

First Passion

I believed that she never looked at anyone else the way she looked at me. How could she? What could it possibly mean to anyone else, when she was mine entirely?

By PAUL HORGAN

DURING the first World War, when I was about ten years old, the most frequent and beloved visitor at my father and mother's house in Dorchester, New York, was a lady I called Aunt Bunch. I had given her this name because she often wore a bunch of Parma violets pinned to her gray fur coat, or to an ermine muff she carried, or at her waist, in the style of the period. She was not a real aunt. The title was merely an expression of my possessiveness.

I adored her tyrannically. I believed her to exist for me alone, and behaved accordingly. When she came to our house, I rudely interposed myself between her and all other people and relationships, until general laughter resulted and I was reminded that I was a child. There lay the key to my worship. She treated me not like a young boy in ribbed black cotton stockings, itchy knee breeches, a jacket whose sleeves never seemed long enough, a starched collar that lay over his shoulder bones and made a dazzling white cone for the support of his hot downy cheeks, but like a young man to whom she could send silent messages, confident that they would be received and understood.

She was, I think, in her early thirties. Her hair was so blonde as to seem almost silvery. She wore it loose in a maddening way—I wanted to put my hands into it and make it all fall down, sliding like gold and silver treasure. Her eyes were blue-violet, which must have accounted for her bunches of violets, and the effect she knew they made. Dark lashes shadowed her eyes, from which great liquid purities shone forth right into your heart. Her mouth fascinated me. Her lips were full, yet ever so delicate. Her cheeks always looked warm, but felt cool.

I knew, because our ardent relationship included embraces. She would come in on a winter day, with snowflakes on her furs, her violets, her veil, and let me climb against her until I hurt. She would kiss me, put her cheek against mine, and hold me in her arms, and I smelled snow and violets and felt the exquisite tickle of melting snowflakes between our faces. Her face was always pink and softly glowing. If she ever looked archly and humorously over my head at other adults, I never saw her do it.

She belonged to me. How could I doubt it? She always called me "my dear," as she might a man, and in that winter we became acknowledged as a cunning joke, as "lovers," with quotation marks, and many an eyebrow went up at the spectacle we made.

My own part of this passion explains itself. But for her part—why did she come to take me out driving in the afternoons, after school, in her electric car? The cushions were gray, there were always violets in the little crystal vases flanking the great plate glass of the front window, and we were alone together as the humming batteries carried us along, and the elegant bell rang at street crossings. We rode, for the most part, in ecstatic silence through the park, watching for swans on the lake, and if we saw one, our excitement made us clutch one another.

Sometimes she let me steer the electric. To do so, I had to crowd near to her and lean upon her lap to manage the long black bar which made the wheels point this way or that. I would steer; she would control the speed by a shorter bar above the other; and we would proceed on our way with joy.

"Poor dear, she has no children, and he is like a son to her"—this was one explanation I overheard. It meant nothing to me. What did it matter why, so long as she would put her head down to mine, and leave it there in dreaming silence and contentment? Or hold my hand and play with my fingers, one after another, slowly and broodingly, flooding me with the moonlight of her eyes? I believed that she never looked at anyone else that way. How could she? What could it possibly mean to anyone else, when she was mine entirely?

Sometimes, on our drives, she would take me to Huyler's for a soda, or again home to her house in the park for hot chocolate. If we were early enough, I preferred her house, where we were so intimate and private, but if we were late, I was unwilling to go there because we might encounter her husband, "Uncle" Dylan.

My reluctance to meet him there had nothing to do with guilt over my love for Aunt Bunch. I simply preferred to meet him at my house because, as a visitor there, he always brought me some sort of present.

For this I despised Uncle Dylan, even as I greedily reached for his pockets. He was a rich man, much older than Aunt Bunch, and he demanded all that his money could get him. His small, pale eyes always looked dry in his sandy face, behind his pince-nez, and I once heard my father remark that it was easy to see how Dylan would look dead.

It was a strange and powerful statement, and I saw what he meant. I'd seen dead birds. Their dull plumage and milked-over eyeballs did suggest Uncle Dylan. He was tormented by the very gifts he made, though everyone always said he was generous. Still, what joy was there in giving if Uncle Dylan always suspected that what he gave was not lovingly received because it brought him with it? And so:

"Now, Richard," he would say to me, one greedy creature virtuously reproving another, "let us not be so sure we have a present today. Why should we have? What have we done to earn it? Do we think others are made of money? Presents cost something, my boy. Do you ever think of your poor old Uncle Dylan except when he has something for you?"

SUCH an attitude made me shudder for him, as he looked over at his wife to see if she smiled at his humor, blinking both his dry, scratchy eyes at her, and then besought my parents to witness his openness of heart, forcing them to admire his latest gift, and to swear that I would not be allowed to accept another single thing after this time. Then, confirmed and strengthened in his poor power over us all, he would sigh and say, "Try the left-hand pocket," and I would plunge my hand in and find nothing. But by then I was not alarmed, for I knew that he could not afford to fail me, and when, with a feeble start of surprise, like that of a vaudeville magician, he would say, "Try the right-hand one, then," I knew the sorry game was about over, to my advantage.

Even as I bled him unmercifully every chance I had, and knew he was a dullard, I never considered him an odd choice as a husband for Aunt Bunch. He simply was her husband, and that ended the matter. As such, he belonged in my world, as she belonged, and I could not possibly imagine any disturbance of its order. What was, was right, to

me, as to other children. So long as they remained fixed, any relationships were accepted. If a new one should appear, the quicker it was absorbed and fixed, the better. But it must be added to what existed, without changing anything.

