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**Three Traveled East**

By **RUTH AYERS**  
Author of "Meet Me At Midnight", "Blackout", "Drafted For Love"

**CHAPTER III**

At first, it seemed incredible. This man, J. J. Patterson, seated beside Connie Dawson in the east-bound bus, had been named in her place for the assignment at St. John's, in Newfoundland. Yes, he was the one the Press Bureau had chosen to be the special correspondent. But it was his job, she had to have it!

Connie's mind began picking up words. "Tanbark City." "Never been to New York before."

She felt Pat's eyes, puzzled as he looked at her. Perhaps the shock she'd felt when he told her who he was had registered in her face. At any rate, he eased Skippy's head and made the little boy more comfortable. Then he turned back to Connie.

"Say," he drawled, "here I've been blowing off about me and just noticed you've sort of blue and wan. World's gone crazy, hasn't it? War and news to frighten you from all sides."

To Connie Dawson, the only frightening thing that mattered was the news which had come to her that morning.

As she made no answer Pat said, "Let me tell you something, girl. Christmas is only two weeks away. The air's tingling with it already; the holiday travel's started. Christmas—it's more than a day. It's a symbol, maybe of all the things we've lost and want to find again. Get into the spirit, Connie. I'll do something for you—lift you up."

Connie leaned back slowly, she began to relax. The pent-up fear she'd had since Mr. Williams had shown her the telegram, was thawing. She found herself laughing in half-hysterical relief. "Perhaps you're right," she gulped.

Because Connie Dawson was seeing light now, figuring it all out. This Pat Patterson was a small-town boy. Yes, a homespun philosopher from Tanbark City, way out west. The minute the New York bureau laid eyes on him, he wouldn't have a chance.

She'd expected a real rival—some brilliant, fast-writing, fast-talking gentleman of the press. As she took out her handkerchiefs to wipe the tears of laughter from her eyes, she relaxed still more. She was quite sure now she would have no competition from Pat Patterson—Pat, the Spirit of Christmas, incorporated.

A plan began to unfold in Connie Dawson's mind.

She knew who Pat was but he hadn't an idea of her identity. She thanked her lucky stars for the mud-caked shoes, the shapeless hat. Pat had taken her for a country kid, a westerner, he had said. Yes, this wonderful student of Human Nature had her figured out completely wrong. Casting admiring glances at her, too, over Skippy's sodden head.

Well, she'd have time to put Mr. Pat Patterson in his place. Wouldn't he be shocked when he learned who she was—the girl who was going to fight him to a finish for the job in St. John's. What would he say when he knew her name—that name which held magic in the newspaper world? Her people had built up a great chain of newspapers in the western states; a dynasty which although it had since fallen had left an imprint never to be forgotten.

She herself, Constance Dawson, had never known the slightest hardship or struggle. She'd been brought up by a grandmother after her parents died. A veritable matriarch, this grandmother, who'd come halfway across the continent in a covered wagon as a little girl. But there had been indentured aunts and uncles to provide travel, the best schools, a debut for Connie. Then the job on The Sentinel. She'd worked hard, of course, but it had been glamorous work with her photograph and by-line in the paper—a sob sister, de luxe edition.

So it was a droll for Pat to be looking at her with such undisguised interest. Compared with Jerry Marsh he was a ridiculous figure, dazed. And his eyes held the look of one who ventures across the lanes of wind and stars. Like her, Jerry had had no struggles, no money cares. Yes, she loved Jerry Marsh. And she was growing increasingly confident with every turn of the wheels that she'd get to Newfoundland in time to be with him for Christmas.

The small socket lights in the bus shone down hard against the white towels on the seat backs. The sound of wind whined louder.

Three seats ahead, the couple had stopped chattering and were holding hands. Back a few seats, the man Pat had pointed out as the parolite was going home after a long absence, stared stonily out the window.

In the seat behind, Skippy's mother was still leaning back, eyes closed, very still. Connie glanced at her, and then at Skippy. Turning to Pat she said, "You must be tired. I'll hold the youngster." She could afford to be magnanimous. Everything would come out perfectly—for her.

