

A WORM IN THE BIG APPLE

by

Marshall Butler

Delivered to the

Athenaeum Society

February 5, 1987

## A Worm In The Big Apple

When I was a Junior in college, I decided to quit school and travel for four years. Actually, it was President Roosevelt's idea, and he was always more enthusiastic about it than I was. They say that travel is broadening but I didn't find it so. When I got out of the Army I weighed 119 pounds--which is not terribly broad unless you are only 3 feet tall. Then I went back to the University of Kansas to finish my degree in music.

Carl Friedberg, from New York City, came to Kansas City in the summer of 1947 to give Master Classes in piano at the Conservatory. I auditioned for him and was accepted--and that was how I happened to go to New York.

Someone from the University had an apartment in the heart of Manhattan and he kindly let me stay there for three days. I was not the only one--there were so many of us that we had to sleep on the floor. However, I never did see our host.

Through an ad in the newspaper I found a room on East 95th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. It was through that chance move that I made a large group of very fine friends.

My lessons with Mr. Friedberg began later that month--which was September. Mr. Friedberg was of the old school (what or wherever that may be) and our relationship was a bit rocky. His studio was about twelve or thirteen blocks from where I lived and I always walked to my lesson. One day when I arrived I asked if I might use his bathroom. This produced a reaction which I could never have anticipated. In a tone of outrage he barked, "Why didn't you do that before you left home?" With what I felt was perfect logic I replied "I didn't have to." I suppose that in order to avoid having something unfortunate happen to his floor he allowed me to use the facility in question, but he was clearly not pleased. The very idea of a mere student using the Master's bathroom! And I was pretty mere.

Ever so often we would have Student Recitals for which Mr. F. would rent a hall. He asked me what I was going to wear to one of these. When I told him I had a new dark blue pin-stripe suit he went into orbit. "Stripes?," he roared, "Stripes? Don't you have a cut-a-way like William Masselas has?" I, who couldn't even afford a place to practice, should have a cut-a-way? I suppose pin-stripes in Austria (where he was from) must be quite wide because when I showed up to play (all pin-striped) he seemed definitely relieved that they were so small. In fact you could almost say--the size of a pin.

Another time when I went to my lesson it started to rain before I got there. When he opened the door to his apartment I was busily wiping my feet on the door mat. In fact, if I had wiped them one more time I would have had to have my shoes re-soled. "What? No rubbers? What about my carpets?" said he. I felt like saying (but wouldn't have dared), "Mr. Friedberg; it is going to come as a surprise to you, but I was born and grew up in a house and we had rugs on

the floor." And besides that I had lived in Europe for two years. But I don't think that living in a tent is quite the same thing.

Some times he could be very nice. In fact before I played in Carnegie Recital Hall the first time he gave me a free lesson. Our main difficulty was that Mr. F. had no discernible sense of humor.

I studied with him for three years, but my money began to give out before the end of that time. Although he had no connection with Columbia University he was a famous teacher and I received credit for studying with him while I worked on my Master's degree at Columbia Teacher's College. By my doing this the GI Bill paid for him and the degree. Or nearly did. The sly dogs at Columbia did not tell me I had used it up, and after I graduated they sent me a bill for \$200.00.

When I was going to Columbia I attended, by invitation, a two-piano recital given by two faculty members one Sunday afternoon. After they had finished playing a beautiful piece of music by Brahms the lady sitting beside me leaned over and said, "Brahms is the answer." I was thrown into complete confusion. Had someone asked me a question which I hadn't heard? Was this a test? Had everybody been given a sheet of paper to fill out? And if so, where was mine? I thanked her graciously. I was indeed glad to know that answer but I certainly never heard the question.

The people in whose apartment I had a room were named Reddington. They could not have been nicer. Mrs. Reddington was born in Tennessee and that made a bond between us--fellow southerners. She had some friends nearby who were passionately devoted to music and she introduced me to them. We took to each other immediately and it was the beginning of a life-long friendship between them and me and the Reddingtons. The fact that they had a crazy sense of humor did not hurt.

These friends--Libby and Kate--had a beautiful apartment and one of the finest Steinway grand pianos I have ever played. I went to their place every Sunday for dinner as long as they lived there. Once a year they would give me a paid engagement and invite an apartment full of music loving friends. After the program they would have a party--just like people here are kind enough to do.

Another person I met through Mrs. Reddington was a decorator--Emma B. Hopkins--know as E.B. However I called her Miss Hopkins. E.B. was an older girl--in her eighties. She was very nice to me, but she could be a trial. Libby and Kate asked Mrs. Reddington to invite her to their apartment one Sunday afternoon. E.B. was a large girl and she fancied clothing herself in tweeds--which made her look extremely well filled-out. When we opened the door to her that Sunday she had on her tweed suit and a hat to match. Although she had never met Libby and Kate before, her first remark was, "I'm crazy about this hat." Obviously she didn't have a mirror.

After everybody asked how everybody else was feeling I was asked to play. When I was about halfway through the program E.B.



said to Libby, "I wonder if you have a knitting needle?" I have thought about this a lot since then, and have come to the conclusion that she thought I wasn't playing fast enough, and meant to spur me on with a few jabs.

