

BENNY ACTON was twenty-four years of age; he played the piano, and he had probably the most remarkable stomach in the entire music business. During the course of an evening, Benny would put away maybe three Martinis, a Daiquiri, a covey of Old-fashionedes, and maybe a Planter's Punch or two.

Only there was a catch to it.

Benny hated liquor. These drinks consisted entirely of colored water.

The thing was, he played piano in a bar, and there is an old tradition among a certain class of yucks that bar pianists are all tankers. These yucks are always requesting some sad and wistful song, and then they send over a drink. They do not, under any circumstances, inquire as to the taste of the musician. They send whatever they happen to be drinking.

Benny found out about the tradition the second night of his employment at the Purple Circle.

A yuck sent over a Manhattan, and Benny sent it away, and the man came over, picked Benny up by the necktie, lifted him over the piano and dropped him on the other side.

Benny immediately made arrangements with the gentlemen who served at the bar, and after that, it was easy. Colored water. Benny was probably the only heavy drinker on Manhattan Island who never touched the stuff. But one night he got hold of a real drink, a Martini with real gin, and it turned out to be opportunity knocking at the door.

He had just finished playing Sunday, Monday, and you-know-what for a flour miller from Minneapolis, Minn. When he leaned back in his chair, there stood Giuseppe Forcas, waiter number three, with a tray in his hand. On the tray was a Martini.

"Who sent it?"

Giuseppe indicated a lady in a near booth by lifting his eyebrows and making a small movement of the head.

Benny smiled at the lady, who was a blonde. She seemed to be alone. Benny showed his teeth and lifted the glass in a gesture of salute. He tilted back his head.

"Before you drink that," Giuseppe murmured, "maybe you—" Benny choked. He sat up straight in his chair. He took fire. He dropped the glass, and an olive rolled across the floor.

"I coulda told you," Giuseppe murmured, and slapped him vigorously on the back. "It's her own drink. 'Take it to the man,' she said. 'The man at the piano.'"

Benny clutched the edge of the keyboard and glared through watery eyes. "I will beat you to death with that tray," he said. "I will strangle you with the strings of your own apron."

"Straighten up and fly right," Giuseppe said. "You are disturbing the customers."

Benny turned around and, truly, some of the patrons were looking at him and then at their own drinks—apprehensively. Benny stood up. "It was diluted," he said, making a joke. "There was water in it. I liked to choked to death."

He dropped back on the white piano bench and began to play. The show must go on. He played the first thing that came into his head. He had been playing for maybe three minutes when a voice sounded in his ear.

"Beethoven," the voice said softly, "you're a liar."

It was the blond lady from the near booth. She wore a small round hat with a feather in it that stuck straight up. The feather was at least sixteen inches tall. It was dark green in color.

"The stuff was all right," she said. "I didn't taste it, but it was sent with the special compliments of the management."

Benny leaned over close to her, a cold light in his eyes. "I will tell you something," he said. "I am an undercover man for the W.C.T.U. A secret agent."

"Personally, I don't drink," she said. "They bring it to me and I give it away. Generally to sailors. Tonight, to you."

BENNY went on with his playing, looking moodily at the keyboard. He paid no attention to the blonde. He lowered his head and played louder, suddenly aware that his stomach was growing unhappy.

"You played that before," the girl said. "I like it, but I never heard it before. It's good."

Ordinarily, this would have been a tremendous moment for Benny because he was playing the rumba movement of a suite called Panama, a thing he had written himself, a thing which he had tried hopefully every night at the white piano in the Purple Circle. Nobody had ever bothered to listen. This was the customer he had been hungering for, the character with musical taste. But at the moment it didn't mean a damn' thing to Benny.

He improvised an ending and stood up hurriedly.

"I'll be back," he said to the nearest waiter. "I hope you choke," he said to the young lady with the feather in her hat, and made unsteadily for the dressing room. There he tried another door, and walked out into an alley.

The air in the alley was not entirely fresh and clean but at least it was cool, and it was outdoors. He walked up and down the alley, and he began to feel much better.

There was a coffee-and-doughnuts establishment, gleaming white and chrome and blue, at the end of the block. He walked briskly down the street, taking big swallows of the cool air.

A green-feathered female was sitting at the counter, eating chocolate doughnuts. Benny pushed past her, looking the other way, and sat at an undersized metal table by the

window. A Filipino waiter whose fingers were covered with powdered sugar stopped and glared at him.

"Three cups of coffee," Benny said, holding up fingers for emphasis. "All at once. Three cups."

The green feather appeared, peering over the heads of the customers like a periscope, and moved in his direction. Benny sighed deeply and looked out the window.

