

WJZ & NETWORK

NELSON OLMSTED'S STORY FOR TODAY

PROGRAM #

A LETTER TO MR. PRIEST

BY

MARGARET COUSINS

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PERM. FILE C. FRIDAY MF

(MUSIC:..ORIGINAL THEME..UP, THEN TO B. G..)

OLMSTED: This is Nelson Olmsted, with your Story for Today. With this show today, we bring to a close our series of story telling programs. For the occasion, I have chosen a fine tale by Margaret Cousins which I think you will like and remember. It's entitled, "A Letter to Mr. Priest"

(MUSIC:..INTERLUDE:..THEN TO B.G..)

OLMSTED: When Marshall Fannin returned from court that wintry afternoon, the letter was waiting for him beside his chair in the front room. He turned it in his hands, slit the envelope and read:

"Dear Mr. Fannin: The class of 1917 of Franklin University will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary with a Grand Reunion on May 23, 1947.

"Your committee is preparing a commemoration brochure of this noteworthy class, and in going over our records we observe that you were nominated in 1917 as 'The Man Most Likely to Succeed.' Due to the distance of your home from Franklin we have somewhat lost track of your activities, and we wondered if you would favor us with a report of your accomplishments to date to be included in our booklet. Thanking you in advance, I am, Very sincerely yours, Adam Priest, Grand Reunion Chairman."

Marshall leaned his head against the back of his leather chair and his mouth twisted in irony. Most likely to succeed, he thought. The most likely to succeed!

Well, thirty years is a long time. Time creeps so slowly, laying its invisible hand upon the bones, cooling the brow, slowing the heart, and always there is so much to do it is not possible to notice that the years are hurtling past and the promises of glory are being dispelled. How callow he must have been 30 years ago -- a skinny, lantern-jawed kid, in love with the sound of his own voice, in love with the law, in love with life.

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OLMSTED:  
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And ignorant -- so ignorant except when it came to torts and theories and the things you read in books.

Thirty years, Marshall thought wryly, and what have you done -- what have you done? He had had such plans. New York City was his field, he knew, and during his last year at Franklin he had wrangled an introduction to James Garrett of the firm of Garrett and Grainger in Church Street.

It was unthinkable at the time that his destiny could be thwarted by a luxury steamship which he had never seen. But when the Lusitania went down, he was faced with postponement.

He **had** said, solemnly, "It's not a question of wanting to go or not wanting to go. We've got to make the world safe for democracy!" Everybody said that in those days. The day after Commencement he enlisted, shivering with the excitement and the intimations of history. When he kissed his girl, Cynthia, goodbye, she clung to him in tears. He was carried away, and whispered "I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more!"

He never saw Cynthia again. A few months later she married a new-minted lieutenant in the new-minted air force.

He had got the Distinguished Service Medal and a little bronze Croix de Guerre, but that was such a long-ago and faraway war - such a minor war, in a way - you could hardly call it accomplishment.

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OLMSTED:  
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No use saying it had been a just war to him, a war of deep personal conviction worth dying for -- it hadn't worked out.

When Marshall was discharged early in 1919, he spent his first free week in New York, but it seemed big and confusing to him. He couldn't imagine himself going to see Mr. James Garrett and asking for a job. He couldn't remember anything about the law actually, it had been so long since he thought about it. He had meant to hang out a shingle in Atlanta or Dallas -- some city place. But when he got home to Ft. Mason, he found his Father sick -- and he had to take over the Law Office.

As he lay on his back that first night, staring at the ceiling, he told himself it would be only for a while -- a year or two.

In six months his father was dead, and he was a country lawyer. There are no prizes for accepting responsibility. Who can call that accomplishment? It's instinct -- doing the right thing. Just as the needle of the compass leans to the north, so does a man's inconvenient conscience show him the way.

But it was a thwarting thing, the insignificant cases, the miserable little fees. He had time to brood, and in the throes of his irritation he tried to summon that resplendent hope of himself -- the great trial lawyer, striding up and down before the jury, playing upon the twelve men as if they were an instrument and he the musician, wooing them with his voice and his wisdom, triumphant in the accomplishment of justice. (MORE)



OLMSTED:  
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People would whisper, "There goes the next Attorney General!" There were times when he even considered the possibility of becoming President.