One Saturday afternoon Miss Hopkins took me to the opera. We had fine seats in the center of the orchestra section. At that time in my life I was afraid if I didn't continually exercise my fingers they wouldn't work when called upon. So I was happily flexing away when E.B. said "I wish you wouldn't do that." Chastened, I sat absolutely still until the lights dimmed. When the orchestra started the overture, very softly, Miss Hopkins said, in a carrying voice, "Now you can exercise your fingers all you want to." I was horrified. What would all the people who heard her think I was doing? By this time a feeling of uneasiness was settling upon me. The next outbreak came with the first appearance on stage of the baritone, Leonard Warren. It was my companion's pleasure to announce audibly, "Skinniest legs I ever saw." So far as I knew his wife could have been sitting on my left, perhaps a few cousins behind us and maybe his parents directly in front. When the curtain came down after the first act I thought surely I'm safe now. Such was not the case. Just before the great golden curtain went up again my friend said, "You may be amused by this, but as a decorator I wonder how many yards of material are in that curtain." Of the many emotions that overtook me during that performance amusement was not one of them. I don't even remember what the opera was.

The language barrier was a small problem when I first went to New York. One day I had gone into a little run-of-the-mill eatery, and caused something of an impasse between the waitress and myself. I had ordered "Irish potatoes." I had to assure the young lady that I did not expect them to be flown from Ireland just for me; nor did I want them prepared in some typically Irish fashion. I learned at that moment just to say--potatoes. A similar hassel resulted another time when I ordered "light bread." That, too, was resolved and I gained in knowledge from it.

When I lived at the Reddingtons apartment, I ate breakfast every morning at a drug store on the corner of 96th street and Madison Avenue. Early in my stay I was sitting at the counter eating when a couple of Bronx-type girls sat down next to me. When the man came to take their order one of them said, "Maybe I'll have a Danish." Well, I thought, that poor counter man has a problem. He is just as busy as he can be, and he has to find out from her what particular object from Denmark she means, and then has to wait around until she is 100% sure that she wants it. To my surprise, he set something down before her immediately. She ate it, paid for it, and left. Obviously this Danish article was edible, and she was not quite as unsure whether she wanted it as I thought.

The fact that I had received my Master's degree from Columbia Teacher's College would seem to indicate that I wanted a job teaching piano in a University. That was not so. I knew, from my student days, that a piano teacher's time was fully taken up with teaching and



there was no time for his own practicing. All I have ever wanted to do, musically, was to play the piano. So, I got a job accompanying in a vocal studio.

The studio was in the Osborne Building on 57th street--diagonally across from Carnegie Hall. At that time there lived in the building a number of famous people including Leonard Bernstein, Shirley Booth, Van Cliburne, Dane Clark, and Blanche Thebom. There were also just plain people with enough money to afford to live there.

The teacher, Eva Brown, had a large class of aspiring singers who were mostly in the theater--or hoped to be. It was one of these hope-to-be's who decided that I would be ideal to play in a small club that he frequented. It was called "The Guardsman", and was on Lexington Avenue between 34th and 35th Streets. The clientel included many people who worked in radio and television. They were very clever--so they said--and I will say they seemed convinced of it themselves. The first night I played there I learned the art of concentration. Gracie, the bar-maid, was standing directly behind me when she shouted: "Two Scotch and sodas." I arose some two or three inches from the piano bench, but never lost contact with the keys. I figured if I could keep on playing during that sort of ruckus I had achieved something. That was one of two things of value that I learned during three years of Saloon Playing. The other was that I dislike, intensely, playing in Saloons. I might add that I played only on weekends. If I had done it every night I would long ago have made Western State Hospital my permanent home.

After I had lived at the Reddington's for seven or eight years, they decided to leave New York and move to their farm in New Hampshire. One of Mrs. Brown's students had a small apartment on West 10th Street--in the village--and she and her room-mate were able to get another one on the same floor. So I moved into the one they vacated. For the first time in my life I had an apartment all to myself, and I must say I enjoyed it.

Claire and Margaret, who had moved out of the apartment I was in, lived just two doors from me, so we saw a lot of each other. Margaret was of Cuban ancestry and proved to be rather excitable. She was forever wanting to sue somebody. Our landloard replaced some folding gates on the elevator with automatic sliding doors. He raised everybody's rent about 15 or 20 cents per month. But--he had not consulted Margaret about this beforehand. I was not terribly surprised when she came to the door one evening with a petition for me to sign so we could "sue him!" She claimed if we let him get away with that he would try something else. However, no one signed. Another time she wanted to sue the people for parking in front of the building. During the time I lived there, Claire and Margaret went on a trip to see Claire's parents in California. While there, they were in an automobile accident involving themselves and another driver. Margaret came into her own. There was her big chance, and she took it. When they came back to New York Margaret was looking very smug. Obviously she had "sued him" and won because she did not even bother to look for a job for a year.

In any sort of argument Margaret always took great care that there should not be the least point of weakness in her position. One day, right outside my door, I could hear her in some sort of a harangue with the landlord and the super. It was obviously open to the public so I went out to see the fun. The men apparently had made a statement that Margaret could not refute, because just as I opened the door she said: "That may, probably, perhaps, be more or less true." The sheer virtuosity of it silenced everyone.

After I had moved to the Village I continued to see my friends Libby and Kate. The Reddingtons, of course, had moved to New Hampshire. We were going somewhere on the Fifth Avenue bus, and when we passed 95th Street Kate looked toward my exhouse and said; "I can't believe you are not all there." Until she said that I had felt in complete possession of all my faculties.

As much as I enjoyed living in New York, the "practicing situation" was very unsatisfactory. I could practice in my apartment only if I used a silencer on the piano. Nor could I teach there. That, plus the fact that I wanted a bit of back yard of my very own, made me decide to come back home. I had a half-dead plant in the apartment which I thought needed sun and air, so I put it up on the roof of the building. When I went up to water it, it had been stolen. That settled any doubts I might have had about the move.

Here in Hopkinsville I have never had a half-dead plant stolen. ~~We are after bigger game than that.~~ I have had some wicker furniture stolen. Hopkinsville thieves are smarter than their New York counterparts.