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And now that wonderfully wry individual, Will Stanton, brings you a very different and uproariously joyful story of soldiers and a girl, a true and vivid piece of modern (and timeless) folklore. "The legend itself," Mr. Stanton writes, "is one I think most GI's would recognize although I've never seen it in print before. I can imagine one of Caesar's legionnaires saying, 'So there I was standing on the Appian Way when along comes this puella in a cream-colored chariot . . .'"

The Girl in the Flaxen Convertible

by WILL STANTON

I WENT OUT to the local drive-in the other night with a friend of mine by the name of Al. There was a war picture playing. It started out pretty much like all the others — some character actor sitting on his bunk looking at the floor and a lot of recruits standing around discriminating against him. Then he and another fellow are out in the dark someplace, you don't know where because all you can see are the faces about 30 feet high. They talk in a kind of Academy-Award murmur that sets up vibrations all over the car. It never fails, I have to get the carburetor adjusted after one of these scenes. Anyhow, one of them asks the other if he's ever been out at night when the stars look like you could reach right out and touch them and it seems like there's a wonderful symphony in the air, and the other fellow says no, he never has. What he likes to think about is having a little place of his own and a wife of his own and kids of his own, and that's what he thinks it all means. I started up the engine.

Al reached over and turned the key. He said it was a good picture and he wanted to see how it came out. Well, the way it came out, all the fellows you thought were bad guys, why they turned out to be good guys, and there was some general that always showed up wearing riding boots because he wasn't quite bright enough to tie his shoes and he pinned medals on the whole bunch. Al blew his nose and slapped me on the back and said it sure brought back old times.

I got the car started again. "Al," I said, "we'll admit it was good whole-

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some entertainment, but when did you ever see a colonel's daughter that was stacked up like that girl in the picture, and could sing and tap dance and play the electric guitar?" Al said he'd seen plenty. Well, the only colonel's daughter I ever knew got thrown out of the K-9 Corps for biting one of the trainers, but Al and I had been in different outfits so I couldn't argue with him. I decided to take a different approach. "Al," I said, "I've got no complaints about the show. I just say there wasn't any realism to it. Now how about that scene where the tenor has to go on K.P. and the mean sergeant makes him peel that big stack of potatoes?"

"How about that!" Al said. "Boy, that happened to me dozens of times."

I gunned the engine once or twice, but I didn't say anything. The Army has got machines to peel potatoes; they've had them for twenty years. Al ought to have known that much. At the same time I can't blame him because I see it going on all over the country — ex-G.I.'s from Silver City, New Mexico, rooting for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and men from the yam and turnip country stuffing themselves on blueberry pie. The folks in Hollywood call it customer identification, but I say there's a difference between what's true and what isn't, even if nobody remembers it anymore. I knew a fellow in the Army, and his ideal was to have a bachelor apartment right in the middle of New York City. He wanted to get up at noon, have two glasses of milk punch and a dozen blue points and then go down and help cast a musical comedy. At that time he was speaking for a pretty large segment of the Armed Forces, but now Hollywood has sold us all down the river for a little chicken farm and a membership ticket in the P.T.A. Sure, the movie people will say I don't know what I'm talking about. They'll tell you that if I didn't habitually associate with the rowdy element I might be in a better position to judge. That's probably true, but it has no bearing on the situation. Men in the Army used to have certain things they were interested in, and they had their own way of expressing themselves. If all this is to be abandoned now, then in my opinion the culture of our country is going to be the poorer for it. Of course, I'm talking about the old Army. I can remember back in Texas in the early part of the war . . .

They called us aviation students, but we didn't study anything because there weren't enough schools to accommodate us. So what we did mostly was lie around the barracks and drink bootleg whisky and talk. We could have bought our liquor retail by hitchhiking to Amarillo, but that didn't seem right to us somehow. As potential officers we had a certain position to maintain. Besides, it wouldn't have been fair to the privates and corporals who smuggled in the stuff. The spirit of free enterprise is just as sacred in the Army as elsewhere.

