

WAIT UP FOR ANNIE

Whenever a Christmas or an Easter pageant was to be enacted at the First M. E. Church in Picket Rock, Annie Ellis was given the role of a statuesque angel. She was perfect for the part.

The only daughter of Eversole Ellis, the town's barber, and his fundamentally-zealous wife, Essie, Annie had long, silver-blond hair, slate-blue eyes, and the kind of bland, expressionless face that characterized seraphim on our Sunday School cards.

"It's all Essie's doing," my Grandmother Benson said, "that poor Annie don't have any more gray matter than God gave a gosling." Several weeks prior to Annie's birth, Grandma reported, a women revivalist of the hell and brimstone kidney had come into town to conduct a meeting in a tent on Schoolhouse Hill. And, having undergone one of her periodic spells of re-birth and been exhorted to proclaim from the rooftops. Essie had crawled out through an upstairs window onto the slippery roof of the portico, lost her footing, and landed on all fours in the petunia bed. So that Annie had been birthed seven weeks ahead of time, and lacking in cranial put-together.

The Ellises had two male siblings, but only my friend, Bert, lived at home. The other, Jim Bob, had climbed out of bed one morning during one of Essie's holy spells, muttering that there must be some peace and quiet in the world somewhere, stuffed his clothing in a sugar sack, and crawled into a freight headed North. The only word the Ellises had from him afterward was a picture postcard with a Chicago label and showing the stockyards.

For as far back as I could recall, Bert had looked after his sister, Annie. If we set out to try for catfish, or for wild berries, Annie had to tag along, and her short legs could never keep up, so we had to stop and wait. If we went into the crick water, we had to put on britches because Annie was along; and Bert had to keep a sharp eye out for Annie because she couldn't swim and only splashed, or wandered off to gather flowers and sat in the shade talking to herself and making daisy chains; a long way off, and Bert had to round her up. Down through the years we grew accustomed to having to wait up for Annie. Bert even had to take time from playing ball, or from a shinny game to button up Annie's coat, in cold weather, or to take her home for a change of panties. Some one of us might circle his temple with his finger when Bert's back was turned, to say we knew she was as goofy as a fly up the crick. Bert always came back as soon he could and took his place again in any game. But here, too, came Annie, as talkative as a cricket and two times as pestiferous.

Bert was a born baseball player. A nondescript-looking kid, with mouse-colored hair, a bent nose, and stand-out ears that he could wiggle for our entertainment, he was in his seventh heaven on a baseball diamond. He could play in any position without a misstep and was tops in the field. He could pick a flyball out of the air with one hand, running backward, and shoot it like an arrow to whichever base the runner was heading and get it there on the tick of a second without a wasted motion. He could throw a curve you wouldn't believe and he was a second Babe Ruth with a bat in his hands. Whoever won the nibs, always chose Bert first and whatever side had Bert nearly always won the game.

When Bert took up the stick in a game, the outfielders backed up, the catcher stiffened, and whoever was on the mound studied Bert to see whether he could make out what was fermenting between those big ears and beneath that mousy thatch. Bert always put on an act. He'd spit on his hands, hammer the bat a few times on the sandbag to test its mettle, and wait for the pitch with his eyes glued to the pitcher. He rarely went through a game without knocking out a homer, and almost any strike he made was good for at least second.

During the summer of Sister Kate's campmeeting, when Annie was eleven, Annie began to give Bert a new kind of trouble. She started hanging around the vacant lot beside the livery stable close to where the men pitched horseshoes. Zack Kaufmann, who owned the stable, which he later converted to

a kind of filling station, was o. k. of course. But some of the other men didn't care what they said around a little girl. And Annie, at 11, was taller and more filled out than most girls her age. She was pretty in a way, too, if you didn't look too close.

Bert never let on he was watching Annie but you could see he was. When he saw her stop beside the horseshoe court, he would drop whatever he was about and take her home, or bring her over to sit on the bench beside home base. Nothing might have come of all this except for a new boy in town by the name of Oley Allison.

Oley's mother, a nice enough woman, had come in the Fall in answer to an ad in the Kansas City Star for a woman to come to Picket Rock and take care of old Lafayette Lucas who had been all but bedridden for some time. Oley and his mother lived in two upstairs rooms in the big Lucas house.

The agreement must have been pretty hard on Oley. Lafayette couldn't (or wouldn't) abide any kind of racket and so Oley was obliged to go around on tiptoe or else stay away from the house during daylight hours, and go to bed with the chickens. To while away his time he went downtown and stayed all day, making the rounds from the horseshoe court to the barbershop and over to the depot to watch the trains come in and leave again. He always seemed to have a little change for gum or candy from the depot slot-machine or licorice whips from Nate Alden's store. Often enough he treated the rest of us.

