

JOHNNY

EVERY day when he went down the town Johnny would go by the music shop and look at the guitar. It was black and shiny with mother-of-pearl trimmings. The price ticket said £46 and he didn't have 46 shillings. But love's a funny thing. It made Johnny think about work. He went down to the wharves and got a job and when he had enough he went in and bought the beautiful black guitar.

After that he didn't bother any more about work. He lived with his Auntie in the Street and there was a house full of kids to feed, and Grannie, as well as a shifting tide of cousins and uncles come to look for work in town.

When he was hungry all he had to do was sit down at the table and sure enough there was something to eat. His Uncle said he was a lazy cow, why didn't he get a job, there was plenty of work at Westfield, but his Auntie said "Leave him alone, I like to hear him playing that guitar. How'd you like to be home all day washing and cooking and looking after the kids so they don't get run over by the trucks that come down the street—how'd you like that all day?" And she looked sullen and angry at him and said to Johnny, "You just go on playing."

His Auntie wasn't all that much older than him. She had red lips and thick black hair and when she wanted to she did things well enough.

But it was hard work keeping the kids and the old house clean and sometimes she would give up trying and come out on the verandah and lean against the rail and say to Johnny . . .

"Play me that 'Love Me Tender' piece." Or it might be "Blue Moon," and her eyes would shine and her hips would rock and she'd forget about the kids till one or other of them'd come up howling that he wanted to wet or that his sister had punched him or something.

JOHNNY never let anyone touch the guitar. Its shining, black beauty belonged to him and he belonged to it. Other boys had girls but he had his guitar.

All day and every night he sat on the steps and played it to the Street and the kids would gather round him when they came home from work—

"Hey, Johnny, play 'Cindy' . . . Hey Johnny, 'Kingston Town!'"

They took to dressing up just to walk down the Street and they'd stand around the gate or lean on the fence, boy and girl together, or girls looking out for a boy, or boys looking for girls, and it came to be a regular meeting place, a kind of Community Centre for the neighbourhood.

Sometimes they'd throw him sixpences and shillings and even half crowns on pay nights, and that kept him in tobacco and bright shirts and ties and coloured socks.

His hands got very soft and clean and he took a pride in his fingernails and kept them long and white just so they'd match the finess of the guitar. The girls vied with one another for such a fine fellow but they had no chance with that guitar.

THEN they started pulling down the houses in the street. Thompsons' was first, then Repias', then Nathans'. One by one they left, but no notice was served on their house yet. They watched

by A. E. Batistich

the others packing up and going off to State Houses or back to the country and all day you heard the crash of falling timbers as the old houses were dismembered; and saw the clouds of dust rise high as the rafters of a hundred years were brought low and the houses were left without any secrets from the Street . . . gaunt chimneys standing naked in the ruined rooms, the wallpaper hanging darkly, insides of mattresses spilling on to the floors; and the jagged ends of curtains dripping from windows that gaped like eyeless sockets from the beams.

The groups around the verandah step dwindled with every moving family, with every loading of a furniture van carrying them off to other worlds—the young people riding high on tops of tables, and chairs and mattresses and bright red rugs. And when they passed the house they called out, "Goodbye, Johnny! Johnny, goodbye!" and he stood there and watched them go.

BUT some curious protection hovered over the house they lived in. No one came to paste up a sign—"For Sale," or "This Site will be Sold by Auction," and they lived on like some remnant of past life in a desert of bricks and rubble and rotten timbers piled up for the destructor.

Every day his Auntie said, "We'll have to find some other place to go. Those inspectors, they'll come here and say this old place's not fit to live in and it's got to come down." She took to not answering the door, sending the kids to peer furtively around the corner of the house to see who was there. "And you'd better not play that guitar," she said to Johnny. "At least, not on the step. Not in the daytime anyway. If they don't find us in they can't tell us to get out," she reasoned.

Johnny was going to say they could write a letter but he wasn't all that interested. A house was a house and they'd find some place to live like everyone else; besides he was missing his audience, not just the money they threw him, but their happy faces around him, their feet tapping to the music, their singing to his guitar.

