

Cottonwood Fall (Pages 127-129)

Since You Went Away

After an enjoyable cowboy double feature at the Grafton, the boys decide to see what's showing at the upscale Chippewa Theater. Evidently, our heroes aren't familiar with the home front classic, *Since You Went Away* which, in 1944, was nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Actress for Claudette Colbert, Best Supporting Actress for Jennifer Jones, and Best Supporting Actor for Monty Woolley. Keep that name in mind.

We read the marquee from a distance. *Since You Went Away*. Neither of us had heard of it. "Sounds like another dog movie," Danny surmised.

"Oh, you mean like Lassie Come Home? Yeah, you're probably right."

When we arrived at the theater, we hurried to the glass case beside the ticket window and studied the Feature of the Day movie poster. Danny read down through the cast.

Claudette Colbert. She was one of my mother's favorites. Danny admitted he liked her too. Jennifer Jones. Danny wondered if she were related to Spike Jones. I didn't know. But I noted that there was no mention of City Slickers so we couldn't be sure. Joseph Cotton. We remembered him from that eerie Orson Wells movie, whose name always escaped us. Shirley Temple. That's good news. Can't go wrong with a kids' movie! But where's the dog? Monty Woolley. There he was.

"Ever heard of a woolley, Danny?"

"Monty? Let's see, I think it's a Royal Canadian police dog."

"Okay then! Let's get our tickets!"

We each plunked down fifteen cents, grabbed our tickets, and entered the theater. The ticket takers and ushers wore tightly tailored navy-blue uniforms with two rows of brass buttons running down their chests. Their trousers had a wide gold stripe extending from the waist to the pant cuff. And, on their shoulders, they wore nifty epaulets of braided golden cord. They always reminded me of the tiny, wooden-soldier ornaments that we hung on our Christmas tree.

We stuffed the torn half of our tickets into our pockets and entered the opulent lower lobby. Our feet sank into the rich red carpeting as we ambled toward the snack bar. Danny ordered two nickel bags of popcorn. Here they each cost a dime. After all, the Chippewa was a very ritzy place.

"Where you wanta sit, Danny?"

Stuffing a gigantic handful of popcorn into his mouth, he pointed up the stairs with his nose.

"The balcony! Terrific!"

We strolled up the wide carpeted stairway leading to the loge. The gradual rise made the climb a comfortable one, even for older patrons. No mandatory elevator back in those days.

Giant sand-filled urns, placed at frequent intervals, encouraged smokers to dispose of their cigarettes and cigars and to tap out their pipes before taking their seats.

Several couples occupied the comfortable red velvet settees that lined the loge. The men in suits and ties balanced felt hats on their knees. The women in tailored suits and fine dresses wore tiny hats and high heels.

These people were waiting for the current show to end before entering the balcony. This was one practice that Danny and I seldom followed. We loved movies, all parts of them, including beginnings, middles, and ends. And we didn't much care in what order. So, as usual, we decided to take our seats immediately.

Just past the tall restroom doors, made of heavy brass and difficult to open, a short flight of stairs led upward from the loge to the balcony. At the top of the stairs, we were intercepted by an officious usher. His badge of authority was the black flashlight. By flashing it at our feet and raising his hand, he ordered us to halt.

"Still be a few more minutes before the next show starts. We're just showing the ending. Wouldn't want to spoil the show for you," he whispered, much more politely than I had expected.

Danny swallowed his popcorn and responded, "We don't mind. We're planning to see it more than once anyway. Besides, endings are the best part."

The usher was confused by Danny's logic. Frankly, so was I. But I didn't let on.

"Okay," conceded the usher. "But please be quiet. Where do you want to sit?"

Using his flashlight as little as possible, he led us downward to the first row of seats. We were nearly in the center of the expansive balcony. We took our seats and settled in. I looked forward to the end of the show when the house

lights would come up, illuminating the ornate furnishings of the old Chippewa. I loved this place.

We focused our attention on *Since You Went Away*. There she was. Claudette Colbert. And we recognized Joseph Cotton right away. But that younger actress with dark hair? She didn't resemble old Spike but, by process of elimination, we concluded that she must be Jennifer Jones. There was another woman who looked a lot like Shirley Temple, but much older. We theorized that it must be Shirley's mom, Mrs. Temple. But where was the dog? Then we saw him. A big old, wrinkled bulldog. So that's a Monty Woolley! So much for our knowledge of dog breeds.

Everybody in the balcony seemed to be sniffing. People were blotting their eyes with hankies. We didn't get it.

"Geez! The dog's back home, safe and sound, for cripes sake. What's everybody cryin' about?" Danny whispered, not too softly.

"Shhhhhh!" came at us from all directions.

I didn't know about Danny but I was looking forward to seeing what beginning and middle could possibly make so many people sniffle at this innocuous ending.

"Maybe it's a science fiction movie, Danny," I whispered, softly this time.

"I think you got it. Check out that weird-looking woolley!"

**Excerpted from *Cottonwood Fall* by Gary Slaughter.
Copyright 2006 by Gary Slaughter Corporation.
All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced
or reprinted without permission in writing from
Gary Slaughter Corporation.**