In order to build himself up, maybe or just to impress the rest of us, he bragged about his life in Kansas City that he thought, or at least implied, made life in old Picket Rock as dull as ditch water. "You just ought to of seen what went on, he told us. "Sometimes I spent the day fooling around the hock shops and the peep shows."

Oley talked a lot about the peep shows. "The girls don't wear anything except a breech clout and a couple of pasties." Once, he said, he had seen a man cut up with a razor and another time he had been in a place that was raided. "Me and another kid dropped into a manhole and crawled out through a sewer pipe."

Never having seen anything more risqué than the hootchie kootchie at the Old Soldiers' Reunion, I was interested. But Bert said, "I don't believe the half he tells. He's too big to get into any sewer pipe. Though, if you ask me, I'd say that's about where he belongs to be."

Bert just didn't cotton to Oley. Oley didn't care for baseball or do worth a darn in any position, in itself a black mark in Bert's books. If Oley showed up when we were choosing up sides for a game, Oley was always chosen last, a fact any of the rest of us would have found humiliating. Oley never seemed to mind. He stood pigtail, or he wandered off to sit by himself and play mumbletypeg with his broken-handled jackknife. Or he swung the little kids on the playground.

"Swing me, Oley!" "No, me!" the kids yelled

when they saw Oley coming. He swung them all in turn.

The townspeople respected Mrs. Allison and they felt sorry for her because Lafayette was such an old curmudgeon. Oley was extra nice to his mother. On Sunday morning the pair of them walked the weedy road in from the Lucas place to Sunday School. If the sun was hot or it was raining, Oley held a parasol over his mother's faded, rose-trimmed hat, a thing none of the rest of us would have thought to of for our Moms.

"Palavers around like a little Jesus saint," Bert said. "But get him out of his mother's sight and all he can think about is gutter stuff."

It was true that Oley talked a lot about sex. He wrote graffiti on the privy wall and on the sidewalks with a piece of chalk. But so did the rest of us sometimes. As school janitor, I had to scrub the privies after school and on Saturdays. Sometimes the writings on the girls' outhouse were the nastiest.

Every evening that summer of Sister Kate's revival, Bert and I went down the hollyhock-fringed alley to the livery stable to practice catch. As soon as I had milked our old Bessie, I took my baseball and mitt and went down the hill and whistled for Bert from the alley behind the Ellis house. Even if I had been blindfolded, I would have known I was near the Ellis place by the smell of boiling beans. The only time most of the women in Picket Rock, including my mother, cooked beans was when they had a good hot fire on wash day, or had a meaty

ham shank. But Essie Ellis always seemed to have a pot of beans simmering on the stove, with onions and fatback.

"If Essie Ellis didn't spend more time doing the Lord's work than doing her own, and boiling up beans," Grandmother sniffed, "maybe she could make out to care better for Annie. It's a wonder they don't all blow up down there."

But Bert really believed in beans. "Beans," he declared, "build muscle. They give you quick strength when you need it." He proved that once when we were in a tough game of tug-of-war and couldn't get anywhere, he asked to be excused and went inside and ate a bowl full of beans. He came right back out and took hold again and we pulled the other side right over as though they had been on greased skids until then.

Evenings that summer, I always whistled for Bert and waited in the alley. If I went inside, Essie was apt to ask whether we had morning prayers at our house or whether I had made my peace with God. I never knew how to answer.

About the middle of June, when the weather was getting up to really hot, an advance man who called himself Chalk-talk Charlie dropped off the Santa Fe and went around the township tacking signs on the telegraph poles announcing Sister Kate's up-coming camp meeting again. The setting up of the big tent on schoolhouse hill, with its native lumber benches and its real sawdust trail created quite a stir. Sister Kate was one, it was said, who could really whip the devil around a stump. Sometimes these meetings were as good as a circus,

and Kate's was said to be better than most.

Her belted-out sermons lasted into morning hours and her shouted Amens and hallelujahs could be heard all over town.

"It's pure hypnotism, that's what it is and all it is," Grandmother said. "There won't be much peace down at the Ellis place until Essie gets over this inoculation. I feel sorry for Gus and Bert and for poor little Annie."

As was to be expected, Essie was one of the first to go down the trail and the most jubilant. She leapt onto the platform and jumped up and down until her long hair came unwound and snapped and cracked like a horse's tail in a high wind. Every now and then she'd let out a piercing squeal; so that I thought of the passage of devils into swine, the way the Bible described it.

When the meeting had ended and the tent struck, Essie packed up and went off with the party to the next stop. I happened to be down at the Ellis's when she took off. "Look after Sister now," she instructed Bert, unnecessarily. "I'll be back on Monday."

