

Hesperus, A Love Story

When I started medical school in Dallas, Texas, my father gave me a 1937 Packard 120, a truly wonderful car, so I could come home to San Antonio every once in awhile. I thought it was a beautiful machine. The straight eight had plenty of power, the gear ratios had been chosen with care, lots of torque when starting and a top end which would satisfy any young man. From thirty feet away the lines looked great - graceful curves, spare tires in the front fenders, altogether a magnificent creation. From five feet away, several dents and a few places where the paint was a little thin were visible, but what the heck, after thirteen years in big city traffic!

When one sat inside, the upholstery, still elegant in some places, water stained in others, wasn't quite so nice and was a give-away to the fact that two children had ridden in the back seat for many miles. The felt headliner had come off the bows in several places and hung down almost to the heads of passengers in the back seat. When the car was driven over sixty miles per hour it flapped up and down almost like a billows, trembled and made a snapping sound each time it changed its contour. In addition, the front floor mat was badly worn and had a few tears and holes. The rings were fairly well worn at 200,000 miles, and if one stepped on the gas hard, a puff of black smoke could be seen in the rearview mirror.

As an automobile was something of a rarity among poor medical students, the car was always full going to and coming home from school. With the billowing headliner, the torn carpets, the slightly leaky roof and windshield and rattle of the windows, the car received the name Hesperus, inspired by the poem *The Wreck of the Hesperus*.

Hesperus soon was known and admired by all 96 boys in the freshman class and before long even seniors and several faculty members came out to admire her and take a ride in her, and several, thrill of thrills, even got to drive her. After awhile, my roommate asked if he could borrow Hesperus to go on a date. He wanted to find out if his girlfriend really loved him or was only interested in his car. She loved him. The experiment was so successful that all my fraternity brothers began to borrow her to test the true feelings of their girlfriends. Then the highest accolade ever, the younger brother of one of my classmates borrowed Hesperus to serve as a limousine for his high school prom. After the dance everyone at the prom wanted to ride in Hesperus and Hesperus pleased them all.

Hesperus was always eager to serve until one weekend trip to San Antonio with six classmates when I didn't have enough money to buy a quart of oil. Forty miles from home at one in the morning I heard a knock in her motor. A Texas norther had blown through, the temperature was about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the wind was blowing and blustering and huge raindrops were coming down in sheets. Rather than stranding her seven passengers on a terrible, cold, dark, wet and windy night, Hesperus bravely ran on until she had delivered our six passengers and me safely home.

She died, never to go again, in my parents' driveway. I, my classmates and several wives cried and wore black ribbons on our arms for a week. Mary, my soon to be wife, was so distraught by Hesperus' death that she had a hard time going to work each day knowing that Hesperus was rusting in a junk yard and would never take her home again.

Mary, Another Love Story

On the morning of January 3, 1952, a little boy had been kicked by a horse and the blow fractured his liver. Dr. Duckett, the premier pediatrics surgeon at the medical school, had sewn him up and called me to do special duty nursing for him. Thus, I found myself at 4:30 in the afternoon on the second floor of the Children's Hospital in Dallas, Texas. At 4:31, the floor nurse, who I later learned was on the first day of her first (for pay) job, came in to ask me a question. She thought all medical students were smart. She had a tiny, almost silly, little cap on her head. All R.N.'s from the University of Texas Nursing School in Galveston wore caps just like hers. I don't remember the question or my answer, but she smiled and said thank you and left to make use of my wisdom.



Mary in her student nursing uniform

When she was gone I thought, "Gosh, she really is pretty. I've got to know her name." She came back to ask questions three or four times before 11:00 p.m. and each time had such a sweet smile! I learned, when I was relieved at 11:00 p.m., that her name was Mary Strasburger. Unlike my mother and her sister, Thelma, my Grandmother Schuetze, my Great Grandmother Gruen, my Grandmother Cade, my cousin Doris, and a host of Doebbler, Gruen and Schuetze great aunts, she had something I had never realized girls had - a middle name - and it was Martha.

That night I went down the stairs and saw a gentleman with a large head of black hair and a very large nose wearing a black overcoat sitting on a bench in the entrance foyer. I wished him a pleasant evening and walked out to ol' Hesperus.

