

What Were You Doing When You Heard the News?

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THAT SUNDAY AFTERNOON was cold and gray but with no hint of rain or snow in the air, what we call a “raw” day, when the clouds just hang there, like they’re doing nothing but putting in time. The day before, Saturday, had been sunny and warm but not the best of Saturdays either because I hadn’t been able to go to the picture show in the afternoon—the great Saturday ritual of the Wild West, the Three Stooges, and whatever serial was playing at the time, to be sat through at least twice (and three times if at all possible) if you were to have any standing at all with your friends. Instead, I had had to go to the music club (which I belonged to because I took piano lessons) and play a trio with two other boys—a piano transcription of the *William Tell* overture—and in costume too, which amounted to short pants and my Sunday hat with a feather stuck in the band, to simulate appropriate “Swiss” attire. As I recall, the theme for that meeting of the club was “Music Around the World” or something of the sort; and the gist of it all was that music was the universal language which would make us all friends despite the war clouds that were now looming on the horizon and indeed had already been storming over Europe for a couple of years. (In his time, William Tell had stood up to a tyrant, but now the Swiss were neutral.)

But anyhow I wasn’t sure I believed all that: I loved music, yes, very much indeed. But I didn’t expect it to remake the world, despite its power to charm the savage breast and all that sort of thing: I had lived too long in the world to agree to that, even at age eleven. And that very

week, at the picture show, which was more or less the center of my imaginative life in those days, I had seen Cary Grant apparently plotting to kill his wife, Joan Fontaine, in *Suspicion*. And even though it had turned out to be all in her imagination really, I had read in *Life* magazine that the book on which it was all based had him actually doing her in. But of course you couldn’t have that sort of thing happening to two big stars back in those days, even if you were Alfred Hitchcock.

On the same program—a Thursday matinee, I remember—was *Paramount News* showing a couple of Japanese diplomats up in Washington calling at the White House and afterwards shaking hands with Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State and one of our own because he was a fellow Tennessean: there had been tensions in the Far East between the Japs, as everybody always called them, and us, and these men had come for talks with the State Department to try to smooth things over. And of course they were all in *Life* magazine too, and everybody hoped it would be all right. Naturally, if President Roosevelt and Cordell Hull were hobnobbing with them, it ought to be. It was mainly Hitler that everybody seemed worried about then: a lot of people were even saying we were finally going to have to get into it all over there whether we wanted to or not and what we really ought to do was just build a wall around the whole thing—Europe and all that went with it—and let them fight it out with each other and not keep on bothering us.

But anyhow I missed the Saturday matinee because of the music club and

had to make do with seeing the program only once, that night. And it was Johnny Mack Brown on a big white stallion going after some rustlers. (That's all Hitler was, I thought, just another rustler, another *outlaw*, trying to take somebody else's home and belongings away from him.) And I thought Johnny Mack Brown was just fine and not like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, who *sang* and were of course naturally "wholesome" because at the fadeout, when they went to embrace the girl, Champion or Trigger would poke his nose in between them and that would be all. And I thought that was all on a par with William Boyd as Hopalong Cassidy refusing a real drink when he had to go in a saloon and always ordering sarsaparilla instead. The West wasn't any Sunday School, and just who did they think they were fooling anyhow? Not me.

The serial that was running at the Dixie Theater then was *Jungle Girl*, which was based on the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the man who had created Tarzan; but because this was a serial and made by Republic and not Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, who produced the *Tarzan* pictures, it was all pretty shabbily put together, with what passed for African jungles all filmed out in the Hollywood suburbs and the heroine, Nioka, played by Frances Gifford, who was certainly not the greatest actress in the world, riding around from time to time (when she wasn't swinging from tree to tree on what looked like grape vines) on an elderly elephant from the nearest zoo. But she was a good game girl, always dreadfully menaced at the end of each installment by a gorilla (while she was tied to the stake) or the possibility of being forced into a bottomless pit down in some dark cavern—and all through the machinations of a malevolent African medicine man named Shamba. Now whether Nioka, like Tarzan, was descended from English nobility and was thus thought by Shamba to be another envoy of Empire sent out to oppress the natives of the Dark Continent, I don't recall. But anyhow he was out to get her and, on the whole, was quite effective, dressed in a leopard skin loin cloth

and sporting a headdress of exotic feathers, his black face all streaked with sinister white war paint. And I thought he would certainly do until a better villain came along.

Well, anyhow, I don't remember much of what happened in that Saturday's installment; but at the end Shamba was creeping up on Nioka as she stood on a cliff overlooking the African plains or something and was naturally going to push her over, where of course she would be dashed to pieces on the rocks below. But just before he reached her, she turned around and saw him and naturally let out a wild scream and that was all until next week; and you and Nioka were both literally left up in the air until then. And it was that scene that some of my buddies and I were acting out in our front yard on Sunday afternoon, with Barbara Jean Simon from down the street playing Nioka and myself naturally as Shamba. I had just growled to Barbara Jean, who had finally "seen" me the second before, "Here comes old Chieftain Shamba and he's going to carve his initials on your gizzard," and she had let out an appropriate scream when my mother came out on the porch and called me to come in the house. And there she told me that Aunt Janie, Uncle Buford's wife and our choir director at the Methodist Church, had called them and told them to turn on the radio: she had been listening to the symphony broadcast from Carnegie Hall and they had interrupted the program to announce that the Japs had bombed Pearl Harbor and there was no telling what might happen. And so that was the end of *Jungle Girl*; and we sat there in my parents' room, listening to the radio while the details of the "sneak attack" came tumbling out—the "stab in the back" while the Japanese envoys had been negotiating in Washington and we were all still thinking of them as gentle little people in kimonos out drinking tea under the cherry trees.

