



THE STRANGE GIRL

Mark was in an unfamiliar world, filled with long-dead people who were strangely alive, with old songs that were suddenly new, with a girl who was out of place, familiar—and miraculous

By J. B. PRIESTLEY

THERE was a glassed-in passage that ran from the far end of the smoking room to the big conservatory; it was probably a favorite sitting-out place at dances, and the basket chairs might have been left over there from some recent dance. Mark chose a chair that was nearer to the smoking room than it was to the conservatory, so that he could still see the group around the piano. He could hear behind the singing and the piano the steady chug-chug-chug, from somewhere not far away, of the primitive electric-light plant that Lord Broxwood had been boasting about at dinner. The voltage must be low, Mark thought, and the bulbs could not be any more than fifteen watt; they did not give much light, but only had an attractive golden glow.

In the smoking room, however, not far from the piano, there were also two large oil lamps. It was this lighting, mellow and a trifle theatrical, Mark concluded, that gave the suggestion of unreality to the scene.

He was smoking a very fat Egyptian cigarette and not enjoying it, but then there had been no sign of any Virginia cigarettes anywhere and he had not felt like tackling the cigars he had been offered after dinner. He was still feeling some bodily discomfort. It was some years since he had last worn white tie and tails, and these evening clothes were not his. The collar was appallingly

As he stared at her, wondering at her beauty, everything but her face changed. They were somewhere else—and in another time . . .



high; no wonder some of the older men looked apoplectic.

All the younger men and the girls were clustered around the piano, played with energy and not without skill by the monocled Captain Waterhouse. Now they were beginning in chorus *Tell Me, Pretty Maiden*, from *Floradora*, which Mark had heard on an old gramophone record.

The men, beefy and bold, roared their lines, and the girls came in with the responses, giggling a little and sounding very innocent with their wavering soprano.

With their hair piled so high, with such generous offerings of pink arms, white shoulders, plump, soft bosoms, these girls seemed both larger and sillier than any girls he had known before. They made him understand all those winking references to "girls" and "curly-curly" in the old popular songs. He was now looking at the prettiest of all earth's extinct creatures. The men were singing their invitation to take a little walk, and they were having some difficulty with the modulations of the tune, but coming out loud and rich with masculine vigor. They made him feel about a thousand years old.

He dug the heels of his dress pumps, which did not fit him too well, deep into the coconut matting. At first, just after it had happened, he had merely felt bewildered. Then for the next two or three hours, before and during dinner, he had felt frightened—of the fantastic situation he was in and of the social complications it might produce, the embarrassing questions. (Thank Heaven he had landed among this casual, moneyed class, still so certain of themselves!)

But now—and it was this and not fear that had driven him out of the smoking room—he was possessed by a sense of loneliness that was becoming a feeling of utter desolation. The professional social historian in him was completely defeated; and even if he had had a notebook, he could not have made a single note. All he could observe was that distance in time was apparently harder to bear than distance in space. Here he was, not two hundred feet away from his study and bedroom, but back in his own time he would have felt less desolate, he was certain, if he had suddenly found himself wandering on South Cape, Tasmania, half the globe away from home. Was home, then, more in time than in space? Yesterday he would have said no, but now he was not sure. Odd how the young, high spirits of the group around the piano, the sight of their flushed faces, the laughter breaking through the straggling chorus, widened and deepened his desolation.

BUT here was company—further need for care. For the elderly lady, plump and mottled, who had sat opposite him at dinner, came waddling in from the smoking room and sank with relief into the chair next to his. "I don't think we were introduced," she began. "They're always so casual here, especially when the youngsters have filled up the house. I'm Mrs. Buller—Lord Broxwood's sister—and, let me see, you're Ronald's friend, aren't you?"

This was rather tricky. "Well, yes—in a way," I admitted.

"I'm abominably curious. My family is always teasing me about it, so you mustn't mind. But

wasn't there something about a bathing accident, Mr.—er—?"

"Denbow. Mark Denbow." What would she think, how would she behave, if he told her he had finished taking his evening seminar (yes, here in this house) at seven o'clock, had then hurried across to the lake for a quick dip before supper, and had dived—into all this? He gave her what he hoped was a friendly but apologetic smile. "Yes, I was bathing in the lake and somehow lost consciousness—probably hit something when I dived in. And then your nephew, Ronald, fished me out."

