



Out of the Air

BY CHRISTINE WHITING PARMENTER

BILLY GREGORY stood in the middle of an ominously silent room, and stifled a sob. He shivered, not from cold (though he wore only his blue pajamas), but from a new-born sense of fear. It was late night. Fanny, the maid, had gone home, of course; and five minutes ago he had stood at a window high up in the big apartment-hotel and watched two strange men put his mother into a waiting ambulance.

He was all alone. There seemed to be no one left in the world. Even his mother had been suffering too acutely to remember him—or so it seemed to the frightened, eight-year-old laddie. There was another family only across the hall; but they weren't friends. The big hotel was full of people. Some of them had stood at their windows as had Billy and watched his mother being carried away—wondered curiously what had happened, and returned to their various pursuits with no thought for a little boy left alone in what was to him the darkest hour of a dark night. Most of them, indeed, did not know that there was a little boy on the fourth floor. Neighbors, that kindly product of the country which can be relied upon in an emergency, do not exist in such a place.

Billy shivered again, and looked around in the forlorn hope that some one, even the strange doctor, had stayed behind. He was in his mother's bedroom. The door to his own small room gaped open, dark and forbidding. It al-

ready seemed long ago, that moment when he had wakened at his mother's frightened cry and, following her painfully gasped instructions, had called the doctor. She had crumpled up then, and hadn't spoken—not once again. Billy had climbed onto the bed and patted her head softly until the doctor sent him away. Then came two men with a stretcher. . . .

He was all alone; and to be alone just then was rather terrible. The lights in the living-room burned garishly, revealing an untrimmed Christmas-tree in a corner; the rose-shaded incandescent by his mother's bed was on; but somehow the rooms seemed lonesome, like dark rooms.

Suppose, he thought with a sob of terror, suppose his mother never came back from the hospital! What would he do? Grandma was dead. Uncle Tom was away in France. Besides, though his uncle had given him splendid presents, Billy distrusted him. It was Uncle Tom who often spoke sneeringly about his father. Once, even before daddy had gone away, Billy had heard his uncle say to mother:

"Look here, Hilda, how long are you going to put up with Dick's playing around with these flossy little blondes?"

Mother left the room in tears, and Billy, who was building a tower with the beautiful stone blocks that Uncle Tom had brought him, arose suddenly and kicked it down. He didn't know what "blondes" were; but his uncle's

tone said plainly that they were something his father shouldn't play with. He would have to ask; but he would wait and ask daddy himself, because he never laughed at questions as Uncle Tom did.

Mother had worn a new gown that night at dinner. Billy told her she looked pretty, and she hugged him. Her dark hair was very smooth and glossy; and her lips were redder than usual, and her eyes bright.

Even at that age Billy knew that his father was a great baritone. For more than half the year he was away "on tour." Once Billy and mother had gone with him; and twice the boy had stayed at his grandmother's while his mother went; but usually they both were left behind, waiting for daddy to come home.

The night that mother wore the new gown, Billy stayed up to dinner. There was no concert that evening, and daddy wasn't in a hurry. He was telling about a trained elephant he had seen in San Francisco, and Billy forgot all about the "blondes" until dessert was on. Then he said out of a clear sky:

"Daddy, what *is* a blonde?"

"A blonde?" The great singer was puzzled at the question.

"Yes," answered his son. "You play around with 'em, you know. What are they?"

Right then the atmosphere at the table changed. Even the little boy felt it strangely. He glanced at his mother and saw with surprise that she didn't look young any more, or pretty. Her lips were still red, and two red spots burned like fire on her cheeks, but the rest of her was pale, and her eyes seemed to have sunk away into deep holes.

"Who," asked his father sternly, "has told you that?"

Billy looked up, frightened. His father's face was hard and very white; and his voice was cold, not like a father's voice at all.

"It—it was Uncle Tom. He said—"

"Billy," cried his mother, too shrilly, "go up to bed."

And then his father had risen and, looking furiously at his mother, had called Uncle Tom something that even Billy knew wasn't quite right. The little boy had left the room in tears. He had gone to bed. Fanny had helped him very kindly; but neither his father nor mother came up to kiss him, and he had cried himself to sleep.

To Billy this seemed long, long ago, because the very day after he asked the disastrous question mother had taken him to grandma's, and he had seen his father only three times since. At grandma's he learned more about the "blondes." It was easy to listen when the grown-ups thought he was at play. Grandma got very indignant when they talked. It was mother who seemed to defend his father.

"I suppose he thinks he has outgrown me," she once said drearly. "He was so young when we married; and these last years he has met such—such different people."

Grandma had snorted.