Monday after finishing my studies, I went back to the hospital to see how my

patient was doing and to tell my evening fairy tales to eight little girls - three of whom had rheumatic fever and were, thus, long-term patients. That night my fairy tale was about an evil witch whose name was Miss Strasburger. The little girls said, "No, no, she's nice" loud enough to bring Miss Strasburger into the room. My plan had worked perfectly.

As I was leaving the hospital that night at about 11:00 p.m., I saw the gentleman with the black hair and the large nose sitting on the same bench he had occupied the night before. My curiosity aroused, I stopped to talk with him. I introduced myself and he told me his name was Henry Strasburger and he was waiting to take his daughter home because she had never learned to drive. I also discovered that the reason she had never developed that skill was buried in her dark past. When she was fourteen, she had started driving



Mary's father
Henry Wiley Strasburger

and had taken her mother to pick up her young brother, John. Their mother was, for some reason, giving John “heck”. Young Miss Strasburger, smiling at John’s castigation, forgot to slow down while turning a corner and ran into a light pole, demolishing the family’s new Teraplane. After Mary and I were married, John told me that at the instant the Teraplane and the light pole met, he realized that big sisters could be an asset.

Each night after fairy tale hour (all my stories centered around the evil Miss Strasburger and the girls always argued with voices loud enough to bring that evil witch into the room to quiet things down), I would stop and talk with Miss Strasburger’s father, frequently telling him about that night’s episode in my continuing saga. I learned a little more about his family each night. I also told him about my mother and my father, who was a lawyer in San Antonio. That knowledge helped form a bond between us and soon I felt we were friends.

The next week he told me about a lawsuit he was trying and how he enjoyed it, but found it tired him out. I already knew that 11:00 p.m. was an hour past his bedtime, so with understanding and great sympathy for his plight, I offered to bring Miss Strasburger home after she finished her charting so he could get his rest. He graciously assented. I was left wondering if I had conned him or if his polished courtroom manners had lured me on. Unable to answer the question, I ran back upstairs to tell Miss Strasburger about the new travel arrangements and sat in a corner of the nurses’ station admiring the scenery until she finished her charts.

Hesperus, on the way home, told me she was very pleased. My plan had worked. I walked Miss Strasburger to her door and told her that if it was o.k., I would be happy to take her home every night so her father wouldn’t have to lose any sleep. With only a little hesitation, she told me graciously that too would be o.k.

The next Sunday, her friend, Margie Knight, took Miss Strasburger to work and while they were sitting in Margie’s car, I walked out of the hospital. Margie turned to Miss Strasburger and said, “See that boy. Don’t have anything to do with him; he’s crazy.” Margie had been at a “Dog Patch” party at the fraternity house a couple of months earlier. Her date, Vernon Polk, came as L’il Abner and Margie as Moonbeam McSwine. I came as one of the twins the fat lady carried under her arms, one on each side. I was much too modest to come unattired as they were, so I wore a diaper.

Margie was impressed by my originality in choosing a costume, but thought I drank too much Purple Passion, a punch made with grape juice and 95% ethanol that we obtained from the hospital. As I couldn’t remember drinking anything stronger than root beer, she may have been right. Another thing that impressed Margie that night was my presentation of a fairy tale. So with a tip of my hat, if I had one, and my thanks to Uncle Clarke Schuetze, I’ll now try again to repeat it..

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess named Cupcake. Cupcake was truly the bright light in her father’s eye. One day as she was walking in the Royal Gardens, a wicked witch turned her into a holly bush. Her father, King Phillip, couldn’t be consoled and wept constantly for three days. He then sent his heralds out to every part of his kingdom with the proclamation that any man who could turn Holly back into Cupcake would not only be given half of his kingdom, but would also marry Cupcake. The whole kingdom was raised to a state of fevered excitement because the king was very, very rich and Cupcake was very, very, very, very pretty.