"How fortunate!" Although she was so plump and smiling and comfortable, her eyes, with no more color in them than a February sea, were cold. "One of his Oxford friends, I imagine, Mr. Denbow."

"I was at Oxford," Mark said, "but not with Ronald. As a matter of fact, we hadn't met before." One glance at her told him he could not leave it there. "I happened to be staying in this neighborhood and—er—thought I'd bathe in the lake. And after I'd got into difficulties and Ronald pulled me out," he continued, gaining confidence, "I was rather exhausted, and he very kindly insisted on my spending the night here."

"That's so like Ronald," she said, smiling. "So brilliant, too. Even when he was a little boy he was quite clever. We all feel he has a great future."

AND now what would happen if he gave Mrs. Buller a hard look, tapped her on her broad, silken knee, and told her Ronald's future? For the memorial tablet in the family chapel declared that Ronald had been (or would be) killed at Neuve-Chapelle in 1915. But while he was making some vague reply, Mrs. Buller found another topic.

"It's rather odd," she began, "but my niece Muriel followed her brother's example. So there are two of you."

"Two of us?" This really startled him.

"Oh, I don't mean this girl was bathing too. You probably haven't seen her, because she didn't come down to dinner, not having anything decent to wear—misaid her luggage, apparently. Ann something; I didn't catch her name. Indeed, I only caught a quick glimpse of the girl herself, a curious little creature. I gathered she'd been abroad—France, I believe—and arrived here, thinking it was some other house. And she'd walked from the station and been out in that dreadful thunderstorm, so Muriel, who's always sweet and kind, wouldn't let her go."

"Was there a thunderstorm?" asked Mark innocently.

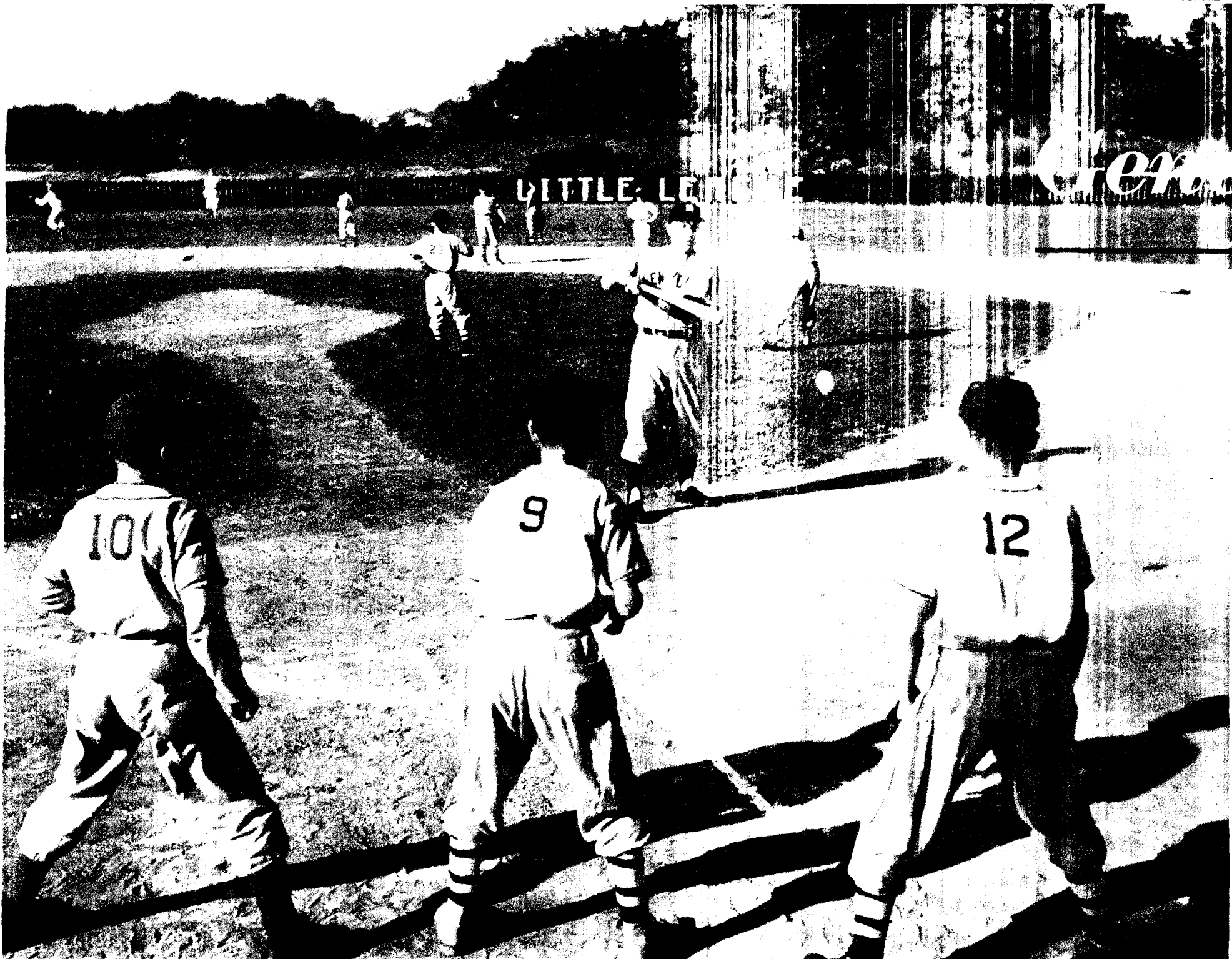
Mrs. Buller stared at him. "Where can you have been? The one that started just before six o'clock."

