

Tin God

George W. Thomson



MY HANDS were sticky and cold in my pockets and they came out covered with bits of lint as I tried to break the strangle-hold my necktie had on my throat. There I was, not ten feet from the band-stand and the man I'd heard more about than anyone I could remember—Eddie Ritz, the top trumpeter of the whole Midwest.

The ball-room was suffocatingly hot, and the smell of sweating bodies and stale liquor did little to settle the slithering cake of ice that was once my stomach.

Why did I ever promise Bruce that I would look up Eddie? For two bits I'd walk out! What's he to me? Yeah, you know what he is to you. The best friend your brother ever had. The best doggone trumpet man in the business. And you know good and well you're not going to miss the chance to shake hands with a celebrity. But what if he doesn't remember me? What if he has me thrown off the stand? What if . . . ?

And then he stood up for his chorus. Head back, eyes half closed, legs apart, fingers lingering on the valves but not forcing, just following them down as if the horn were bewitched and playing by itself. Each note came out as round and brilliant as a dew drop and hung in that foul air for seconds before it faded. The bass pulsed lightly in the back ground while that lovely horn wove a thread of gold. People were crowding close around me—at first noisy and then growing quiet as they too were caught in the spell.

My eyes stung with tears and I was so light headed that I thought for a moment I might faint. Sissy stuff? Maybe, but that's the way perfect music hits me.

At last he lowered his horn and moistening his lips, sat down. I found myself halfway up the stairs to the stand before the crowd had even gathered itself for applause. A second later I was standing in front of Eddie and much to my surprise found that I was fairly shouting, "Oh, that was terrific, Eddie!" Then my senses came back and I said sheepishly, "I'm Bruce's kid brother. I don't suppose you remember me."

He looked at me for a moment and then tried to stand but fell against me and sank back in his chair. My heart pounded behind my eyes so that I could scarcely see, and I suddenly felt very much alone. The mob on the floor watched us curiously. The man at the piano winked and ran off a two-finger riff on the bass. What's going on? What have I gotten into?

"Sure, Kid. Let me shake your hand. How's old Bruce?" His hands were sweaty too, but hot where mine were cold. The feeling wasn't nice. "Kid, you tell old Bruce that poor ole Eddie fell off the wagon tonight. Will you, Kid?" His voice was thick and flabby with the paralysis of liquor. I didn't know he would look so old. Lord, but he's soft and bald—like a banker or somebody—not a man that can make music like the angel Gabriel himself. "I know what you're thinking, I know you don't approve of drinking. Bruce never did either; I want you to know that, Kid. I quit for him once."

There was an abrupt change. "Do you want a swig, Kid? I got some good stuff right here—somewhere." He fumbled in his pockets. "Here! Here, Kid, have a drink with the best damn musician in this whole lousy town. Don't be such a ———!" He swore violently and loudly. His horn slid from his lap and the bell crumpled as it struck the floor.

He stared, dull-eyed for a moment, then picked it up gently and patting it like a kitten, put it to his lips and began to play so softly. The whiskey ran across the chair and dripped into battered tin derby. The band men watched him from the wings; a girl laughed shrilly from the floor and then was silent. Nobody spoke.

I was scarcely noticed as I slipped out the back-way and ran for the cool, clean night.