"Outgrown the woman who has lived with him for sixteen years and borne him four children?"

"I know; but the children are not here. Perhaps if they'd lived—if there were more of us to hold him . . ."

"Bosh!" exclaimed grandma angrily. "He isn't big enough to stand success, that's all. His head is turned. You'll be well rid of him, Hilda, even though his voice can wring tears from a stone wall; and if you don't ask for a big alimony, I——"

"It will not be necessary," interrupted mother coldly, "to ask for any alimony at all. I know my husband better than you do."

Grandma snorted again; and over in a corner behind the davenport a little boy sat pondering. Alimony! Another word he didn't understand. He wished daddy was here so he could ask about it.

Later the boy was to hear other words that puzzled him. One was divorce. His mother was getting one; but Billy didn't know just what it was. And the other day he had heard Fanny talking with the maid across the hall. She said something about his father—that he was only waiting for the final decree before—It was provoking, but just then they spied him and stopped talking, so he didn't know what his father was going to do, or what a final decree was, either. Billy was disappointed. It was so seldom he heard anything about daddy.

But he heard his voice—often! It was on the phonograph records that mother played in the long evenings when she thought her little boy was fast asleep. Once Billy opened the door a crack so as to hear better, and saw his mother sitting there looking so sad that he longed to throw his arms around her in a strangling hug, only some subtle bond of sympathy warned him that she would rather be alone. So he crept back to bed and lay there listening to the familiar songs—the splendid one about the Toreador; and the one about the little gypsy sweetheart, too. Billy loved that song, but mother hardly ever put it on the phonograph. . . .

The boy still stood in the middle of the room. He cast a cautious glance toward his own dark doorway, and shivered again. He couldn't go back—

there. He would get into his mother's bed, and perhaps in the morning some one would remember him—the doctor, maybe, or when Fanny came——

But Fanny wasn't coming! It was a glimpse of the Christmas-tree that brought this devastating thought. Tomorrow was Christmas eve. Mother had wished Fanny a "Merry Christmas" when she left that night, and told her not to come back till the great day was over. Fanny wouldn't come! No one would come. . . . If only grandma hadn't died. . . .

Billy turned toward the bed, then hesitated. Grandma had once told him not to waste the electricity. He supposed he must turn out the light in the living-room, though it was sort of cheerful—like company. Quickly he snapped it off; then scampered like a frightened squirrel for the bed. They had wrapped his mother in the blankets, but her soft, warm, silken puff was there. Billy pulled it close to his chin and snuggled down. He did not turn off the rose-shaded bedside-light. He felt sure his grandmother would not mind if he kept it burning—when he was all alone.

Resolutely, the small boy closed his eyes, but only to see visions of his mother curled up so strangely—gasping. . . . He opened them, and the dark shadows from the rooms beyond frightened him. And then there swept over him an overpowering longing for his father. He wanted him—wanted him more than anything in the world—except his mother. And he didn't even know where his father was! If he could hear him sing on the phonograph, he might drop asleep; but he was afraid to go into the dark living-room. . . .

His eyes came back to the bedside-table. Beyond the light stood the radio.

The boy's face brightened. He would turn it on. Perhaps somebody would be telling a funny story, or a band might be playing. It would be company. Billy knew how to use the radio, and saw in the dim light that the dials were already set for a local station. He reached out, turning the switch. Some one was playing. The tune seemed vaguely familiar. And then out of the air, clear, sweet, and penetrating, came his father's voice:

"Away in a manger,
No crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus
Laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the heaven . . ."

"Daddy! Daddy!" cried the small boy in an ecstasy of relief, "I knew you would come—somehow!"

So for an hour he lay there, free from the dragging fear that was so terrifying, and heard his father sing the old, old carols: "It Came upon a Midnight Clear," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "The Three Kings," and at last "Silent Night—Holy Night," the one his mother loved best of all.

It was over, that Christmas concert. The last, flawless notes had died away; and with them a sense of panic crept through the little boy. If he lost his father—again . . .

Billy strained his ears. The announcer was speaking. He said: "You have been listening to an hour of Christmas music rendered by the distinguished American baritone Richard Gregory. We should be glad to hear your impressions of this concert, and if you will address either the broadcasting station, or the artist himself in care of Station XYZ . . ."

The artist himself! Suddenly the boy sat up. Why, he could write to his father! Daddy would come. . . .

He was out of bed, the dark rooms no longer a thing of menace. He ran to the desk, found an envelope, and wrote the address with painstaking care. Here were the stamps, the two-cent kind, and the ones that mother told him she kept for an emergency, the big blue stamps that made a letter go more quickly.