"Look," the girl said, "I'm sorry."

"You still alone?" Benny said. "Ordinarily there's a lot of lonesome guys at the Purple Circle. Did you try hard?"

She laid her purse on the table, zipped a zipper, and fumbled inside. The purse was big enough to hold a set of golf clubs, but all she brought forth was a small white card. The card said that she was Wendell Evans, and that she worked for a morning newspaper of considerable size and reputation.

"People who like me," she said, "generally call me Dixie."

"Why?" Benny said.

"Once I made a trip to Memphis, Tennessee. Maybe that's it."

Wendell Evans was a character that Benny knew about remotely. There was a column in the paper, reviewing clubs and restaurants and sometimes minor musical events. Wendell Evans.

"I thought it was a man," he said.

"So did my mother," the girl said. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right."

The waiter laid the coffee on the table, splashing a little from cup to saucer each time. Benny took the nearest cup and drank eagerly. It burned his tongue, but it tasted fine.

"What did you say the name of it was? The thing with the funny figure in the bass?"

Benny looked at her morosely. His stomach was beginning to feel better. And she worked for a newspaper.

"It's the rumba movement from a suite called Panama. I wrote it. I was in Panama with the U. S. Army eighteen months. It's a rumba called Chala."

She leaned back in her chair and looked carefully at him. "I have conversed," she said, "with at least ten thousand piano players in at least ten thousand bars, and everyone of them has a great composition. To a man."

"Take it or leave it," Benny said, assaulting the second cup of coffee.

"Only when you ask them to play, it always turns out they left their music at home. And it turns out that they are playing a piano in a bar only because their little sister has to get through high school. Where's your little sister?"

"Look," Benny said, "I work at the Purple Circle because it means I can get a piano, free of charge, for six hours a day. I also get paid. In small amounts."

The girl reached over and took the other cup of coffee. She smiled at him over the top of the cup. She had gray eyes.

"Is it a piano suite?" She sounded as if she knew what a suite for piano might be.

Benny shook his head. "It's orchestra," he said. "I hope. I don't know much about orchestration. I try. Mostly I got ideas."

She took a couple of swallows of the coffee and then

Hello,

pushed the cup away. "How'd you like to meet Lansing O'Hara?" she said. "Tomorrow night, maybe?"

It was as simple as that.

She was waiting for him in a taxi when he finished work the following night. She pushed the door open and smiled at him and said, "Hello, Beethoven." He crawled in beside her. The inside of the cab had a pleasant smell, an odor of anonymous flowers.

"Is that you," Benny asked, "or does the driver burn incense?"

"That's me," she said. "It's called Consuming Fire. They try to keep it out of the hands of unscrupulous women."

THEY drove east on Forty-eighth Street, turned on Third Avenue, and moved downtown, in the shadow of the El. The town was almost quiet; it was 2:30 A.M. They could smell the river; and the smell wasn't exactly good.

"Maybe O'Hara lives down here so he can whip out for a quick swim," Benny said.

"He doesn't live here; he lives in a place in the Seventies, with pink zebras on the wall and a bed that's eight feet square. He just works down here."

They stopped in front of a delicatessen, with a blue light burning somewhere inside, and buzzed a bell at a side door, which immediately clicked open. They climbed a flight of splintered wooden steps, and Dixie knocked on the panels of a sagging door.

"He'll be asleep, or something," Benny said. Suddenly he felt self-conscious and almost afraid. "He won't let us in. Not this time of the morning."

"He doesn't get up until dark," Dixie said. "It's the middle of the day for Lansing O'Hara."

"Come in!" a large voice said through the door.

The room was maybe thirty by fifty feet, and there was no furniture in it except a green couch and the biggest piano Benny ever hoped to see. Nevertheless the room was almost overcrowded. It was full of Lansing O'Hara.

Mr. O'Hara, clad in a green bathrobe and white sweat socks, was sitting in the middle of (Continued on page 27)

After he finished, Benny waited for somebody to say something. "You're a lousy pianist," Lansing O'Hara roared. "I couldn't tell much." Benny turned around to look at O'Hara on the floor and suddenly got mad