The following Saturday afternoon the Hardpan Hoboes came in for a matched game with the Picket Rock Punks, a play off we'd practiced for all summer. The two teams were pretty well matched. By the end of the sixth when the Punks came up to bat, the score was tied 3-3. Bert hit a two-bagger but had only reached third when we were retired again.

As the Hoboes came to the plate our fans tried to throw them off by heckling. When a decision was made that called a "strike just a ball," our girls rocked back and forth and chanted, "Cheater! Cheater! Cheater!" The little boys, who didn't really care who won, ducked through the lot into the livery stable and threw horseturds at the referee.

When we came up to bat again, after the Hoboes had scored another one, we got off to a pretty fair start, with two on bases. But by the time Bert came up to bat, we'd had two outs. Even Bert had lost his usual casual swagger. The Hobo pitcher looked grim, but confident. He made a feint or two at throwing but kept his eye on the occupied bases. Bert stood with his knees bent, waiting. The bystanders kept yelling, "Play ball!"

The pitch came. Bert's bat connected, but the ball went up for a high foul, which the catcher missed by inches. We groaned and the Hobo fans yelled, "butter fingers!"

It was during the wait for the next pitch that I caught a glimpse of Annie and Oley Allison, in the shade of the Chinaberry tree. She had on a bright pink pinafore and her cheeks were as pink as her dress. Oley was talking to her.

When we came up to bat again, after the Hoboes had scored we got off to a pretty fair start, with two on bases. But by the time Bert came up to bat we had two outs. Even Bert had lost his usual casual swagger and the Hobo pitcher looked grim. He made a feint or two at throwing but kept his eye on

the occupied bases. Bert stood with his knees bent, waiting. The by-standers yelled, "Play ball!"

The pitch came, and the bat connected. But the ball went up for a high foul, which the catcher missed by a few inches. We groaned and the Hobo fans yelled names at the catcher.

It was during the wait for the next pitch that I caught a glance at Annie. She was still with Oley, who had his arm across her shoulders; and Oley was talking to her.

He had hold of Annie's hand and was trying to pull her along toward the stable.

I nudged Ike Reese, who stood next to me, and pointed. Ike said, "Oh, oh."

"Ought we tell Bert?"

"We can't," he said, "We'd lose the game."

Even the cheer girls had turned quiet. The ball came in a sweet curve and Bert's bat connected again with a sound like a rifle shot. The ball described a high arc and disappeared beyond the livery stable. The runners got underway and Bert dropped the bat and started a slow dogtrot around the bases. The crowd went wild.

When I remembered to look again, Oley and Annie had disappeared. Ike saw it, too, and said, "You take the front Grover. I'll go around back."

"Oughtn't we tell Bert?"

"I can handle it."

After the bright sunlight the darkness inside the stable was like being blindfolded. But presently I could see Oley and Annie moving along the corridor toward the grain bins. When they passed through a light from a side window, Annie's dress showed pinker and her yellow hair shimmered.

Ike reached the pair first. He leapt like a cat onto Oley's back and Oley went down. But he squirmed out from under, got to his feet and came lunging down the entry. Ike yelled, "Head him Grove" and I braced for the impact.

Oley hit me in the stomach with his head and we fell together. Oley was on top and I'd lost my wind. But somehow I managed to lock my legs around his thighs. He threw himself backward and forward like a calf in a noose and got to his feet. But then he lost his footing and fell hard against the manger and went down again.

My own lip was bleeding and I was fighting mad. I threw myself on top of Oley and began to pummel him in the stomach. He made no effort to fight back and that made me even madder. It was like hitting a bag full of mush or a football dummy.

When I saw Bert coming down the passageway on a run, I got up. Oley still didn't move. When Annie saw Bert coming she backed against a manger and put her hand over her mouth. Bert passed her without looking.

"Honest, Bert," Oley whimpered. "I wasn't doing anything. You can ask Grover here."

I could hear the fans outside yelling for Bert. But he didn't seem to hear. He stood looking down at Oley the way you would look at a nest full of maggots.

"Get up," he ordered. Oley didn't move.

Bert nudged him with the toe of his sneaker. "Get up!" he hissed.

When Oley still didn't move, Bert reached down and pulled him up by his shirt front. There was a tearing sound and some buttons popped off. When Bert hit him, Oley sagged back like a limp bolster. Blood began to well from his mouth and nose.

I thought Bert was going to hit him again. But I couldn't conjecture what he was about. I thought he was going to walk past Annie without a word. But he stopped squarely in front of her.

All my life I've had to look out for you. All the rest of my life I will have to look out for you."

He had spoken gently.

Annie made no answer. She faced him straight in the eyes. She looked about to cry. For the first time, I felt sorry for her.

He took her hand in his own. "Come on," he said, "we're going home.

Obediently, like the child she was, she complied, and the pair walked together toward the exit.