He was playing a tune he had picked up outside the Mission Tent on Sunday when the door bell rang again.

"Oh, my God!" his Auntie said, "It's them!" She said it every time so Johnny didn't take much notice, but when the bell rang again, louder, and kept on ringing, he got up and said he'd go to see who it was, but his Auntie pulled him back.

"No!" she said. "Don't go!" But he brushed her away—"They won't go till someone goes out," he said. "I'm going to see who it is."



When he opened the door he saw the two girls standing on the verandah. It was raining and they came and stood inside the door almost, to shelter from the weather. Their brown, earnest faces were wet with the rain.

"Yes?" Johnny said, meaning what did they want. The younger of the two spoke up.

"We're from the Mission. We come to help you find Salvation."

All Johnny registered was "Mission."

"You from the Tent?" he said delightedly and pulled them inside and they followed him down a dark passage to the kitchen where his Aunt was sitting with her children gathered around her, waiting for what would come in the door.

THE girls came in, smiling. This was a welcome. They saw the guitar, lying where Johnny had left it.

"My, that one's a beauty!" the talkative one said admiringly and picked it up like it was anyone's old guitar. Johnny winced. He put out his hand to take it from her but she was strumming a tune and singing softly and it was the tune Johnny had been playing when the door bell rang.

He waited till she was finished and then he took the guitar and began to play. He looked fine with his head bent to the guitar and his bright shirt open at the neck and his black curly hair falling over one eye and the girls were filled with the love of the Lord and such beautiful things as Johnny and they began to sing in harmony together of Jesus and His Glory, and before he knew it Johnny was promising them that he'd come to the Mission the next Sunday.

THE Tent was all lit up with coloured lights and signs, when he came. Johnny stared. It looked like somebody's rainbow heaven.

"Gee!" he said. "Gee!" wondering why he had never been inside before.

He held his guitar in one hand and fingered his new green tie with the other wondering what would happen next.

The two girls who had come to the house were giving out books by the door. As soon as they could they got away and came up to him.

"We said you'd come!" the young one cried triumphantly—then, squealing delightedly she pointed to the guitar.

"You brought it!" Then before he had time to say he wasn't going up they took him by the arm, one on either side and pulled him towards the platform all strung with banners saying "Welcome!" and "Glory" and "Hallelujah!"

Three young men in dark suits with stovepipe trousers and long coats were standing on the platform. One of them was shouting about Sin and Salvation and Repentance. He flicked an interested eyebrow at Johnny, making a sign to the girls to bring him on but he didn't stop shouting. The words came in a torrent and everyone listened so they wouldn't miss a word.

Johnny had a moment of panic. Were they taking him up there to stand in front of all these people? He hesitated. "Come on!" the girls said and pushed him up.

And there he was standing on the platform and the man who had done all the shouting had him by the arm.

"Welcome to our Brother in the Lord!" he said, then, in Johnny's ear—"say something!"

He looked down at the million faces looking back at him. Most of them were brown like his own but here and there a white face took on a ghostly green from the reflected lights, or glowed a bright vermilion; but brown or white they all looked up to him, demanding that he speak to them.

BUT he had nothing to say. He did not know now why he had come. Then he heard a voice call out "Glory!" and the faces called it back. The girls came up and pushed him to the very front of the platform till he was right on the edge, in the full glare of the blazing lights and then in sheer panic he started playing his guitar.

"Jesus and His Glory," he heard the girls singing, then everybody was singing and the faces were calling for More! More! More! and suddenly it was all right to be up there.

He looked down at the faces looking up to him, lit with love and something that the music of the guitar called out of each of them . . . his people from the Street, from the houses that were gone, the boys and the girls, the kids, the men and the women and when the guitar stopped and someone he had known in the street called out "Johnny! Hallelujah! It's our Johnny!" he knew for sure and certain that everything was right again.

He was saved and they were saved and the power that had saved them was the power of the Lord who had set the wind to blow in the trees, the dust to settle in the streets, who made the man who made the guitar, who made Johnny and the joy that was in him of making the music that made his people happy.