In that season of so much love, when the heavy winter had come and left snow that would stay for weeks, and the warmth and light of our house was a twilight joy after the steely-cold out of doors during the day, an old friend returned to us as somebody new. He was my father's friend and business associate, who, many months before, had joined the Army, and was now a captain of artillery on leave before receiving new orders, which everybody knew meant going overseas to France to fight the Hun.

NOW he came to see us in his uniform, with its high collar and stiff stock, its Sam Browne belt, pegged breeches and officer's boots. Captain Jarvis McNeill seemed like an entirely new person, with no relation to the infrequent visitor of the same name before the war. He was unmarried and appeared at parties mostly as a stray, to fill in. Now home on leave, he took to coming to our house late in the day, when the curtains were drawn and a fire was burning in the fireplace and other friends dropped in without announcement.

Sometimes such little gatherings would turn into supper parties; people would stay, and the animation and conviviality of my parents would have happy expression. Almost always, late in such an evening, the piano would be played, and then Captain Jarvis McNeill would sing in a crackling baritone voice distinguished by both volume and purity. He had an instinct for communicating true feeling, and when he sang, a lump would sometimes come into my throat in sorrow for what people knew, and were, and did, beyond the boundaries of my knowledge.

I always knew when Captain Jarvis McNeill arrived. I would know it by the sound of his boots in the entrance hall, when he stamped off the snow. He was big, and his movements and gestures were necessarily large, though never awkward. In his ruddy face there was a comic appeal that he be understood and forgiven for anything he might do—with a broad hint, in his raised eyebrows, his blue eyes, his crescent smile, that he might indeed do anything.

When I heard him downstairs, I held my breath to listen. His speaking voice was heavy and carried through the rooms. I listened to hear if it grew louder in my direction. Then I would hear him coming up the stairs. He was coming to see me in my room. To see me. A real captain, a soldier who fired cannons, who had a sword, and wore boots, and was going to war, and would himself hang the Kaiser, and was a hero.

Captain Jarvis McNeill repaid my worship with serious and simple appreciation, which took the form of getting down on the floor of my room, where my toys were, and playing there as I played, as long as the company downstairs would let him. He filled the room with his presence, and brought the spicy, sharp aromas of a barbershop with him—the clean, adventurous smell of a man who has been combed, slapped and shined to his most presentable state. His cheeks got hotter as he bent to the miniature task of imagination among my lead soldiers and wooden artillery. His collar choked him, his big legs were in (Continued on page 70)

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Dimly I knew I did not want Aunt Bunch and Captain Jarvis McNeill with me together. I wanted them with me separately

ILLUSTRATED BY TOM LOVELL

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"Mr. Roberts" Is a Banker Now

By JAMES POLING

MRS. HENRY FONDA recently spoke her mind when her actor-husband showed signs of invading a sphere she rightfully considers her own. "I was struggling with a piece of embroidery," she says, "when Hank came up and looked over my shoulder. After a while he announced, 'That looks interesting, maybe I'll try it.' I almost burst into tears, and I screamed, 'Hank, don't you ever dare pick up a needle! Let there be just one thing I can do that you can't. Now go away someplace and act like you're acting, and leave me and my ego a little breathing space.'"

Under ordinary circumstances, Mrs. Fonda's ego is nourished by her husband's many accomplishments. She is proud that, after having starred in 41 motion pictures, he has now established himself as one of the finest actors in our legitimate theater. Mrs. Fonda, the former Susan Blanchard, twenty-two-year-old stepdaughter of Oscar Hammerstein, has no doubt that his role in *Point of No Return*, scheduled to open December 13th at New York's Alvin Theater, will be as fine a job as his celebrated Mr. Roberts. And she is content that he should be a talented painter, an expert builder of model planes, trains, boats and guns, a talented photographer, an organic-farming enthusiast with a deep interest in the temperature of his compost

piles, a knowledgeable ceramicist, an ex-pilot, an amateur sculptor, a competent handy man and an atrocious trumpet player. But she won't let him take up needlework, or even demonstrate his boasted culinary skill.

"Women's work is my work," Susan Fonda says. "You'd think he'd be content to work at his acting. Embroidery, indeed!"

Henry Fonda very probably would devote himself exclusively to his acting, if he could manage to make it fill all of his waking hours. Away from the theater, however, he is a restless being, deprived of his orientation. His friends say, "Hank's really living when he's acting, just existing when he isn't." But since he can't spend his whole conscious life on stage, Fonda has taken up hobbies, with a passionate intensity, during his existing, or nonacting, hours.

An example of Fonda's dedication to hobbies emerges when he talks of that golden moment when he first achieved stardom in the 1934 Broadway hit *The Farmer Takes a Wife*—after a six-year period during which he learned to eat corn flakes

moistened with water because he couldn't afford milk. He says, "I don't remember anything in particular about the opening. I don't think I even got tight." Then he adds, revealingly, "What I do remember is that I just couldn't get used to having free days. Suddenly I didn't have to make the rounds looking for a job and I didn't know what to do with myself."

"Jimmy Stewart and I were living together at the Madison Square Hotel, and just about that time Jimmy got his first job in a hit, *Divided by Three*. He had time on his hands, too. So we bought a model airplane set—it was a Martin bomber, I remember. We'd sleep till ten, then work on it all day until it was time to go to the theater. Our room got ankle-deep in balsa shavings and glue, but we had to order the maid not to clean; she'd have probably swept up a strut or something. We did a painstaking job and got every detail just right, but Jimmy changed his mind about the paint job so often, and put on so many different coats, the plane was overloaded and crashed the first time we tried to fly it."

Fonda's new starring vehicle, *Point of No Return*, is Paul Osborn's dramatization of John P. Marquand's best-selling novel of the same title. Moreover, it is opening at the same playhouse in

In his new role as Charles Gray, a harried big-city banker, Henry Fonda enjoys a visit from an old friend, played by Robert Ross