Doing as much talking as we did, naturally we got pretty good at it. We'd start off early in the morning while we were still in bed, about 8 o'clock. Usually some farmer who had been up since 6 would come back from breakfast, patting his stomach. Then somebody in one of the bunks would open an eye and start asking questions — was the mess hall still open? — any hot water in the showers? — how was the weather? — coffee any good? — and so on. And the farmer would say the weather was fine — chow was good — coffee was good — not much of a line — everything O.K. By that time everybody would be awake and listening and the first fellow would say, "By the way, what did you say your middle name was?" And the farmer would blink and gape and give his middle name — we'll say it was Hector. Then the first fellow would say, "Well, Hector, you taxi back to the chow hall and tell the mess sergeant I said the hell with it." We went through this routine about five mornings a week.

Probably some people will say it wasn't much of a tradition for a crack Army unit. Maybe not, but traditions were scarce in those days, and we cherished what we had. Afternoons we used to hang around the P.X. or the service club and discuss local gossip and rumors. Sometimes the post was going to be inactivated in 48 hours and moved to Montana. Other times the C.O. had got lost on a weather hop over the field and some tech sergeant had to go up in a Cub and bring him in. Or else it would be the new counterespionage school in Lincoln, Nebraska — the one that trained men to hang around poolrooms and dance halls near defense plants and watch for spies — things like that.

But the best talk came in the evening — the story hour. All the stories were pretty much the same, but that didn't matter to us. The way they all started out, some fellow would be standing on the corner in Denver or Albuquerque or Louisville when up drives this blonde in a blue Cadillac. Well, sir — and we would lie back and nod and light cigarettes, already miles away. You take a kid that knows the three bears backwards and forwards, he still gets a big kick when the old bear says, "And here she is yet." Well, that's the way we felt about it.

I did try a little variation one evening, but it didn't turn out so well. I was telling about a corner in Trenton, New Jersey, that I had been standing on when a lanky brunette came up driving a '34 Nash. We went out to her place and sat around with her folks, playing parchesi until 11, and then I took a bus back to camp. I thought I told it modestly enough, but it didn't seem to set very well with the other fellows. The trouble was, I guess, that our stories were generally considered to be common property, and mine not being on a very high plane they thought that it was a reflection on the group as a whole.

Probably the only fellow in the barracks who didn't see anything unnatural in it was Howard Loessing. It may have brought back fond memories to him — I can't explain it any other way. He was from Indiana, North Forty, or some such place, and in spirit he had never left home. If he just crossed the barracks you'd swear he was walking on plowed ground. I saw him slouch past an M.P. captain one time, and the expression that passed over the officer's brutal features was not so much one of anger as of betrayal.

Loessing was almost completely hairless and built along tubular lines like that old tire advertisement. His eyes were close together, and he had a great beaked nose that he used to talk through whenever anybody happened to give him a kind word. Then he would take out his wallet and pass around pictures of his uncle and the head of the 4-H Club. In the evening he would sit on his bunk and write them letters — six or eight pages at a time. Well, this particular evening something I said must have started a chain of memories, it seemed that because Loessing looked up from the letter he was writing and listened, and then it seemed that he, too, had a story to tell.

He had been stationed at Santa Ana and on his first week-end pass he went into L.A. He started out on a sight-seeing bus and halfway through the trip he got separated from the rest of the party. You or I couldn't have done it, but things like that came easy to Loessing. He started walking — so many furrows to a block, so many blocks to a quarter section. Whether he was headed for the base or back to Indiana he didn't say. He hadn't covered but a few miles when the convertible pulled up beside him and the girl asked him if he wanted a lift. He noticed she had straw-colored hair that just matched the car, and then he must have blacked out, because the next thing he remembered she had turned into a long driveway up in the hills and parked the car. It was quite an impressive place with an indoor pool and movie-projection room and other such luxuries. In fact he thought at first it was some kind of country club and was half expecting a crowd of people to show up and maybe throw him out. But he didn't see anybody else the entire week end, and the way Loessing told it, they had themselves a real genuine picnic.

The bar was stocked with kirsch, among other things, and stout, Pernod, Chianti — he'd never heard the names before, but he tried them all. I guess he figured he might never get a chance to live so high up on the hog again. Then there was a library with all kinds of remarkable books in it, and oil paintings every place you looked — some comical and others more on the artistic side. As a matter of fact there was nothing he'd ever thought of that wasn't there for the asking and more besides — pork chops for breakfast with cream gravy and two kinds of pie — anything you might care to name.