"I guess maybe this is a—a 'mergency," said Billy thoughtfully.

A half-hour later a small, pajama-clad boy stole into the dimly lit passage to the mail-chute; then, turning out even the rose-shaded light, comforted, unafraid, he crept under the puff on his mother's bed and fell asleep.

A "distinguished American baritone" was wakened next morning by the persistent ringing of his telephone. Though he had overslept, he felt mildly irritated at being roused. He yawned, reached lazily for the bedside-instrument, and said: "Hello."

A strange voice answered. A letter addressed to him had just come by special delivery to station XYZ. Some one had signed for it and the boy was gone. Should they send it up by another messenger, or would he call?

The singer was puzzled. "A special delivery? Is there an address on the envelope?"

At the answer—the name of a certain apartment-hotel—he straightened up.

"I'll come for it. No, hold on. It'll save time to call a messenger and send it up. Sorry to trouble you."

Richard Gregory hung up the receiver, his fine eyes thoughtful. Why should Hilda be writing to him now? . . . She couldn't possibly need money. . . . Darn queer; and upsetting, too, at Christmas-time. . . . Those carols

last night had been bad enough. . . . They brought things back, especially another Christmas eve when three little nightgowned figures had stood by the piano listening raptly while—

The baritone gave his pillow a vicious dig and went on thinking: There was something uncanny about this marriage business. Beatrice was a witch, of course—utterly desirable. He was going to marry her; but he hoped that after their marriage his path and Hilda's would lie far apart. He knew men who were on perfectly friendly terms with their divorced wives; but he was—different. Perhaps he was a fool; but in all these months he'd not been able to obliterate the past as he'd expected to—wanted to, of course. Not long ago his audience had demanded the "Gypsy Love-Song," and he had responded to their request as a singer must; but amid the applause that rocked the hall he had seen only Hilda—Hilda whom he had once called his "little gypsy sweetheart." . . .

No, he couldn't wholly erase the past. A man's wife was, somehow, his wife. There were intimate memories that he and Hilda shared—would always share "till death us do part," he mused. And the boy—their boy—

Fear clutched suddenly at his heart. Had something happened to Billy? At their last bitter meeting Hilda had said that she would not trouble him with letters. What else could it be?

That morning a fastidious American singer omitted his customary shower. He was fully dressed when the messenger arrived. A glance told him that the letter was not from Hilda; yet he felt strangely stirred as he read the childish scrawl:

"Dere Daddy, it is nite. I just herd

you sing the Crismus songs. It kep me from being scared. I am all alone. Mother had a dredful pain and they took her away. It was in the nite. I gess they forgot me. I am all alone. Grandma is ded. Plese come. To-morrow is Crismus eve. Excuse bad riting. Your boy Billy."

If Richard Gregory had slept late that morning, his son slept later still. When a little boy is wakened in the night and terrified for what seems a lifetime, exhaustion is apt to follow. When Billy awoke the sun was streaming across his face. For a moment he lay there puzzled, wondering why he was not in his own bed—remembering at sight of the waiting Christmas-tree what day it was; and then remembering—everything! A lump rose in his throat, but he swallowed it manfully.

"I wonder," he said aloud, "if daddy has got my letter. I wonder how soon he'll come. Maybe I better get up and dress."

He washed carefully, as his mother liked him to do, wishing regretfully that he hadn't ever troubled her by trying to evade this duty that she thought necessary. He was struggling with a knotted shoe-lace when the bell rang. His heart pounded even as he told himself: "It can't be daddy this quick." Yet hope rose as, shoe-string dangling, he ran to the door. The lock stuck, but he got it open. . . .

Billy was in his father's arms. He was crying—just like a silly baby! His father was crying, too—crying and saying terrible things about doctors, and hotel managements, and people across the hall. He was terribly angry. He called them— Well, he used a word . . .

Billy blew his small nose, and spoke.

"You mustn't say that, daddy. Mother says no—no gentleman ever says that, and—and——"

His father hugged him a bit tighter.

"She's right; but I'm not a gentleman this morning—I'm just primitive man, protecting my young. Tell me about—mother. What happened?"

Billy told him graphically.

"It hurt so she couldn't talk. I—I think she forgot me. She never even said—said good-by."

Good-by! The word on the small boy's lips sounded hideously final. Its effect on the man was unexpected. A sense of nausea swept over him, and, arising, he set his son gently on his feet.

"Where's the telephone?"