The first would-be swain was a man named Edward. I don't know his family name, but he was a renowned magician. He began waving his arms, jumping up and down and side to side, and yelling magic words. When he said a certain magic word he turned into a puff of smoke. This proves the accuracy of the old adage "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

There were many spectators and kibitzers standing around that day, but none could remember the magic word, which turned the throat and the rest of the body of him who spoke it into a puff of smoke. They were, thus, afraid to say anything and obviously, having analytic minds, were afraid to jump up and down, since that activity could also have precipitated the catastrophe. Alas, all interest in turning Holly into Cupcake died. The old king suddenly looked and felt twenty years older each time he looked at Holly or thought of Cupcake. Several months went by and then, by chance, a young man named Charles, who was rather fat and a bit lazy, came by. He was trying to think how he could make some money for Christmas without working too hard and decided to make some holly wreathes and sell them. However, a big problem presented itself. The only holly bush in the kingdom was also Cupcake. He finally overcame his scruples and walked to Holly/Cupcake in the Royal Garden, broke off one small branch and, puff... I don't know if there was a puff when Cupcake became a holly bush, but there surely was a puff when Holly Bush became Cupcake, for that was just what was needed to break the evil spell.

The king was overjoyed and promised Charles wealth and marriage to Cupcake. Charles thought being king would be very hard work and being rich would create so many problems and besides, at 36, he wasn't old enough to get married.

The king and his councilors paid no attention to Charles and marched off to attack a neighboring kingdom, for he thought that neighboring kingdom would be the ideal half of his kingdom to give Charles. Alas, King Phillip's army was defeated by King Richard IV and King Phillip had to sue for peace.

In the negotiations to end the war, Phillip ceded half his kingdom to King Richard IV. Cupcake was married to Richard's son, and Charles was condemned to be hanged as a war criminal.

Now I ask you, knowing the above, was it just for Margie to think me crazy for telling that story and having just one cup (on serious reflection, it might have been two cups) of Purple Passion? After so many years, I can't really remember. Before you reach your decision as to the state of my mind on that memorable night, I want you to know that Mr. Batdorph, who taught freshman English at UT, Austin, said the spelling and punctuation were both excellent and he thought it the most entertaining comment on the Nuremberg war crime trials he had ever read. Sane or insane? Now you cast your vote!

After I had taken Miss Strasburger home each night for about three months, I asked if it would be all right if I called her Mary instead of Miss Strasburger. It was. Three months later, after bringing Mary home each night, I took her to the door, put my arms around her waist, kissed her and told her I loved her. She replied that she thought she loved me too.

Greatly emboldened after twenty or thirty more kisses, I asked her if she would marry me. She thought she would like that, but that night she talked it over with her mother, and the next night she told me she thought she loved me enough to marry me, but wasn't quite sure. I kissed her again and waited under her bedroom window. When the light was turned on, I began throwing pebbles at the window until she opened it. Then, emulating one of my heroes, Cyrano de Bergerac, I stood in the shadows and with silent thanks to another hero,

Bobby Burns, said, with great feeling:

*Oh, my love is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June.
Oh, my love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.
So fair art thou my bonny lass,
So deep in love am I,
And I will love thee still my dear
'til a' the seas gang dry.
'til a' the seas gang dry my lass,
And the rocks melt wee the sun,
And I will love thee still my dear,
While the sands a' life shall run.*

*So fare thee well my only love
And fare thee well a while
And I will come again my love
Though it were ten thousand mile."*

And I did, and 48 years later, I still do.

Mary's response to my Cyrano de Bergerac performance, "I'm not really sure" to my way of thinking, was totally unsatisfactory. The next night, after Hesperus and I delivered her to her portal, I again stood in the shadows and pelted her window with pebbles until she, like Roxanne, came and smiled down on me. I sang a tender German love song to her. As you might not read German, I'll give you my translation and hope somewhere you can find the music:

*Dearly beloved maiden, leave your window lattice open
So that you can hear my songs
For if you do not hear them, my heart and my zither
Can never know peace.*

*Cloister walls surrounding you
Can never be made so strong and tall
As to keep my songs from finding you.*

*When the light grows dim and the evening shadows fall,
I will climb up the leafy vines to you.
Then, you beautiful penitent,
Only look down on me below
And in spite of Priest and Holy Mother
Repay me for my songs.*

Several years having lapsed since Mary played Franceska in *Minna von Barnhelm*, her German had become a bit rusty and she thought I had been given all I asked when she smiled down on me. For the next three months, I either sang a love song or recited a poem of love every night. I reserved the most tender and passionate songs for nights when there was a full moon for I knew the moon always (if that was possible) made her appear even more beautiful. That being true, perhaps it would do the same for me. One night, I sang her the American song "*Moonlight becomes you, it goes with your hair, you certainly know the right thing to wear,*" She professed the belief that I referred to her John Seely School of Nursing cap.

