1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

By WILLIAM SAROYAN

WALKING through Woolworth's in 1927, he saw a small crowd of shoppers working swiftly with their arms over a table stacked high with phonograph records. He went over to find out what it was all about, and it was a special, new Victor and Brunswick records, five cents each, and a wide choice of titles to choose from. Well, he hadn't heard the phonograph in months. He might wind it up again and listen to it. The phonograph was pretty much himself. He had gotten into the machine and come out of it, singing, or being a symphony, or a wild jazz composition. For months he hadn't gone near the phonograph, and it had stood in his room, dusty and mute.

These five cent records reminded him that he had been silent through the phonograph for a long time, and that he might again enjoy emerging from it.

He selected a half dozen records and took them to his room. He was certain that none of the records could be very good, but he wasn't seeking anything good and he didn't mind how trivial or trite the music might be. If a thing is terribly bad, anything, a man or a piece of music, it is a form of exploration to go through the thing. He knew that he could do this with the worst sort of American jazz. The melody would be idiotic, the orchestration noisy, and so on, but somewhere in the racket he would be able, by listening carefully, to hear the noblest weeping or laughter of mortality. Sometimes it would be a sudden and brief bit of counterpoint, several chords of a banjo perhaps, and occasionally it would be the sadness in the voice of some very poor vocalist singing a chorus of a very insipid song. Something largely accidental, something inevitable.

You could not do this with the finer music. The virtues of the finer music were intentional. They were there for everybody, unmistakably.

It was early August, I think. (I am speaking of myself.) For many months he had not listened to himself through the phonograph, and now he was taking these new records home.

In August a young man is apt to feel unspeakably alive: in those days I was an employee of a telegraph company. I used to sit at a table all day, working a teletype machine, sending and receiving telegrams, and when the day was over I used to feel this unspeakable liveliness, but at the same time I used to feel lost. Absolutely misplaced. I seemed to feel that they had gotten me so deeply into the mechanical idea of the age that I was doomed

lated. I won't mention the name of the composition because I am sure the effect it had on me was largely accidental, largely inevitable for me alone, and that anyone else who might listen to the passage will not be moved by it the way I was moved. The circumstances would have to be pretty much like the circumstances of my own existence at the time, and you would have to be about nineteen years of age, crazy as a bat, etc.

He put away the records and forgot about them. Their music joined all the other music he had ever heard and became lost. A week went by. One evening suddenly, in his silence, he heard the passage again, one two three four five six seven eight, fourteen times. Another week went by. Every now and then he would hear the passage. It would be when he felt unspeakably alive, when he seemed to possess strength enough to smash everything in the earth that was ugly.

There was nothing for me to do in the city Sundays, so I used to work. Sitting at the teletype machine had become the major business of my life, so I used to work on Sundays too. But on Sundays business would be very slow, and most of the day I would sit around in the office, moping, dreaming, thinking about the house I wanted to get for myself. The teletype machine sends and receives messages. It is a great mechanical triumph, and it put thousands of old time telegraphers out of work. These men used to get as much as a dollar an hour for their work, but when the teletype machine was perfected and put into use these men lost their jobs and young fellows like me who didn't know the first thing about regular telegraphy got their jobs. It was a great stroke of efficiency, the perfection of this machine. It saved the telegraph companies millions of dollars every year. I used to earn about twenty-eight cents an hour, and I used to be able to send and receive twice as many telegrams as the fastest telegraph operator would have been able to receive and send in the same length of time. But on Sundays business would be very slow and the teletype would be silent sometimes for as long as an hour.

One Sunday morning, after a long silence, my machine began to function, so I went over to it to receive and check the message, but it was not a message, not a regular telegram. I read the words, hello hello hello. I had never thought of the machine as being related in any way to me. It was there for the messages of other people, and the tapping of this greeting to me seemed very startling. For one thing, it was strictly against company rules to use the machine for anything other than the transmission of regular business. It was a breach of company discipline for a teletype operator, and it was because of this fact that I began to think a great deal of the other operator who had sent me the greeting. I typed the word, hello, and we began a conversation.

It seemed very strange for me to be using the machine in a way useful to myself. I talked with the other operator for about an hour. It was a girl, and she was working in the operating room at the main office. I was working in one of the numerous branch offices in the city. We did a lot of silly talking for about an hour, and then suddenly I read the words, wire chief, so I knew that the big shot had returned to the room and that we would not be able to go on talking.

Suddenly, in the silence, he began to hear the passage again, one two three four five six seven eight, over and over again, and it began to have specific meaning for him: the house, the clean earth around it, the warm sun, and another, one two three four five six seven eight, himself and this other and the house and the earth and the sun and clear senses and deep sleep and one

two three four five six seven eight, and meaning and fullness and no sense of being lost and no feeling of being caught.

I began to try to visualize the girl. I began to wonder if she would go out with me to this house I wanted and help me fill it with our lives together. After a while the teletype machine began to tap again, and again I read, hello hello, wire chief gone.

It was very splendid, the way it happened, a breach of company discipline and so on.

At five o'clock in the afternoon she came down from the main office and walked into the office where I was working. She hadn't said she was coming down, but the moment she stepped into the office I knew who she was because as soon as I saw her face I began to hear the music, one two three four five six seven eight, swiftly, and it was so bad with me that I wanted to leap over the counter and embrace her and tell her about the house.

We talked politely instead.

At six o'clock, when he was through working for the day, he walked with her out of the city to her house, talking with her, hearing the music over and over again. For the first time in months he began really to laugh. She was splendid. Her mind was deliciously alive; she loved mischief, and in her eyes he seemed to see the earth, the bright earth, full of light and warmth, and the strength of growing things. It was a place to build the house and to be alive and himself.

That evening he played the record over and over again, and finally the landlady came to his room and said, Mr. Romano, it is almost half past eleven. He went to bed, still hearing the music.

They got to be pretty good friends, and he began to tell her about the house. At first she didn't really listen to what he said; she merely listened to the way he said it, but after a while she began to listen to everything he had to say, all the insane things about the machines getting into them and destroying them and destroying everything decent in them.

They stopped working Sundays and began going across the bay to Marin County. Every Sunday they walked into the hills of Marin County, talking about the house. All during September and October, 1927, they were together on Sundays, walking in the hills across the bay from San Francisco.

The feeling of being lost began to leave him. There was at least one person in the world who knew that he was alive and attached some importance to the fact, and for a while it looked as if the house he had wanted so long would actually materialize, and he would enter it with this girl, with music and laughter, and they would be in it together, forever and forever.

I have said that he was nineteen.

Forever and forever, that is the amusing part. All day long at the teletype machine he would hear the music, one two three four five six seven eight, forever and forever and forever, and this girl and this music and the house that was to be, they all mingled and for a while he believed in the inevitability of his hope.

I am coming now to the truth. I am not permitting myself to make a story.

In August and September and October, because of something inexplicable, atmospheric if you like, climatic if you prefer, they were splendidly one, melody and counterpoint, precisely, perfectly, and the dream of eternity was not a fantastic dream.

The house, they wanted. They wanted it desperately. In August and September and October. They wanted themselves