Billy pointed to the desk, and his father sat down and called the doctor. He was asking about mother, Billy gathered. The doctor talked for a long time. Daddy said simply, "Yes," and "I see," and "Not to-day?" and "Tell her the boy is all right—that he's with his father. She'll be worrying." And then his polite voice changed and he demanded: "Do you know that when you took her away an eight-year-old boy was left here—*alone*—in the middle of the night? . . . That's no excuse . . . I . . ."

He was angry again. Billy was terribly afraid he would say that bad word right to the doctor! But he didn't. He hung up suddenly and sat there a moment without speaking. Then he said:

"It was appendicitis. She's pretty sick; but she'll be better soon—she's *got* to be better! Now let's see." He stood up, dropped his fur coat, and asked: "Have you had breakfast?"

"I'm not all dressed. There's a knot in my shoe-string."

"Give it here," said dad, and fixed it

in no time. "I haven't had breakfast either. Do you eat it here?"

"Fanny gets it; but she's away—for Christmas."

Billy winked back the tears. He had forgotten Christmas. His father had forgotten it too—forgotten where he had meant to spend the holiday—forgotten a girl with golden hair and laughing lips. He turned his eyes quickly away from the boy's face.

"We—we were going to trim our tree to-night," went on Billy sadly. "Will she be back—to help—to-night, daddy?"

"Not to-night," answered his father gently, "but *I* can help."

They went out to breakfast, but Billy noticed that his father didn't eat much—just drank his coffee and sat there thinking. The boy had to speak three times to rouse him.

"I've had enough, daddy. Let's go home."

"I think," dad answered thoughtfully, "that first we'll send some flowers to—to the hospital."

Billy's face brightened.

"She likes the red ones."

"I know," answered his father. "Roses."

"Will she know who sent 'em?" asked Billy as they left the shop.

"Yes. I put in a card. We must hurry now, son. I want to call up the doctor."

"And we must make the beds," said Billy practically.

Richard Gregory came away from the telephone with a grave face. He stood for a long time staring out of the window. Then, at his son's reminder, the great American baritone made the beds.

"There are some wrinkles," commented Billy critically. "You haven't done so good a job as mother."

"I know it—now," answered his father; but he wasn't thinking about beds.

They went out for a late luncheon, and again the boy saw that his father didn't eat. When they got back he called the hospital.

"She's sleeping," he said. "They're a bit encouraged."

"Will she be home for Christmas?"

"No; but—if she's better we'll go and see her."

"I've got a present for her, daddy. Fanny took me to buy it. Can I take it to her?"

"Yes, if it's nothing big."

"It's a record. It's you singing. She'll like it."

His father started.

"How do you know she'll like it?"

"Because she plays 'em—nights—when she's alone. I guess maybe she was going to listen to you last night, daddy. The radio was all set for that station. I guess she was going to turn it on after she went to bed. It was lucky, wasn't it? I wanted you so, and—and I didn't know where you were or——"

Billy ceased speaking because his father had gone to the window again and wasn't listening. But pretty soon he turned.

"Sonny—I've got to leave you for a little while."

"Please don't," begged Billy, frightened.

His father sat down and took him on his knee.

"Look here, son. There's some one that I must see, and I can't take you with me this time."

"Couldn't you write a letter?"

"Yes; but it would be cowardly to write a letter. You don't want your dad to be a coward, do you?"

The boy shook his head, but his lips trembled.

"Will you be long, daddy?"

"Not longer than I can help. Can you use the telephone?"

Billy nodded, and his father wrote something on a card.

"You can get me here—at this number. If any message comes—about mother, tell them to call me there. Perhaps there's something on the radio that you can listen to while I'm away."

"I think maybe I'll play some records," said the little boy. "I know how; and it'll seem more 'sif you were here."

Billy felt very lonely after his father left. Even the records didn't comfort him. At last he took some of the Christmas-tree trimmings from the box and laid them in a row on the window-sill, ready for evening. He brought the tissue-wrapped packages from his mother's drawer where he knew she had hidden them, feeling of each one curiously as he laid it down. He found a cloth and wiped the dust from the chairs and tables.

"Mother's kind of particular about dust," he told himself, looking around hopefully for something else that she might want done; and then, having exhausted all such possibilities, he sat down in a chair by the window to watch for his father. The minutes passed very slowly, and the early winter twilight began to fall.

"I wish he would come," said Billy to the lonely room.

And at that very moment Richard Gregory was saying, his deep voice strangely shaken: "No, it has nothing to do with her sudden illness. I haven't seen her. I don't even know that she still cares. It's something that's been growing on me for weeks—the feeling that marriage, if it begins with love, as mine did, can't be dissolved merely by

evidence trumped up for the occasion. Marriage has roots. One may think they are dead, past all reviving; but at an unexpected word—a song—a gesture—they stir uneasily. I'm not saying that such a course is wrong for others—but it would be wrong for me. And for you, too, Beatrice. The thought that you'd trampled another woman's happiness under foot in order to gain your own would some day rise up to strike you—when it was too late. . . . Blame you? . . . My dear—my dear—I blame only myself. . . .”