He met Josephine Burns at a picnic, though he'd known her since she was ten. He didn't know how he happened to get paired off with her, except that he was always running into her and people began to think of them as a couple. But he couldn't take her seriously -- not until the day he found out that the Mattewan Land Company case he had been fighting to get had gone to his competitors, Stephens & Smith. The Mattewan people had decided that he was too young to handle anything that had so much at stake. He was glooming in the office at ten o'clock at night when he heard a step on the wooden stair and Josephine opened the door.

He gave a guilty start. "What are you doing here, Jo?"

"I saw your light. I thought you must be up here worrying about something."

"I'm no good, Jody. I'll have to wait about forty years to be good enough for them. I can't get anywhere."

"They're just fools, Marshall. They just don't know how wonderful you are!"

"I reckon they're right. I haven't made much progress in a year. Always the leavings of the business!"

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OLMSTED:  
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She sat down beside him and talked for a long while, full of confidence for him, building his battered ego.

Two months later they were married. And he had always intended to marry a city girl!

Those were exciting years, the years of beginning - the struggle and striving, the mammoth victories that now seemed so insignificant, the depressing failures that now seemed thoroughly unimportant, the children being conceived and born and growing into definite personalities and long legs; the enthralling microcosm of family life and the power and glory, the fear that goes with being the provider. He used to lie awake at night and marvel at it all.

Economically the times had been stringent. He needed clients. When the Myridon Oil Company sought him as counsel in a title case, he knew it was the opportunity of his lifetime. It was money, publicity, celebrity even.

"The documents are all on our side," Jack Snell said. He was president of Myridon, a suave, expensive operator with shrewd instincts. "It's just a matter of interpretation of the law."

Marshall brooded over his decision, but it was a waste of time. He foresaw that he might persuade a jury to rationalize a fine point. But he could not forget old man Bizbee, who had homesteaded the arid land, earned it with his toil, owned it actually.

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OLMSTED:  
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Poor old man Bizbee, he could scarcely read. That land was part of his body, after twenty years of scratching it with a plow, grubbing it with his muscles, watering it with his sweat.

Marshall turned down the opportunity. Snell was furious. He called him a hick, a high-grass Pollyanna. But Josephine had said, "You did right, Marshall. I wouldn't have had it any other way."

He had often thought about that incident. It was a fork in the road. You took one direction and maybe you wound up a senator, a citizen of the world. You took the other, and you were Marshall Fannin, LL.D., Fort Mason. He reconnoitered in his mind where he might be and what he might be doing now if he had represented Myridon -- how different his life might have been. Snell was right. His stand hadn't mattered at all. Old man Bizbee lost his land.

"When the big chance turned up, I muffed it," Marshall thought. "Put that in your brochure, Mr. Priest!"

But it was after that he seemed to gain stature in the community. People tried to overlook the fact that he continued to be a Wilsonian advocate, putting it down to aberration. "If you would just keep your big mouth shut," said Finis Cooper, the party chairman, "you could be elected to the legislature."

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OLMSTED:  
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But he had lost the nomination. It was one of the most hurtful things that ever happened to him, being rejected. He wondered why he could not conform, if the end justified the means. You could do more about the Ku Klux Klan inside a lawmaking body than outside it. You couldn't do anything outside it but fume and rage. All you needed for nomination and election was to keep your mouth shut, and it was just an adage that silence gives consent. The nature of his business was argument, so he argued with himself, but he didn't win. And he wasn't nominated either. Josephine was the only one who understood.

He began to have more than he could do. It was something to have people trust him. The tide of human misery that washes over a lawyer washed over him. He wasn't brilliant, but he was sound and earnest and a good pleader. They paid him off in various ways, and there was money enough for the boys to get schooling and to keep the house up and buy Josephine a fur coat.

"In 1929 I bought my wife a beaver coat." There was no way to explain what that meant in the way of pride. He had thought, "Now we're on the way." He had never lacked for clients from then on, but there were several years when the crops failed and there was a drought and something seemed to happen to all the money in the world.

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OLMSTED:  
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Then, there was that hideous, humid, suffocating Saturday afternoon, with the heat lightning flickering in the sullen sky, the low murmur of men in the streets of Fort Mason, the wretched boy who was cowering in a cell in the county jail. The prisoner's alleged offense had been inexcusable and brutal, but when times were hard, men seemed to have less perspective on law and order. There was in them some wish to hurt, a lust to break the tragic monotony with violence.

