DETROIT THE DYNAMIC

BY JAMES STEVENS

Is the murder of Jerry Buckley yet unsolved? Who has succeeded Joe Mendi, the chimpanzee, as Father Coughlin's rival attraction in the neighborhood of Royal Oak? Since Mayor Murphy's departure, whose voice throbs now from the amplifiers, with ravishing political poetry, to promise "the dawn and dew of a new day"? How goes Eddie Guest's latest droll story? Where are the brave French boatmen who ferried the beer from Canada before Repeal? Does Iffy the Dopester hold his own? And the UNWED TRIPLETS MOTHER of the tabloid headlines — is her betrayer found and chastened?

As I vegetate in the rural deeps of Indiana, such questions often rise in a nostalgic murmur from my heart. I am familiar with most American cities that authors cherish and celebrate, including the Canadian. I have visited Paris, Buenos Aires, Rio, and Bucyrus, Ohio. Yet Detroit remains my golden town.

This is a difficult confession for a writing man to make, as Detroit is the conventional image of scorn with American literati, even as San Francisco is enshrined. During my nineteen months in Detroit the few visiting novelists of note all took off, at the completion of their lecture contracts, as though a robot devil were heeling them. No journalist, after stopping over to write up Henry Ford, remained to pray. Only a few authors in overalls, men like myself, have ventured to defy the craft conventions by settling in Detroit and brazenly enjoying the abundant life there. This life, to be known and appreciated, must be experienced as Detroit commoners live it, and witnessed with their vision. Then it appears as the best that America has to offer. I present and describe it as prime material for optimist novelists who are repelled and disheartened by the current literary spectacle of malarial share-croppers, tick-infested Oregon homesteaders, yearning proletarians, gangster punks, slum slaves, and the sleazy cohorts of Judge Lynch. Detroit calls up the most intelligent and energetic laborers of the land, even as California lures the bums. Candidates for jobs are rigorously culled in the great shops. The survivors are, beyond question, the pick of plain Americans. They get comparatively huge wages. Father Coughlin and an army of lesser uplifters guard their political rights. The motor companies, as well as civic agencies, vigorously promote culture among them. In short, Detroit is theirs.

What do these selected plain Americans make of their well-nigh Utopian opportunities? I shall tell what I recall and know.

For more than a year and a half my wife and I made our home in an elderly residential district of Detroit. It had become a factory neighborhood. Our block lay between the two main roads to Dearborn. It was an easy walk from home to the Cadillac and Graham-Paige factories.

We could hear the roar of Timken axles in the making. Our familiar neighbors — in an apartment house called the Gonfalon — were two metal finishers, a boss of carburetor assembly, a die-cutter, a gear-shop machinist, a proud fellow who had turned out a daily mountain of steering wheel nuts for seventeen years, and other votaries of the machine. These men were veterans of the shops, but not one was a native of the region. So they were typical Detroit citizens, characteristic social products of mass production. They were parts of the thick layer of Detroit life that exists between the upper crust of executives, technicians, and business folk, and the slum families at the bottom. They were the true children of Ford.

When we first moved to the Gonfalon I had gloomy doubts about my reception, as a writer, at the hands of the machine men. But there was no reason for these doubts. One of the tenants was a veteran rivet-line oiler who wrote gangster stories in his spare time: in the past five years he had sold two dozen of his ferocious fables to the pulps. The Gonfalon also housed a young architect-painter who was living through the Depression by packing Ford parts. Another personality of the house was a folk poet, a son of the Cumberlands who celebrated current murders in the style of his ancestral ballads.

The vast basement office of Mr. Gallerty, owner of the apartment house, was the common rendezvous of the male tenants. The painter had an easel there, and would work away on a portrait while rugged talk surged about him. Mr. Gallerty had walled off a workroom in a quiet corner of the basement for the bard of the Purple Gang. A similar refuge was built for me, without extra charge. None of the regular laborers considered these arrangements remarkable. They were so accustomed to strange professions and curious trades in the great shops that I was casually welcomed. I soon felt at ease. Then, in the Gonfalon eventides, Detroit began to live for me in the lore of her folk.

The martyrdom of Jerry Buckley was a favorite subject with the Gallerty circle. As the tale was told there it became, for me, an image of the Detroit mass mind. I recognized Jerry Buckley as a local legend, as significant in revelation as the Paul Bunyan legend among the loggers. In the giant absurdities of the latter is a portrait of the people of the woods: the Buckley legend similarly reveals the mass soul of Detroit, the mind and emotions of a people who are, by all evidence, a select body of American commoners.

Jerry Buckley was a super-Coughlin. Jerry stood alone at the microphone of his little radio station, and battled valiantly for the poor, without benefit of church or position. He rose to major stature in the town when the Depression began to strike hard. The welfare organizations of the boom years were breaking under the load, government resorted to police power alone in the crisis, and the jobless faced starvation. Then it was that Jerry Buckley cried out with the voice of "The Little Father of the Poor". His appeals were broadcast, not to the rich and powerful but to folk who were yet at work. The money rolled in, from four to six hundred dollars in every day's mail, all petty donations from Jerry Buckley's listeners-in. There was bread for the hungry.

But bread was not enough. The unemployed stormed the City Hall, following red flags. In one riot ten thousand of them raged through the streets, battling the police. Again Jerry Buckley raised his voice, and this was a cry for war. The mayor was the Klan-supported Charley

Bowles. Buckley demanded his recall. He buttressed the demand with melodramatic revelations of the fraternal union of boss politicians and boss gangsters. It was all very hot stuff. Buckley named names; in detail he described meetings between public officials and public enemies; he told of booze parties and sex orgies in a bold though moral tone. Every radio in Detroit was tuned in on his nightly broadcasts. A young judge, Frank Murphy, inspired by Buckley, took to the air. His "dawn and dew" oratory brought about the defeat of Charley Bowles.