Well, first off they went down to the pool, and I presume Loessing must have appeared bashful and uneasy, because the girl got some kind of a leopard suit and made him put it on and they played Tarzan and Jane for a couple of hours. By that time he was about as waterlogged as a cypress stump, so they went to another place and the girl put on a sergeant's outfit — not Wac, but a regular Army uniform with long pants — and she taught him a game called Spin the N.C.O. It is just such little touches that make all the difference to the boy away from home — something the U.S.O. and the others have never seemed to understand. Anyhow, on Sunday night she drove him back to camp and that was the last time he saw her. He would have written, but he hadn't thought to get her name.

That's all there was to the story. Loessing went on to finish his letter and the rest of us didn't say anything, then or later. Evenings we would lie on our bunks, staring at the ceiling, and after a while one of the fellows would give a sigh. But not Loessing — he never seemed to notice any change. I think it gave some of us kind of an uneasy feeling to be dreaming about his girl while he was writing to some farmer in Indiana, but there wasn't anything we could do about it. I did stop by his bunk a couple of times to admire his uncle's picture — I think he appreciated that.

It was about that time or shortly afterwards that I got shuffled into a new outfit, and the scene shifted to a town somewhere in France. It was a good-sized town, more like a city actually, and by this time most of the Germans had left, so we were able to carry on the war without too many complications. Every once in a while we would organize a trip up to the front, or anyhow close enough to hear the shooting and buy souvenirs to send home. Prices were high, of course, but we had our overseas pay and flying pay and some of the men set up small businesses on the side and we managed to get by. They issued us ribbons to wear and combat boots, and Paris was just over the horizon.

Then there was an evening that found eight or ten of us sitting around our quarters. We had been playing a game with some dice that weren't all they might have been, and our morale was low.

Somebody had liberated a couple of bottles of cognac and we drank that and told a few lies, but there wasn't any feeling in it, at least not until Cliff Turpin began to tell his story. He was a bandy-legged chap with a sloping forehead and a slight speech impediment, but he never borrowed money or molested anybody and he made a good officer.

I wasn't paying much attention to what he said, something about Irish highballs and eating chicken and waffles for breakfast, and then he mentioned a girl who wore a major's suit and suddenly the battlefield faded from my mind and I was in California again. I never even thought of Loes-

sing at the time — it was more like I was reliving some dream. The same honey-colored car was there, the same house, the same girl, and I was somewhere in the background, partly looking on, partly remembering. When he had finished there was no comment. I glanced around the circle of cynical, hard-bitten faces and I could tell that Turpin's words had touched them more than any one of them cared to admit. As the poet has so rightly said — "Tho' the boys be far away, they dream of home."

That was the last I ever heard of her. It's strange too, because you'd think of her as the type that would become a legend. I've talked to a lot of veterans who were stationed on the West Coast — mostly the high-octane boys with the 50-mission caps and the gaucho boots. Some of them from what I could gather had been shot at by half the husbands in Beverly Hills, but none of them had known her — only Loessing and Turpin, only those two humpty dumpties. And yet I feel sure that there must have been others — and maybe there are more today.

I don't want to appear sentimental, but out of what we call the American way of life, to me she symbolizes what is noblest and best. I like to think of her as a sort of beacon, standing on the bluffs near Santa Monica, perhaps, waiting there in the fog with arms outstretched — not for heroes, not for the ones surrounded by glamor, not for the well-loved, but for the stumbling ones, the misplaced and bewildered, the ones with nothing to recommend them but a shy smile and their awkward need.

Her car would not be so golden any more; it would be tarnished and battered by the years. She, too, would be getting on — in her middle thirties if I judge correctly. Still, some things, they tell us, can never change — her comic understanding, her steadfast immorality, her all-embracing tenderness. Sometimes I get to thinking, if I were a young man again, but then . . .

No, I shall never see her, never even know her name. I have enjoyed remembering her and I am proud, and that is enough. She will always be dear to me, she and her shabby little band of loved ones. Wherever they may be I wish them well.