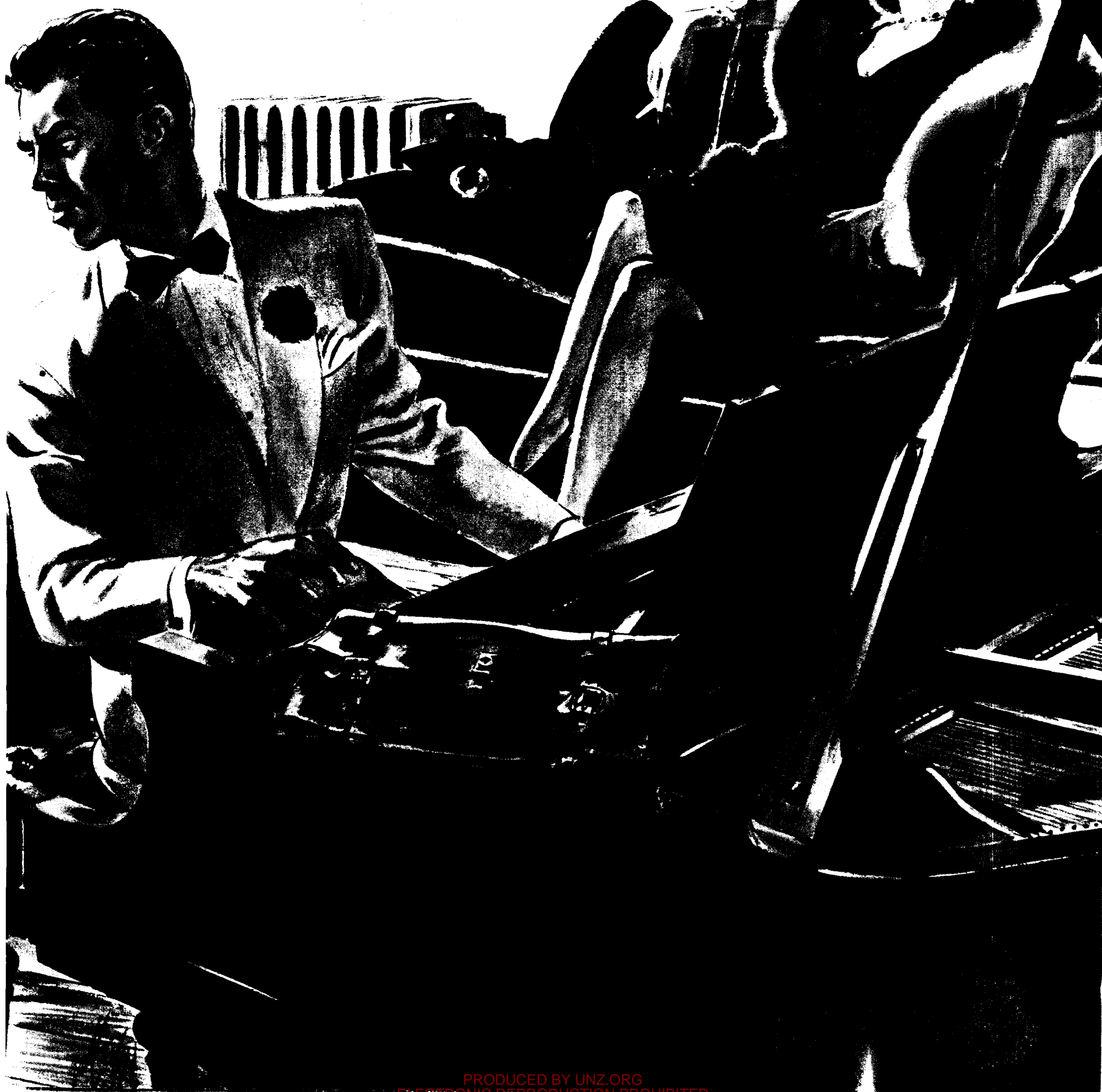


Beethoven

BY WILLIAM PORTER

ILLUSTRATED BY GILBERT DARLING

One real Martini, a blond columnist, and a screwball composer might add up to either nightmare or success. Benny, being only a normal human being, had no way of knowing how



**G.I. Family
at Yale**

BY WILLIAM
PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLEGE

BY WILLIAM R. SEARS
COLLIER'S BY HUSTON-P

BY WILLIAM K. ...
PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY HUSTON-PIX

IF HE'S ready to invest all his savings, hock his War Bonds and live on a shoestring, any married ex-serviceman, even one with a family, can go to college.

That's the conclusion to which my wife, Alice, and I have come after settling down to a routine which in two and a half years will give me a Master's degree in Oriental studies. Three hundred other married ex-servicemen at Yale, roughly half of whom have at least one child, agree.

Our routine, frankly, is very much like the day-to-day existence forced on many couples while the husband was in uniform, except that the many restrictions of service life are eliminated. Any Army wife who has done the circuit of tank towns and whistle stops near which most Army camps were located (where, incidentally, she got used to paying astronomical prices for rent and food) considers college life a snap in comparison.

Once we had decided that the time invest-

