

Bully of the Town

by Con Chapman

They had been playing the beer garden at the State Fair for the better part of a week, and were getting a bit tired of the routine. They played from noon until closing time at 10 p.m., a long day. In the morning they'd be in the shade, but all afternoon long the sun would beat down on the little riser that was their stage. Their throats were sore from singing.

"You guys should play more instrumentals," Sal, the guy who ran the beer garden said. "Easier on your tonsils and on my ears." They rarely spoke to him since he wasn't the one who hired them. They still had to be nice to him since he was the one who okayed their daily meal allowance: one hamburger or two hot dogs, fries and a drink.

"Girls want to hear us sing," Billy said, even though he only sang back-up. It was true; you never saw a girl looking all dreamy-eyed during "Telstar" or one of the other all-guitar numbers.

"You're not playing for them," Sal said, since the girls who were attracted to the band were too young to come in by themselves and would stand watching on the other side of the white fence that ringed the beer garden. "You're being paid to bring people in the gates." Sal could be gruff but he never was that hard on them. They were the least of his worries, between health inspectors, employees stealing from the till and carnies coming in paying a nickel for a cup of hot water, then putting free ketchup in it to make tomato soup.

They learned as the week went on that what Sal said was in their interests, too. They were supposed to play when the place was empty, to fill it up, and stop when it was full. It went against their instincts; they liked to play for people, even old people. It was more fun to play for a crowd than a bunch of empty chairs, but they'd wised up after a few days. You had to take every break you could if you were going to make it through a week-long gig.

"Thank you very much," David said as they finished a song to applause. The place was a little more than half full, but it was still early. He looked at Sal who gave him the sign to cut it off. He wanted to turn the house again before the dinner crowd came in.

"We're going to take a little break right now," David said into his microphone. "But we'll be back before too long." With that he turned off his mike and amp and started to unplug his guitar.

"Aw, come on y'all. I just got here," a woman said to him. She was fat and red-faced; she'd been drinking from the smell of her breath. She was holding a brown bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"Sorry, ma'am. Those are the rules," David said.

"Whose rules?"

"Union rules," Billy said with a sly smile as he kept moving away from the bandstand so as to make a clean break.

The woman watched him go. Tony, the other guitar player, was still putting his stuff away carefully. "You still got you two and that other feller. You don't need a drummer—come on."

"Sorry, ma'am, but our contract says we get a 15-minute break every hour," Wayne said. "You can come back and hear us play later." He always spoke with an air of authority that seemed out of place given his age; it was because his father was caretaker of the fairgrounds, so it was like his home.

"Do you all know Bully of the Town?" she asked David. As she did, Wayne and Billy both broke out laughing, which they did nothing to stifle.

"I don't believe I've ever heard it," David said. Tony was done with his gear, so he stepped off the riser onto the grass and joined Wayne and Billy off to one side.

"Aw, you know it," the woman said, then began to sing. "*Lookin' for that bully, bully of the town,*" she sang. She was drunker than she'd seemed at first, David thought. They'd learned a lot about adults in the course of playing for the first time in a place where

alcohol was served. They weren't all stiff like high school teachers. They would get unusually friendly, especially at closing time, when they'd offer to pay money for the band to keep playing.

The woman was dancing now, holding her bottle high in the air as she slowly turned around, blocking David's way to the exit. *"I asked Miss Pansy Blossom if she would wing a reel,"* she sang, and David looked at the other three who were bent over from laughing. *"She says 'Lawd Mr. Johnson, how high you make me feel.'"* The other customers were enjoying the woman's antics, and some started to clap in time. *"Yes I'm lookin' for that bully of the town."*



"Go on and play somethin' for her," a man said, as he took out his wallet. "I'll give ya two bucks to keep her dancing."

The woman heard him and turned around to face him. "Why thankee," she said. "If you pay the piper you've got to pay the singer, too."

"Naw, they's perffessionals," the man said with a smirk. "You was dancin' fer free, so just keep on doin' what yer doin'."

The woman didn't take offense, she smiled and curtsied, then began her song and dance again. "It's a good old song, you oughten to learn it," she said to David. "Go on and play some," she said.

His guitar was a hollow body, so he strummed a few chords and the woman began again. *"When I walk this levee round, round, round,"* she sang, and once again began to spin. David looked over at Sal, who just shrugged his shoulders as if to say he didn't care.



"Every day I can be found, found, found."

He felt ridiculous, but he kept playing three chords which bore no relation to the melody. *"When I walk—this lev-ee round I'm a-lookin' for that bully of the town."*

The woman's face was growing redder, making it contrast more with her fat white arms. The man who'd offered the money was clapping louder than anyone, and David wondered how long the woman could keep singing.

"Woo!" the woman said, stopping to sip her beer. The dance had made her dizzy, and she began to fall in David's direction. He caught her against his guitar and slowly righted her.

"You okay?" he said. He used the moment of her discombobulation to take his guitar off and put it on the stand.



"Yeah, I'm fine, don't you worry," she said. She gazed out over the tables and took in the customers, who had for the most part turned their attention back to their beers and each other.

"Do you all need a singer?" the woman asked David.

"No ma'am, we don't," he said politely, hoping to end the encounter without further incident.

"Because *I'm* a singer!"

"You sure are, ma'am. There's another band down at the other beer garden, close to the midway. Maybe they need one."

"They's colored," the woman said. "I want to sing with you boys."

"Well, we don't get paid enough to take on another musician."

"I wouldn't charge you. Hell, I'd sing for free."

David looked over at the other three, who had made their way out the entrance behind the woman's back and were giggling at him.

"We couldn't do that, ma'am. You're a professional—it wouldn't be right."

"Naw, I'd do it for the fun of it," she said. She turned to throw her empty beer bottle in a barrel and David saw his chance to escape. He stepped towards the exit but she caught him by the arm.

"Don't go nowhere," she said. "Let's put a quarter in the juke box and dance, you and me."

He looked at Sal, who was laughing now, along with the fry cook and the bus boy.

"Do you like 'In the Mood'? Do-da-doo-da-do-do, do-da-de-da-de dah," she sang as she put her arm around his waist and began to lead him in a dance.

"I told you you should learn some instrumentals," Sal said.

"Ma'am, I've got to go," David said and broke her grip. "We only get 15 minutes, I've got to eat."

With that he was out the entrance as the woman called after him. "Okay, I'll come back and see y'all later, ya hear? You boys are the best thing at the fair."

He hurried away and the other three caught up with him.

"You started a fan club!" Wayne said; just like him David thought.
"You guys weren't much help," he said.



"What were we supposed to do—she was drunk and blocking the exit," Billy said.

"You could have distracted her," David said.

"You two seemed to be enjoying each other," Wayne said.

"Bite me," David said, and went off to get a milk shake at the Dairy Building. His throat was sore.