"Oh, yes, of course," he cried. "How stupid of me! I ought to have remembered." But what he ought to have remembered was that Mrs. Buller's weather, before seven fifteen tonight, was not weather.

"Ah, here's Dorothy, my daughter," Mrs. Buller cried, with maternal satisfaction. "Well, darling, are you tired of making a noise in there?"

Dorothy was a large, pretty girl in pink. She perched on the creaking arm of her mother's chair. "It's so jolly hot in there, Mummie," she said, smiling vaguely at Mark. (Continued on page 54)

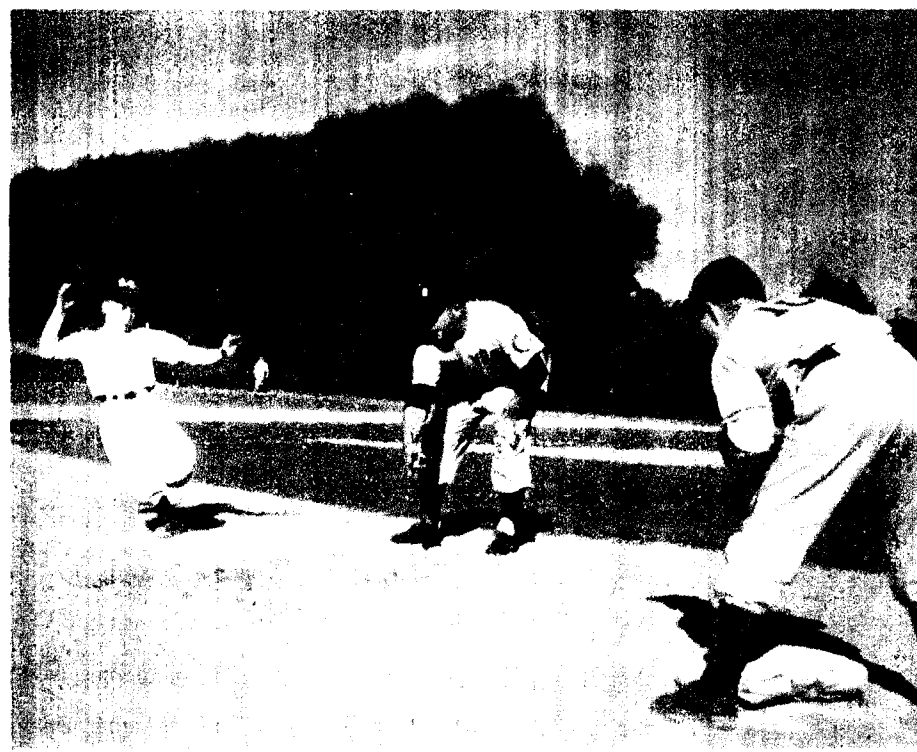
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Gene Woodling hits ball to Fair Lawn, New Jersey, Little Leaguers in fielding drill during Saturday-morning practice. Team is one of the best in its area



Little League workout ends and Gene heads for big-league Yankee Stadium, pausing to answer questions from the eager youngsters



"Tuck your leg up," Gene shouts to Little Leaguer sliding into third base. Like all Little Leagues, Fair Lawn teams are uniformed, rigidly regulated