The prophet's work was done. But in the hour of his triumph Jerry Buckley met his martyrdom. After broadcasting the returns of the recall election, Buckley left his radio station at midnight and retired to his modest hotel. In the lobby, as he paused to read an election extra, three gunmen closed in and mowed him down.

This was an old story at the time I entered the Gallerty *salon,* but age had only added sanctity to the martyr's memory. Jerry Buckley had become a shining figure of folk art. The ballad writer of the Gonfalon chanted over his guitar:

He was a friend of the poor,
So they shot him through the door —
Oh, mourn for Jerry Buckley! . . .

And working Detroit mourned indeed. A year after his colossal funeral Buckley was honored by a memorial service in the vast Graystone ballroom. The overflow audience packed the surrounding streets. Even Father Coughlin has failed to gain such a devoted following. Jerry Buckley still remains on his popular pedestal, a holy name to Detroit's selected Americans.

Another story, even as sad but sweeter by far, was that of Juanita Aymar, the unwed triplets mother. In most particulars it was an ordinary narrative of betrayed maidenhood, and for some time I could not comprehend the absorption of the machine workers in the affair. When I did comprehend it, I began to understand Detroit.

Juanita Aymar was the daughter of a welder who had come up from Nashville to work for Ford. In the hard times he was reduced to taking a job in a garage that was owned by a gang of beer runners. One day Juanita brought her pa's lunch to the garage, and an apprentice gunman took her home in his roadster. So the romance began. It ended some months later at a lying-in hospital. The Nashville welder being a blooded Southerner, there was only one thing to do: abashed and contrite, the young gangster was fetched to Juanita's ward, with Pa Aymar's family revolver nudging his ribs, a marriage license in his hand, and a minister in tow. All were met by the news that Juanita had given birth to female triplets. The gangster lost his complaisance. He went desperately for his automatic, got the drop on the flabbergasted welder, and took out. He was never heard of again. Juanita was left to become the UNWED TRIPLETS MOTHER of the headlines.

Detroit is not Nashville, however, and Juanita's shame was soon transformed into golden fortune. Gifts of money and goods poured in. The boss beer runner came around with a large check and with promises of slaughter for the runaway sire of the triplets. Pa Aymar was presented with a prize job by a garage chain. Juanita's neighborhood welcomed home the triplets and herself with open arms. She was able to turn down several honest offers of marriage, and finally became a dazzling star in the Walkathons.

The pull of this story for the rugged lads at Gallerty's mystified me completely

at first. But I understood it in a later year when Detroit was agitated by the Dionne quintuplets to a degree reached by the folk of no other region. The appeal was simply to Detroit's ruling spirit — mass production.

II

Detroiters do not only yield to this spirit; they go for it ardently, as ducks take to water; it is the God of Mass whom they endlessly worship. This is the Detroit of the Detroiters: first, of course, the automobile capital of the world; then, the city of champions — Joe Louis, the Tigers, the Redwings; the parish of the priest with the largest congregation ever heard of; the patriotic community that put on the most monstrous of American Legion parades; the home of the world's brainiest chimpanzee; the music capital that presents Gargantuan outdoor festivals of song; the financial center that produced the most prodigious banking crash of the Depression; the traffic metropolis, which erects a Paul Bunyan billboard that flaunts the boast — "the busiest corner in the world"; the scene of the colossal spectacle and the nation's hugest crowds; the city that calls itself Detroit the Dynamic.

The town does famously by the home folks, and it is small wonder that they have little interest in the world outside. To particularize, Joe Mendi, the idolized chimpanzee of the Detroit Zoo, died on the day of the *Morro Castle* disaster. The *News* got out a roaring extra on the demise of Joe: in it the story of the *Morro Castle* was presented in secondary position to the news that was far more affecting to all honest Detroiters. On Labor Day, 1932, this same Joe Mendi had pulled forty thousand visitors to the zoo: at the time Candidate Roosevelt was in town talking to a Naval Armory audience half as large as the chimpanzee's crowd. This was hailed in the *Free Press* as an exhibit of intelligent discrimination, which perhaps it was. . . .

The crowds turn out in Detroit for any event that promises to be a show. More than four hundred thousand Detroiters stayed up all night, or rolled out at two or three in the morning, to jam the docks and watch a speedboat race between Gar Wood and Kaye Don. A comparable host surged to Belle Isle for the outdoor community music festival of ten thousand voices, massed bands, and giant choirs from Chrysler's and General Motors. When Detroit entertained the American Legion's national convention, the entire city turned out for the parade, and the greater part of the crowd was still on hand as the last drum corps rattled by. Again the masses packed the sidewalks for the funeral procession, under communist auspices, of the men who were killed in the raid on Dearborn. And for Nancy Brown's party — but this is a story by itself, vividly characteristic of the city.

Nancy Brown was, and is, the love editor of the *News*. In her earlier columns of advice to troubled hearts she used a method and style which evoked an image of a little old grandmother uttering gentle wisdom in the children's hour. Old-fashioned Nancy Brown caught on tremendously with the sweethearts, sisters, and wives of working Detroit. But her power, so quietly attained, was not realized by her bosses and colleagues: as love editors usually are, Nancy Brown was a newsroom jest. Then she gave her party.

On the party night, Nancy Brown invited her chief to accompany her to the hall in the Art Institute, where her readers were to gather. Some five blocks from the hall a crowd filled the street, and