"Swell. Here, let's see if I can ease him over without waking him. He's got a long way to go yet and I figure every cat nap counts."

As she lifted Skippy, Pat's eyes

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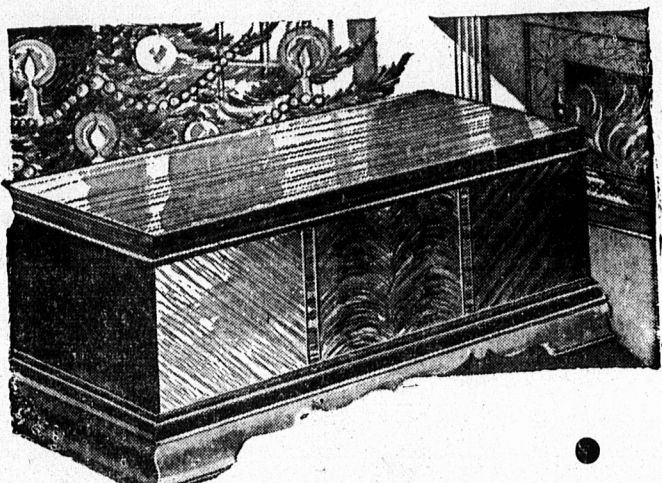
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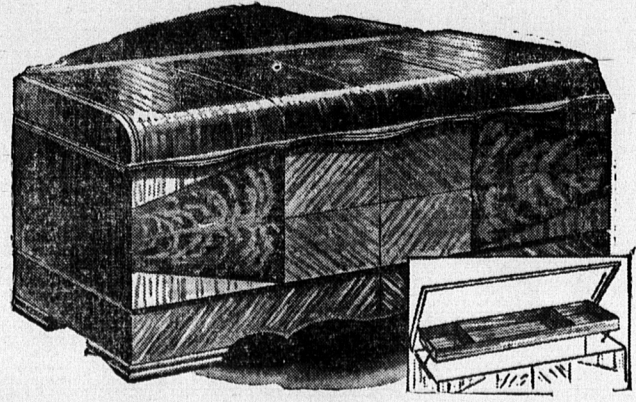
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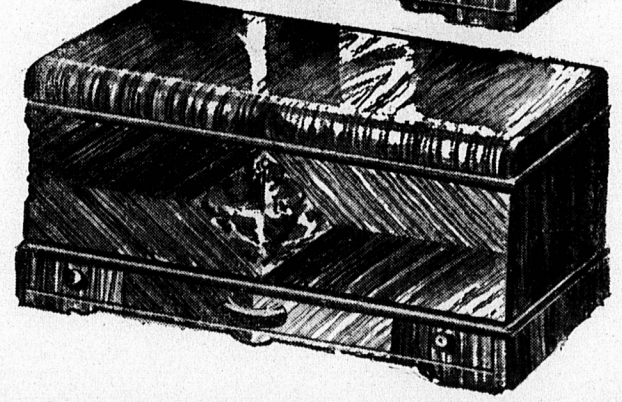
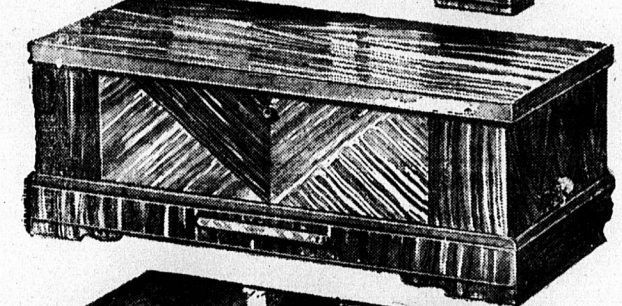
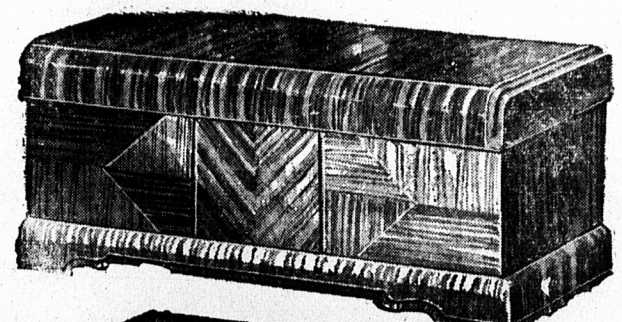
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glowed. He fairly beamed when she brushed the little fellow's hair back from his forehead and smoothed down his wrinkled sweater.

