Dad's Night

By CURLIN REED

The program at the school was to honor the children's dads, and young Dan's father enjoyed it almost as much as his mother did.

WHEN Dan, Jr., came home from school at noon, Mame was already beating the batter for Dan's birthday cake. They had moved only that morning—boxes and washtubs, full of dishes and pots and pans and fruit jars, were still all over the kitchen floor, waiting to be unpacked—yet Mame was already making a birthday cake. She had had the inspiration to make Dan a cake before she realized his birthday and the day set for their next move would fall on the same date, and once she had an inspiration, she was not a person to relinquish it easily.

Dan, Jr., rested his elbows on the other side of the kitchen table and propped his chin on his hands.

"This here," Mame told him enthusiastically, "is going to be a birthday cake for your daddy. As far as I know, it'll be the first one he ever had in his whole life. That old aunt of his never baked him one, you can be sure of that, not in all the years he had to live with her. I never have even baked him one before. I've baked cakes for you kids, but I've never made one for him. I don't know why. I guess just because neither one of us ever was used to having a birthday cake." Mame's sharp, quick eyes softened with the thought of doing this for Dan; her mouth grew tender with sudden immediate remembering of him, until she was almost pretty. "I mean tonight I'm going to have a real birthday supper for him."

Dan, Jr., jerked his head up from his hands. "Uh-huh," he said shrilly; "then you ain't going to the program tonight, after all! I knew all the time you wouldn't go! I knew you'd back out when the time came!" He let her hear in his voice the depths of his scorn for a person who wouldn't keep a promise. His face, sharp-eyed like hers, looked more peaked.

"Keep your shirt on, will you?" Mame said smoothly. "Who said we wasn't going? Who said anything about not going?" She had forgotten all about that program at his school, but not for a second did she let him know it.

ILLUSTRATED BY B. KIMBERLY PRINS

Dan, Jr., looked at the boxes and washtubs there in the kitchen; he looked through the open door into the two other rooms, where the furniture stood just as the moving men had left it.

"Shoot!" Mame said, seeing his look. "I'd hate to think I couldn't move and cook a birthday supper and go to a program at the school all in the same day. I'd hate to think I couldn't do any more than that." She spoke of moving with the confidence of one who has had much practice. A move to a different house which in some feature would be an improvement over the place where they had been living was one of Mame's most faithfully recurring enthusiasms. In the ten years since she and Dan had been married, they had lived in more than that many houses. Or parts of houses.

"Where's daddy?" Dan, Jr., asked.