And in a way, it was all very thrilling. I remember thinking, at the time, now we were really in a war and I'd get to see what it felt like, like Grandpa, who had

fought in the Confederate Army in Virginia, like the English right that minute, going down into the subways (or the underground, as they called it) every night during the blitz while the RAF took on the *Luftwaffe* up above. Now history wasn't just something that happened to somebody else; now I would get to be part of it too. Of course I was too young to go fight; but I wondered if the Japs would attack Woodville and maybe bomb the school, maybe even send one of their Kamikaze pilots to plunge into my sixth-grade classroom, to undermine morale on the home front—a tall order, of course, since we lived a couple of thousand miles from the West Coast, but I had a vivid imagination and saw *Paramount News* and *Life* magazine every week.

Anyhow, none of us said anything much right then, as I recall; we were all too busy listening, my parents and I. But Daddy did reach out and put his arm around me, when the radio said our declaration of war was now a mere formality and President Roosevelt would address the nation and there would be an emergency session of Congress right away. Was Daddy trying to allay any fears I might have had, or was he trying to forestall his own—that something might “happen” to me, to all of us, in a future for which there now seemed no rules and which had sprung on us, in the twinkling of an eye, with no real warning and, we thought, hardly any rhyme or reason? Had Cordell Hull and President Roosevelt also been taken completely by surprise, or did they know more than we did? At that point it hardly mattered. In any case, after a moment, when all we could hear was the sound of the radio (and with the details of disaster coming so thick and fast into the room we could hardly take them in), Daddy spoke up suddenly and said, “I know what. We'll go out to your Uncle Jim's at Maple Grove and tell him and Aunt Mary and your Cousin Laura. With only that old battery-powered radio of theirs, they may not have heard the news. Jim was saying just the other day that it was about to play out and he could hardly wait till they get electricity

out there next summer, when the TVA finishes putting in their power lines.”

And so that was what we did—drove out to Maple Grove in the twilight, to Uncle Jim and Aunt Mary's and the house where Grandpa had lived in his last days. And we sat there in front of the fire in the front bedroom, where Grandpa used to sleep, with only one lamp lit, while Daddy and Uncle Jim discussed the *pros* and *cons* of the matter and agreed that since we were bound to get into it all sooner or later, it was just as well to go on and get it over with, this war that was now really a sure enough *World War*. I can't remember now whether Uncle Jim and his family had heard the radio account before we got there—or understood it properly if they had, their old instrument was working so badly. But I remember, as we sat there in the near dark, the calm that seemed to pervade the scene: there was no sense of momentous times or high drama, just the quiet conversation of two men who were brothers (the women and children naturally had nothing to say then) talking *business*, about the nation and the world and a job that must be done as quickly and efficiently as possible, no more, no less. And in a strange way, it was all thoroughly domestic and peaceful—almost like something out of a Dutch genre painting, where people can go quietly about the affairs of their day untouched by the rumblings from the great world outside. But you know they're both right there together, different sides of the same coin.

And I wondered what Grandpa would have thought now—the man who had defended *his* country, right or wrong, against all invaders. Would he have ventured now on even a timid reminiscence of the Rebel yell (and I remembered him as a fierce old man that I was afraid of) or just treated it—like Daddy and Uncle Jim—as a matter of business? Whatever the case, he surely would have said you had to defend your *home*; that was why Daddy and all the brothers always stood up for people like the Greeks, even in the short skirts their soldiers wore—because they loved their country. (But then I sup-

posed the Japanese and the Germans loved their country too; it was all very confusing.) In any case, Grandpa would surely have understood what was happening now: he himself had been on the losing side but that didn't take away from your obligation now. At least that was as near as I could figure it. And the next day when we all went into the auditorium at school to listen to President Roosevelt asking Congress to declare war, despite all the high talk and all the business about the "day of infamy," that was just the way I thought the President and Congress were acting, like rolling up your sleeves before tackling a really nasty job, getting ready for *business*. (I had already seen Winston Churchill rolling up his sleeves in a cartoon from an English newspaper, and *he* surely knew what it was all about.)

And so maybe that was the way it always happened, in real life, outside the history books. It wasn't mixed up with plumes and swords and power and glory so much as it was with acting out scenes from *Jungle Girl* and talking big questions

over in front of the bedroom fire, in the early dark of a December day. Maybe it was mostly more *business* than *drama* anyhow, and you lived up on the heights but seldom. That must be the way history really worked, I thought—usually no big deal but slowly and quietly and every day was Judgment Day. And history didn't so much *happen*; it just *was*. Of course I couldn't realize all this at the time, at least not in so many words. That knowledge came only many years later and after a number of other dramatic, even sensational moments, of which our times have certainly had their share. But I did begin to have what my mother would have called a sneaking idea that the whole thing was both simpler and at the same time more complicated than I had thought. In any case, when anybody asks me now whether I remember what I was doing when I heard the news of Pearl Harbor, I can certainly give him an earful, indeed perhaps tell him more than he really wants to know.