Our evenings, or mornings, for it was always past midnight when my serenade reached its end, invariably concluded with that soul chilling sentence "I think I love you enough, but I'm not sure."

I was getting desperate; my repertoire of love songs and poems was exhausted. I went home and looked through my poetry books, but not even Burns, Shelley, or Lord Byron in English, or Goethe in German had anything to help me. I borrowed a book of French poetry from my roommate, but found no solace as I couldn't read French and he had forgotten it. I pitched around all night scarcely sleeping. About 4:00 a.m. a lovely little song came to my fevered brain:



Mary as Franceska in *Minna von Barnhelm*
UT Austin, Spring 1948

*Won't you marry, marry me
Love does harry, harry me
Won't you marry me Barb-a-rah?
I love you so.*

Perfect I thought! Barbara obviously would not work, but it was easy to stretch Ma-a-ry into three syllables. Then my analytical mind broke through the fever and I realized it hadn't worked 72 days ago and there was no reason to think it would do the job a second time around. Then I remembered a poem Andrew Marvel had written to his fair mistress:

*Had we but world enough and time
This coyness, madam were no crime.*
(Madam wasn't the word I wanted, but lady would fit perfectly.)
We could sit down, or walk, and talk and plan

Which way to spend our long loves' day.
(perfect I thought)
Thou by the Indian Ganges side shouldst
Rubies find and I by the tide of Humber
Would complain
(again, absolutely perfect)
I would love you ten years before the flood
And you could, if you wished, refuse until the
Conversion of the Jews.
(nothing could top that)

My vegetable love would grow vaster
Than empires and more slow.
A hundred years to praise your
Eyes and on your forehead gaze,
A thousand to admire each breast
And thirty thousand to the rest.
(I was a little embarrassed to say breast to her)
An age at least for every part
And the last age would show your heart,
But at my back I always hear
Times winged chariot hovering near
And yonder all before us loom
Deserts of vast eternity.

Nothing could have sent the message of my heart better. After reciting the next five verses to myself, however, it was apparent Andrew wasn't thinking of a majestic cathedral, a beautiful white wedding dress, a lovely smiling, slightly anxious face, or anything so lasting as marriage. Reluctantly, I laid aside the marvelous sentiment expressed by Andrew in the first part of his poem.

Then a brilliant thought hit me and my night of agony ended. I was so pleased with my solution, and unworried by the thought I might not remember it when I woke up, that I instantly fell peacefully into a dreamless sleep, which lasted so long I missed my first two classes that Tuesday morning. At 1:00 a.m., on Wednesday, under a brilliant full moon, I sang:

On a tree by a river a little torn tit
Sang willow, tit willow, tit willow,
And I said to him Dickey Bird, why do you sit,
Singing willow, tit willow, tit willow?
Is it weakness of intellect birdie, I cried?
Or rather tough worm in your little inside?
With a shake of his poor little head, he replied
Oh willow, tit willow, tit willow.

*He slapped at his breast as he sat on that bough
Singing willow, tit willow, tit willow,
And a cold perspiration bespangled his brow,
Oh willow, tit willow, tit willow.
He sobbed and he groaned and a gurgle he gave
And plunged himself into the billowing wave
And an echo arose o'er the suicide's grave,
Oh willow, tit willow, tit willow.*

*Now I feel just as sure as I'm sure that my name
Isn't willow, tit willow, tit willow,
That 'twas blighted affection that made him exclaim,
Oh willow, tit willow, tit willow,
And if you remain callous and obdurate,
I shall perish as he did and you will know why,
Though I probably shall not exclaim as I die,
Oh willow, tit willow, tit willow.*

Mary said, " I WILL."

Today, 48 years, six children and sixteen grandchildren richer,
my favorite song is still *Tit Willow*.



Bob and Mary
June 1, 1953