

Ball and Chain

By Louis Lippman

The black Ford V-8 proceeded leisurely down the main street of Middleburg and came to a stop in front of a large expensive-looking but ugly brownstone house surrounded by a high hedge.

Joe Greenbar jumped out of the car, slammed the door behind him and walked up the winding sidewalk to the house, whistling out of tune.

The maid let Joe into the house. She took his hat and tried to keep from smiling at him when he almost slipped on the well-waxed floor of the hall.

Joe grinned sheepishly and walked through the hall into the large over-furnished living room which resembled a museum of everything expensive in furniture in the past decade.

Joe greeted Mr. Critt, a large important-looking gray-headed man, who was seated in an easy chair by the window. As he did so Mrs. Critt came into the room.

"Here's the evening paper, John," Mrs. Critt sat down and struck up a conversation with Joe.

"You're going to be a junior next year aren't you Joe?"

"Yes'm. I'm finally going to get those cuffs on my pants."

Mr. Critt ceased surveying his paper to state in his usual gruff manner, "Jack Tally was some sort of a sergeant on a staff his junior year at A. & M. and went on to be a major. You going to be anything, young man?"

"Well, I don't know sir, but I think I've got a chance. You see they . . ."

Nancy Critt swept into the room. She turned toward her father.

"Why, certainly Joe is going to be something!"

Joe had the uncertain feeling that if he weren't "something" it would be an insult to the house of Critt, except Mrs. Critt. Joe smiled as he looked at that placid woman who somehow or other had gotten into this household which specialized in moulding destinies. She smiled back and gave him one of those strange looks which he couldn't interpret. She had often looked at him like this since he had been going with Nancy. Joe felt that he and Mrs. Critt had

something in common. Just what, he couldn't figure out.

He turned to Nancy.

"Not to change the subject but Nancy, what do you say we go down to the 'Texan' and see 'Josette'. We missed it the first time it was here and—"

Mr. Critt interrupted Joe.

"We've got some visitors coming down from Dallas in a little while, Mr. and Mrs. Shott. Mr. Shott is the commissioner of the A. A. A. board in Dallas. You ought to stay here and meet them."

"But John," said Mrs. Critt, "the children aren't interested in him, why not—"

"It's about time Nancy met some really nice people."

"Yes, John, but—"

"That's the trouble with this younger generation. Always playing! I think I know what's best for Nancy!"

"Father's right," said Nancy. "We will stay."

Mrs. Critt had nothing else to say. Joe, even less.

Despite her pretty black hair and fair complexion Joe could not help but notice the unusual resemblance of Nancy's jaw to her father's when she got into an argument. Even if Nancy did look as though a strong wind might blow her over, she wasn't only a tower of strength; "Lord," Joe thought, "she's a complet castle!"

The buzzing of the doorbell announced the coming of the Dallas visitors and the evening wore on. Mr. Critt explained what was wrong with the world and Mr. Shott agreed, perhaps in view of the fact that Mr. Critt was the financial tycoon of this section of the country. Then Mr. Critt launched into the story of how he had come from his college in the east to a small inheritance in Middleburg and built up the structure of the Critt fortunes in central Texas. Joe listened half-heartedly and felt vaguely out of place as usual. He ran his finger under his collar and wished wholeheartedly that he could say something that wouldn't reveal his ignorance of finance and business. Finally the large clock on the mantel struck ten.

Nancy and Joe wandered out on

the porch. The moon was shining but nothing happened. Mr. Critt's one-sided analysis of the New Deal lay on Joe's spirits like a wool shirt on a hot day. After a minute or two Joe started toward the front gate.

"Don't forget Saturday night!"

"I won't. Goodnight, Joe."

The town of Middleburg became a beehive of activity on Saturday night. Every farmer within fording distance was in town. Car after car ambled aimlessly but tirelessly around the town square, their occupants enjoying the metropolitan sensation of the brand new traffic lights. As each red light turned green there was the whining of gears and the sound of tires squeaking around corners. Men in shirt sleeves lined the wall at Randall Green's pool hall, watching the games that were in progress. Older men stood by the county court house discussing the crops. It was a typical summer Saturday night in Middleburg.

Joe took the steps two at a time in front of his people's cottage and slammed the screen door as he went in.

"Hello, mom." He kissed his mother heartily but absentmindedly.

"Hello, dear. You better hurry and get out of those clothes if you want to get to the dance on time."

Mr. Greenbar came stomping in the front door.

"Did you have a hard day at the refinery?" asked Mrs. Greenbar.

"Aw, same old thing."

Mr. Greenbar and Joe emerged from the bedroom door and the three Greenbars sat down to their evening meal.

"Well, young man," said Mr. Greenbar, "Are you going to see the Miss Critt tonight?"

"We're going to a dance at the Country Club."

"A dance at the Country Club! Well, well."

"Yes, sir, a dance at the Country Club. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Have you got your tuxedo ready?" Mr. Greenbar let out a good-natured roar which passed for laughter.

They finished the meal and Joe left