"I knew it," Pat said. "Knew you were—well, the sort of girl who would talk to kids."

Skippy stirred and opened an eye. "There, there," she whispered, "you keep right on with your cat napping." She made a cradle of her arms and rocked him gently in time to the bus. Once when she stole a look at him her eyes were held by the curve of his round cheek, the brush of lashes.

Then abruptly to Pat. "Tell me more about yourself." Not because she was interested, but just to have the background all sketched in.

It was like tossing a bone to a puppy. Pat beamed. "Guess I told you everything important, except that I'm twenty-four years old and been foot-loose half that time. Mother and Father died when I was a kid. Thought I'd run away but I stuck it out in school, getting a job as sort of errand boy, office boy and printer's devil at the newspaper plant in Tanbark. That's what gave me my start."

"Married?" asked Connie, and could have bitten her tongue afterwards.

"No, I'm not married." Pat answered. "Never found quite the girl I wanted—that is, not yet." He was looking at her, a twinkle in his eyes; a blush spreading right up to the roots of his unruly red hair to betray him.

Connie avoided the glance by leaning closer to Skippy. Yes, she'd been right. The bumpkin one did like her. "And how was it," she went on, "that you obtained this wonderful job as special correspondent?"

"Reckon a number of things figured into it. The men at Press Bureau headquarters had been reading my stories. Two or three times I had a chance to cover a big assignment for them. Not often, of course, because not much of importance to the outside world happens in Tanbark City. But when I heard about this vacancy on the staff in St. John's, I put in an application, quick."

So had she!

"He went on, same cocky voice: 'They had a newspaper woman lined up for the job. I convinced 'em long distance I was the one for it. No place for a woman.'"

That was it! He had gone out of his way to take the job from her. "I presume," she began icily, "you think woman's place is in the home."

He chuckled. "Well, in the home edition anyway—on the woman's page."

The bus slowed and came to a stop before a long platform. Skippy roused, wide-awake. "Mama," he said, "Mama, where is we?"

J. J. Patterson was taking charge of things. "This is where we eat," he said, waving Skippy back to his arms.

He lunged.

Skippy rubbed his eyes. "Mama hungry too," he said.

"No-sh," Pat cautioned. "You let your mother rest a little longer and then she can put you to sleep for the night."

Connie made no move.

"Come on," Pat suggested, "we'll get coffee and some ham sandwiches. Skippy will have milk and cereal. The treat's on me."

"No thanks," Connie said, planning to sidestep Mr. Patterson without further ado. She was tired, impatient to have the long ride over.

Pat urged. "Oh, sure, come along. I'm not usual broke. And after we've eaten we'll come back to the same seat. It'll be kind of nice, don't you think? Company for each other."

Most of the passengers were getting up, stretching their legs, flung off.

"Terminal Restaurant" said the sign over the lunchroom door. There was a white placard in the steamy window—"Coffee—3 cents."

Connie still held back, but as she turned she saw Skippy's mother—a girl who was taking her little boy home for Christmas. Her eyes were still closed. She was breathing quietly, almost too quietly. Pools of purple shadows fell across her cheeks.

There was something about that white face and thin, racked figure that gave Connie a sudden feeling of foreboding. She felt a lump in her throat. The bus itself, cold with the hound of wind leaping through the door, seemed to hold an ominous shadow. As Connie hesitated Skippy said, "You feed me my cereal like Mama, hah!"

