Of Purely Social Significance

LUCY KAUFMAN

It was generally considered a privilege to be among Mrs. Howard Wonderly, Junior's guests on any occasion. Her social gatherings were frequented by only those who moved in the most elite circles, and each affair shone as a sterling example of infallible taste and unsurpassed propriety. With magnificence the smooth black limousines would draw up before the heavy door, and immaculate chauffeurs would leap from their vehicles and commit the ennobled visitors to polished doormen. With faultless execution, the pompous dinners would be served to the assembled group of gourmets. With carefully voiced thanks, spoken in exactly the proper phrases, and at precisely the prudent moment, the guests would depart, and the heavy door would be closed gently behind them.

However, today, it was a more cosmopolitan group of guests, who wandered through Mrs. Howard Wonderly Junior's gardens. They had arrived for the presentation of the annual Pageant, which Mrs. Wonderly, with infinite generosity, had offered to hold upon her estate.

It was early afternoon of a warm cloudless day. If one stood at the west side of the house, one could look down across the valley and see the ploughmen busy at their yellow fields. Far to the right, where the city lay, rose the black smokestacks of the factories. And down to the left, the river seemed only a small brown streak, as it twisted through the green foliage of woods. The blue sky was veiled by a haze of light gold, as it often is in summer.

The gardeners had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and spading the gardens. Each flower, from the purple irises that leaned against the house to the white water-lilies that floated on the pond, seemed to have been shown special attention.

It was decided that the Pageant should be enacted on the lawns at the back of the house, and chairs of every variety, deck chairs, gilt chairs, arm-chairs, and garden seats had been placed in rows to seat the audience. On tables, distributed throughout the grounds, iced punch swam in gleaming silver bowls, and butlers bearing trays, laden with intricately designed sandwiches, skillfully maneuvered themselves and their charges through the crowd. Miss Florence Parker, who, it was rumored, had enjoyed some experience with the drama, (the extent of which was uncertain) had been chosen to write the script and to direct the actors, who volunteered from the local community.

Now the audience was assembling. They came streaming around the sides of the house, pouring across the gardens, emerging from among the trees. There were farmers; there were factory workers; there were those whose identities were unknown, and as Mrs. Wonderly might have noticed, some of the best families were represented. Even a reporter from the local newspaper was present.

In the bush-screened glade, intended for backstage, Miss Parker stood. One hand held an object possibly suitable for a costume, could she have found the person on whom it belonged. The other hand tapped nervously on the bark of a maple tree. Clothes were strewn about
the ground. Hats, hurried by the breeze, scooted along the soft moss. Dresses, colored by dyes which attracted insects, flies in particular, lay in disordered heaps. From the bushes came laughter, the result of attempts to dress for the Pageant amid brambles.

Miss Parker began to pace. Was the audience becoming restless? She peeped through a barren spot in the bushes and saw that it was.

"Where is the phonograph?" she demanded of an unsympathetic figure, wearing a green and pink cape. In a flash of vivid color, the individual swept off to search.

"Quiet!" she exclaimed, as the noise in the bushes verged on hysteria. The laughter ceased, and Miss Parker leaned against a tree and sighed.

"We are ready to start now," cried a voice from behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Mrs. Wonderly flouncing toward her. "Good God, that woman," she thought. "But we aren't," said Miss Parker. At that moment, the figure in the cape reappeared with the phonograph.

"Now we are, I guess." Miss Parker made the statement wondering whether or not to feel relieved.

"Very good," approved Mrs. Wonderly, and turned in the direction of the audience, as one who is expected, waited upon, and comes.

Again Miss Parker leaned against the tree, hating Mrs. Wonderly. Oh, the torture of that woman, she thought. Why am I wasting my talent here? And she signalled for the music to began. Miss Parker had no respect for the socially elite.