He had never seen a mob before, nor could he have imagined it. It was seven o'clock. The twilight had fallen, but the scorch of day lay on the air like a wool blanket. In front of the jail, there was an angry group of men, murmurous with the angry sound of hysteria. There was such a sickness in the sight that he was immobilized for a minute, not able to take in its intent. When it broke over him, he hurtled down the stairs, running as he had not thought it possible to run, gasping and sweating in the breathless air. He grabbed the keys from the only keeper at the jail -- an old man, hard-of-hearing and tremulous. Then he forced himself to go out the front door, and stand there, facing the mob. Somehow he made a speech - not a word of which he could remember later -- but it was brilliant and passionate, and it held the crowd off, and took the edge from its hysteria. Then out of heaven poured the deluge, a curtain of cold, pelting rain, staved with lightning and the loud detonations of thunder.

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OLMSTED:  
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The crowd broke like frightened children, scuttling for cover, wordless at their deliverance. The experience left him white, and gasping, and sick. That had been, in his lifetime, his sole oration.

In 1937 he was the leading lawyer in Mason County, summoned often to the capital tribunals. He was too busy to enjoy his modest prosperity. He was also too busy to think much about Hitler, and he didn't like to anyway, because it reminded him of that mob in front of the Mason County jail. When Chamberlain came home from Munich, Marshall Fannin looked at his sons, Burns and Cary, and his heart turned over. It was already too late.

This new war smote him far more personally than the one he had fought in. He had dwelt with reason a long time, and unreason deteriorated him.

Both boys returned from the war, however, battered but ambitious. Cary had put out for New York to pursue a familiar dream. Burns, obviously aghast at Marshall's unbusinesslike methods, had entered his father's law office to revolutionize it. It looked now as if Marshall might eventually have time to become county judge, but Burns thought in no terms smaller than the Senate. How unoriginal life is, Marshall thought, and how impatient **the** individual man.

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OLMSTED:  
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He has only to look at the record and know how slowly we progress, with each generation adding its small accretion - two steps forward and one step back - and that every step has its inception in the mind and heart of some single human being. Progress is a personal thing, and no man is too small to have his take in it, if he cares.

Josephine was standing in the doorway, with her youngest grandchild Caroline, a sorceress of five. Josephine said, "Marshall, what are you doing here in the dark?"

"I must have dropped off."

Josephine bent over and kissed him, and Marshall thought, "I found my love. What else is there?"

He went into the back sitting room, which had been fitted up as a home office, and sat down at the typewriter to answer the letter before dinner. Caroline trailed him and stood nudging his knee. Marshall wrote:

"Dear Mr. Priest: It is very good of you to wish to include my accomplishments in the commemoration brochure. When the old gentleman looks at his medals, he finds that they are so few and far between that they don't bear discussion. I fervently hope that the members of the class of 1917 have displayed more judgment in afterlife than they did on that class day when they nominated me 'most likely to succeed.' I am just a country lawyer. There's honestly nothing to tell. Sincerely yours,  
Marshall Fannin." (MORE)

OLMSTED:  
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He folded the letter into an envelope, and Caroline exercised her prerogative of licking the stamp.

"There," she said.

He looked down at her. "How would you like to be President, Caroline."

"Sure. Okay!"

Marshall grinned. "Well, you never know," he said, and they went in to dinner.

(MUSIC:...SOFT,QUIET MOOD...)



ANNCR: You have heard a short story by Margaret Cousins, entitled "A Letter to Mr. Priest." Now, here is Nelson Olmsted with a closing word:

OLMSTED: So, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the end of our "Story for Today" programs. It has been a great pleasure bringing them to you. Before we go, I want to thank Bill Marshall, the director of this series, for his understanding and friendly help. Bill is an accomplished musician in his own right, and a director of fine perception. It has been a pleasure working with him. My thanks, also, to George Henninger, our organist, and \_\_\_\_\_ our engineer. My appreciation to the officials of ABC, to the authors of the stories, and their agents. And the gratitude of all of us to all of you listeners who have written to us during the series. Your comments have been stimulating and heartening. So, for the present, we'll say so long. This is Nelson Olmsted. Good-bye and good reading.

(MUSIC:..THEME: UP, THEN OUT ON CUE. ..\_)

ANNCR: THIS IS ABC...THE AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY.

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10:00 PM