

The Dog House

The dog house which Lathrop's daddy built was very large. It had to be, because their dog, a well-bred harlequin Great Dane, was a large dog, taller than Lathrop. And there was another reason why the dog house had to be so large: Lathrop's daddy was often in it.

The Great Dane, incidentally, was a beautiful specimen, bred and trained by some Germans on a farm in

Indiana. The only trouble was that he did not understand English; you had to speak to him in German:

"Platz! Sitz! Bleib" Kommst du hier, schnell!
etc."

Lathrop's family was of Irish, somewhat liberal Catholic background, and their German was several fractured. Nevertheless the dog, named Wilhelm, loved them all dearly, particularly Lathrop.

The first time Lathrop's daddy was in the new dog house was on the day following a dance at their country club. Lathrop's daddy had consumed several straight-up martinis when he got up and cut in on a very young flapper wearing a very tight short skirt. She was known to be very fast. He was not a good dancer, unable to do either the Charleston or the Black Bottom. He could do a sort of fox trot, but never in time with the music.

With his left arm extended straight out, his left hand clutching the flapper's right hand tightly, a weapon was created which, with the solidity and momentum of a swinging baseball bat, could knock down any other dancers within range. With his other arm he held the flapper in a death grip. Reaching down and enveloping her softly rounded posterior with his big right hand, he pressed that charming part of her body tightly against his own genital area. They bounced around this way through several numbers, and he let go only after the band had finished On The Sunny Side of the Street. The flapper kissed him on the mouth and went to her table, as he, sweating, returned to his.

Lathrop's mom, who drank only scotch highballs, was not at all amused, so the next day, Lathrop's daddy was in the dog house.

Lathrop crawled in and stayed with his daddy all day, except when walking to the kitchen and back to get food. They took turns telling stories. There was only

room for Wilhelm's front quarters, as he lay half in and half out all day as well, content, in spite of his English deficiency.

A few weeks later the dog house was filled up again.

Lathrop's mom had a great yen for travel, particularly to Europe. She had friends who went almost every summer. Because she had not been abroad in years, she felt out of it when the friends talked so incessantly about shops on the Faubourg-St. Honoré, overnight trips on the Royal Scot to Edinburgh, clandestine bedroom visits at the Villa d'Este, and other delightful experiences.

Her husband, on the other hand, hated to travel, except on the C&O to White Sulphur Springs for a weekend of golf. But he had finally submitted to his wife's pleas, reluctantly agreeing to a spring trip to Europe. Then one night he came home with bad news. Europe was out. He blamed the recent stock market crash for decimating his financial resources.

"We simply can't afford it, my pet. Sorry I have to break my promise, but the margin calls are ruining me."

Weeping, Lathrop's mom accepted reality. After all, some of her friends had let servants go, and one poor man had jumped out of his window. Fortunately it was on the ground floor so he only sprained his ankle.

Just a week later Lathrop's daddy drove home in a brand new car which he had just purchased at the annual Automobile Show. It was a cream colored Franklin phaeton with light blue fenders, lots of chromes and a musical horn which played How Dry I Am!

"It was a wonderful buy, dear. On the last day of the show they sell all the cars at a discount. Isn't she a beaut?"

Lathrop's mom, sobbing, ran up to the bedroom and slammed the door. Behind the garage the dog house loomed.

The breaking point had been building up for some time. A few weeks later it was reached.

Lathrop's daddy did not have an ear for music. He hated the Symphony and the Opera. Lathrop's mom attended them all, with her mother. As a youngster Lathrop's daddy had been forced to take piano lessons for a year, but he was totally without talent. Instead he had taught himself to play one single rag-time tune. After two martinis he could still play a few bars of it in a ludicrously stiff stilted fashion, which made everyone laugh. After a third martini he might, on occasion, try to sing some ballad such as After the Ball is Over. But he couldn't carry a tune, and everyone would laugh harder.

Lathrop's mom did play the piano. She rarely sat down by herself to play classical music, but she would pull out popular sheet music from where it was kept under the seat of the piano bench and play for the family after dinner. Moonlight on the Ganges, Cross My Heart from the revue Queen High and Who from Sunny were Lathrop's favorites.