Mrs. Wonderly reached her friends, in spite of the bourgeoisie, whose assembly near the house was to her, the pre-meditated attempt to make the return to her chair more difficult. She sat down. On her left, Vera VanSickle, a socially distinguished dowager from one of the oldest families, discussed the pending divorce of the Lacy's with Cyril Carver, a playwright. At her right, Sally Tompkins and June Sprague talked of the latter's debut, which had occurred the previous evening. Behind Mrs. Wonderly sat her husband and Oscar Greer, the copper magnate. They were absorbed in reading the stock-exchange reports.

An old woman in a frayed blue dress limped by their row of seats, and Mrs. Wonderly felt slightly ill at ease. How awful to be like that! And for a moment she pitied those who were less fortunate than she.

The phonograph groaned like a tractor on a muddy day. The audience settled themselves in their chairs. Voices were hushed, and the rattling of paper ceased.

Looking at the program, Mrs. Wonderly turned to Vera VanSickle.

"It says that the Pageant will represent life here fifty years ago."

"Yes," replied Vera VanSickle who could also read.

The bushes parted, and a little girl in pink came out. With great dignity she began,

"This is a Pageant all may see Drawn from our city's —"

"She's forgotten her lines!" a voice exclaimed.

"History," prompted Miss Parker from the bushes.

"History," repeated the child.

The girl in pink finished her poem, and the first act continued. Men in high stiff collars, women in long, awkward gowns strode on and off the stage.

Mrs. Wonderly smiled, as she won-
dered whether her drawing-room should be redone in green or rose. Mrs. VanSickle smiled, as she contemplated her new sable wrap. The audience smiled, as they watched the performers. There was a vast chasm, which would never be bridged, between the Pageant and a few of the spectators.

Oscar Greer looked at his watch. Then he observed his program. At the rate they were moving now, the damn Pageant would last until midnight. He should have closed that deal with the New York firm before leaving the office. He would get in touch with his secretary after the performance. He moved restlessly in his chair, and wished that he had a drink.

A group of middle-aged people appeared before the crowd. Apparently, they were members of a choir. In a key somewhat flatter than that of the accompanying phonograph, they sang

"Bring them in
Bring them in
Bring them in
from the fields of sin."

A plump lady in a costume, intended for a slimmer figure, could be heard above the others. Adults cleared their throats. Children giggled.

Howard Wonderly drew the stock market reports closer to his face. He noticed that Transcontinental & Western Airlines had gone up five-eighths of a point.

Vera VanSickle was eagerly awaiting the entrance of her family in the representation of the community. She leaned toward Mrs. Wonderly and whispered,

"I wonder who will play the members of our family."

"What vanity!" said Mrs. Wonderly to herself, as she turned and smiled intimately to her left. She was interested in only the representation of the Wonderlys.

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true"
vociferated the cast.

"Louder," barked Miss Parker from her bushes. The hopelessness of these amateurs!

Cyril Carver sat bitterly witnessing the Pageant. How could he have been roped into a thing like this? He noticed the faces of the audience, earnest, intent. What fools these people were! He'd loved to have them see a play on Broadway — one of his plays.

Sally Tompkins and June Sprague simultaneously stifled yawns.

Mrs. Wonderly observed a dirty little boy two rows in front of her. He was munching a candy bar. How ill-bred he was! It was a shame that all children could not —

There was a roll of drums followed by a blare of trumpets. It was "The Star Spangled Banner." Chairs were pushed back, several crashing to the ground, as the audience rose.

"O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave."

The music died away.

"But it couldn't be over," a voice protested. "Where were we?" The voice belonged to Vera VanSickle. But Mrs. Howard Wonderly Junior was pondering the same question. Could it be that the Wonderlys and the VanSickles had been overlooked?

Miss Parker was watching from the bushes. She had heard the voice. The voice had understood. In her glory, she stubbed her toe against a root. Someone paused to congratulate her.

"How gay, how lovely!"

Miss Parker beamed. The Pageant had been a success.