“I wish daddy would come back,” said a lonely little boy as lights began to spring up in the street below; but the Christmas stars were spangling the dark sky before he came.

He came in quietly, looking very sober, and went to the telephone. Mother, it seemed, was better. Billy could see her to-morrow.

“And you too, daddy?”

“Perhaps. I'm sorry to have been away so long, son, but it could not be helped. Now let's eat some bread and milk; and then we'll trim the tree.”

It was a never-to-be-forgotten evening to that little boy, an evening for which a certain distinguished singer deserved a medal for bravery, though watching his gaiety and antics one wouldn't have guessed it. His own torment he put resolutely aside as, with an heroic effort, he brought smiles to the boy's eyes and laughter to his lips. Under his skilled fingers the tree became a thing of beauty, from the glistening star of Bethlehem at its topmost branch to the myriad lights that shone so gaily when, the last bright bauble in place, they darkened the room and lighted the tree itself.

And then, at his boy's eager request,

Richard Gregory did the hardest thing of all—swallowed the lump in his throat and sang the carols, not knowing that at the first golden notes the members of that unfeeling family across the hall had gathered outside the door to listen—and wipe their eyes!

“I wish mother had heard you,” said Billy wistfully as the last song ended; but his father, having reached the limit of endurance, did not answer.

“Don't you love Christmas, daddy?”

The man nodded.

“Mother'll be glad to see us, won't she—on Christmas day?” And after a silence: “Can we go in the morning?”

“I—I hope so.”

Only when his little boy was happily asleep did Richard Gregory give way to the conflicting emotions that were tearing his bruised heart.

And Christmas morning they went to the hospital.

“We must be very quiet,” warned the father as they approached a clean, queer-smelling corridor. “She's been so sick.”

“I'll be quiet,” Billy promised, clutching a package which daddy had helped him tie with a red ribbon.

“Only ten minutes,” cautioned the nurse, and left the room.

Billy glanced toward the bed. His mother's head was turned away a little. Her long, dark hair was braided, hanging down over her shoulders on the white counterpane. Her eyes were closed. The boy moved nearer. He had never seen her like that—so still. . . .

“Mother!”

It was scarcely more than a whisper, but the head on the pillow turned slowly. His mother smiled. How white her face was!

“Mother—it's Christmas! I've brought you a present.” He was untying the

ribbon—tearing the paper. “See! It’s a record. It’s daddy singing. Do you like it?”

“I—I love it.”

With an effort she turned her head still farther until her eyes found what they were seeking. Her husband stood with his back against the door. His face was white, too, thought Billy, terribly white, and for a moment he didn’t move. Then mother stretched out a hand, weakly, and something clutched in her fingers fell to the floor as daddy came closer and spoke her name—just that:

“Hilda?”

It seemed like a question. And then, suddenly, he dropped to his knees beside the bed. His face was on the pil-

low, against hers. Billy was conscious of the scent of roses. A long, long moment passed—two—three. . . . Outside church-bells were ringing . . . Christmas bells! . . . How still the room was. . . .

The boy stooped, lifting the thing that had fallen from his mother’s hand. It was a visiting-card; but it had no name on it, only some words from a song in his father’s nice neat writing that was so easy for a little boy to read. Billy guessed it was the card that had gone with the red roses, though all it said was: “For my little gypsy sweet-heart”—nothing more.

The great American baritone was still kneeling beside the bed when the nurse came in to send them home.



At the Fair

BY CHARLOTTE MISH

THE grand stand is alive with eager faces,
 Gay pennants wave, and happy voices shout;
 And now, before the final thrilling races,
 Two plain and humble work-horses come out.
 They haul the cumbersome and heavy drag
 That levels down the turf for races here,
 And, as they pass the stand, some country wag
 Begins to clap and whistle and to cheer.
 The crowd is quick to join in the affair
 And rocks the stand with tumult and applause!
 The band strikes up a military air!
 The two work-horses, startled, turn and pause,
 And then they straighten and throw back their heads,
 And pull their burden grandly to the tune,
 And, prancing as the joyous clamor spreads,
 They find their Moment over all too soon.
 But they have had their Moment, anyway!
 They have been fêted actors in the show!
 And afterward, recalling this proud day,
 They’ll swagger, just a little, as they go.