About the time that Lathrop's daddy finished the dog house, some of the men in his crowd thought it would be fun to make up a jazz band and practice in the evenings with the idea of giving a concert the next New Year's Eve. One man played the piano very nicely; there was another who had played a coronet in his high school band, and a third who played the violin. Lots of people in those days, having played the ukulele, could learn to strum a guitar or banjo. The rest of the orchestra would be made up of men who learned to play from scratch an instrument of their choice, before New Year's eve. They hired a teacher of music from the high school to lead the group.

Lathrop's daddy chose the saxophone. Saxophones were the epitome of that era, the jazz age. All dance bands featured the odd looking instrument with its sometimes wailing sweetness, sometimes staccato barking, and sometimes demanding squeals and shrieks. Saxophone players themselves, even rotund and balding ones, automatically donned an aura of sex appeal.

Lathrop's daddy did not know how difficult it was to play one, and he was determined. So he bought himself a tenor sax complete with book of directions.

Almost every evening Lathrop's mom sat at the piano while his daddy fumbled around and turned very red in the face, trying to make sounds come out while peering at the musical score and the book of directions at the same time. Lathrop would listen patiently until his bed time.

By mid-December Lathrop's daddy could at last pump out two numbers, entirely by rote, just as he had learned to play that old rag-time tune years ago on the piano. The two numbers were Indian Love Call from Rose Marie, and After You've Gone. During the other eight numbers of the program, his sax was to be mostly silent.

On New Year's Eve the concert was scheduled for 8 p.m., to be preceded by a cocktail hour and followed by supper and dancing with professional music.

Having fortified himself with several martinis, Lathrop's daddy took his place on the bandstand with the sax at his side in a little rack. The first number was Exactly Like You, rendered studiously without frills or imagination, but also without any noticeable lapses except for the vocalist, who had to hum the words he couldn't remember. There was no part for the sax player in this number, so he was able to scan the audience during the rendition. His wife sat next to his mother-in-law, who was tapping her foot and smiling

a patronizing smile. The audience at first looked pleasantly surprised, then bored.

The boredom was dispelled during the second number, the Indian Love Call. There was a beautiful slow wistful passage for the saxophone which Lathrop's daddy had rehearsed assiduously. However he had gotten his music sheets mixed up, so that when the moment came and the band leader nodded to him, he opened with a loud and labored rendition of the refrain from After You've Gone, in his own distinctive tempo. The rest of the band, ignoring the sax, concluded the Love Call on schedule. The audience, stunned by the cacophony, was silent for a moment, not knowing whether to clap politely or laugh. They decided on both, in fact there were several shouts of Bravo. His wife and mother-in-law did not appear to be amused.

The program continued with minimal participation by Lathrop's daddy until the last number which was After You've Gone. With the right sheet in front of him this time, he began his part a little late. After the band leader had nodded twice and then, in desperation, jabbed the baton into his ribs, he plodded through the same song again, louder and with more confidence than before. But for some reason he was playing it in the wrong key, several full notes off, as well as several bars behind. The sound was more horrendous than the Indian Love Call.

Lathrop's mom and her mother were definitely not amused. Everyone else was, however, and the New Year was rung in more joyously than anyone expected, given the state of the stock market.

The dog house was full the next day, and for many days thereafter.

Then Lathrop's daddy moved away, and Lathrop heard the word divorce. Soon after, he heard discussion of "church annulment" and how very much that had cost. He also heard a grown-up laugh and say:

"But darling, that makes little Lathrop illegitimate, does it not?"

Lathrop didn't care. Daddy came every Sunday and took him riding in the Franklin. Wasn't it fun when they stopped for gas and the attendant would ask:

"Shall I check the water in the radiator, sir?"

(The Franklin motor was air cooled).

Lathrop did care, though. He didn't know the meaning of the word "illegitimate", but the grown-up's voice had sounded cold and cruel.

He walked out the kitchen door with a handful of graham crackers. Wilhelm bounded over to greet him. Together they crawled into the dog house, and, as Wilhelm gobbled up the crackers, Lathrop said:

"Das schmecht gut, nicht-wahr?"

Wilhelm licked him on the nose with his big pink tongue.