With that he jerked at her arm. Her purse fell, spilling to the floor. One of the lunch clips Jerry had given her rolled out, sparking like white fire. Connie reached for it, covering it quickly so Pat wouldn't see. She'd seen from Tanbark City she hadn't know that wasn't paste. No, he hadn't seen but Connie because aware that someone had. Looking up, she saw the parolite staring at her with cold, resentful eyes.

IV

In the stir of moving passengers, Skippy's mother finally opened her eyes. She saw Mr. Patterson with Skippy in his arms and nodded gratefully when he offered to take him to the restaurant. The girl was going with them—a pretty girl but with something unhappy in her face.

Skippy's mother closed her eyes and thought, "Pat Patterson—he's someone you take to and never forget. Something about him friendly and human."

It had frightened her at first when he'd told her he was a newspaper man. But she'd lived so long under the terrors of illness that everything was frightening. By rights, she shouldn't have been on this bus at all. She'd left the hospital against doctors' orders—stolen out at night. Oh, it hadn't been difficult because she wasn't a bed patient. She had been a patient in the long pavilion marked "Cardiac Clinic."

It had taken some time to figure out the work "cardiac." Then the doctor, very brisk but very understanding too, had explained: "Heart case—weak hearts, sick hearts," he had said. Like hers.

"And I—what about me, Doctor?"

"You'll be fine one of these days," he'd told her. "Rest and long lazy

hours will do it. Don't think of anything but that you're going to get well.

But there was something else to think about and she knew she was never going to get well.

"I want to go home with my little boy."

"Sometime—not yet. Aren't you happy here?" He had beckoned her to the window from which there was a view of the valley, ripe and green; blue sky above it; a warm golden sun.

"Yes it's lovely," she had said. But it wasn't home. No Christmas here in the valley of the endless summer. She'd felt a fierce hunger for Skippy, a longing to take him back to the little town in Connecticut. It was where he belonged. There were two spinster

aunts who had brought her up, stern and straight-backed. They'd never forgiven her for the runaway marriage and the crazy cross-country honeymoon to California. But they'd help her now when she was in trouble. They were her own. And if anything happened to her—well, Skippy would be with them.

That was Lila Ernst, going home with her little boy for Christmas—going home to a little town in Connecticut, where the elms on Center Street would be white and regal in snow as became December.

The man who had been staring out of the window reached for the money in his pocket. It was odd to feel coins slip through his fingers. The warden had given him the money. Not much. Only enough for the bus ticket for a few meals en

route and for the railroad ticket he'd need on the last lap of his journey. Going back after all these years.

What had the warden said to him in those last few minutes in his office? "We can be quite frank with each other. You're not innocent or you wouldn't be here. But you've had a better break than some. You have a daughter waiting for you. A daughter who doesn't know where you've been—who'll never need to know."

"You're not innocent!" The wheels had ground out the words ten thousand times. No, he wasn't. The irony of it was that he hadn't started out to be a felon. But now he was going back—empty-handed. His face looked back at him from the square of window.

Close-cropped gray hair his mouth a thin line, inscrutable eyes.

Funny, he thought, that girl gitting with the redhead? That girl out of whose pocketbook had spun such an unexpected treasure. She would be about the same age as his own daughter.

He had a name, but he had been a number for so long he'd almost forgotten it. Now he whispered it and the mirrored window showed his moving lips. Jim Bardley—Jim Bardley going home for Christmas to his daughter—empty-handed.

The young couple who'd been holding hands were eating in the restaurant—Dutch treat.

She was a teacher in a country school in Missouri. She'd closed classes a few days early so she could

go east for the holidays. The board members had agreed to it after the last meeting. She'd stood before them, her collar had cuffs starched to an exactness her glasses polished until they shone.

Most of them were farmers. The salt of the earth with leathery faces. Looking a little awkward and ill at ease in tailored suits and collars. When you spoke to them you felt as if you were competing against a silent barrier of thoughts which included such things as crop rotation, soil irrigation and rural electrification.

"If you have no objection," she had begun in her best parliamentary manner, "I should like to request a few extra days for Christmas vacation."

(Continued on page 12, Col 5)

**TILLIE THE TOILER—THE PRICE OF SILENCE.**



By Westover