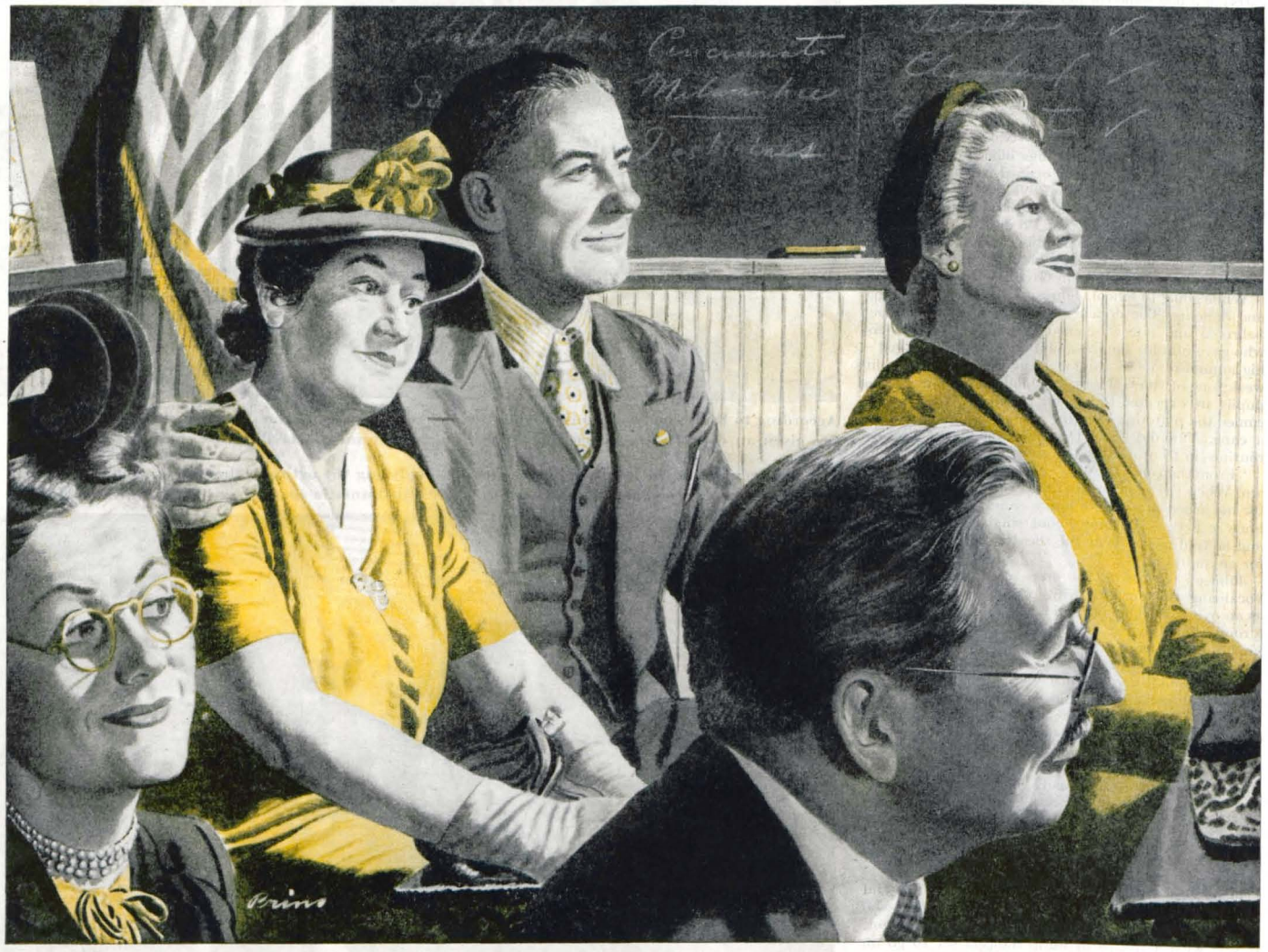
"Out at the yards, icing a banana train. He phoned and said another banana train had come in, and they'd have to stay out there and get through with it. He said he'd grab a hamburger out there after he got through. You turn around there and make yourself a baloney sandwich. I'll call Claudette and Norma in and feed them after I get this cake in the oven. They don't have to get back to school the way you do."

But Dan, Jr., was thinking of something else. He jerked his head up as though he had been hit in another spot. "Yeah, and I bet he has to ice banana cars again tonight and can't go."

"I betcha he don't."

"He had to ice 'em last night and the night before."

"And that's just a good reason he won't have to do it tonight. Them banana trains come in bunches. There won't be a single one for maybe two weeks or more, and then, for a couple of days or so, they'll come in every three or four *(Continued on Page 74)*



"My land!" Mame whispered delightedly to Dan. "If they're not going to let him sing twice."

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hours or closter. He's had to be out there two nights and two days now, so that's a good sign it's time for 'em to slack off."

"Yeah, but if they call him," said Dan, Jr., with wise hopelessness, "he'll go. You just wait and see."

Mame rested the spoon against the side of the bowl. "Listen, hon," she told him. "I promised you we'd go to that program, and we're going. So just don't worry about it."

Then she returned to the subject which, for her, held the greater interest. "I'm going to dress a chicken and fry it for him. I don't know why I've never had a real birthday meal for him before. Always before I've just fried him some round steak and onions and shoestring potatoes, and let it go at that. Tonight I'm going to have peas and milk gravy and mashed Irish potatoes."

"He'd rather have shoestrings. He don't like 'em mashed."

"Shoot! I give him shoestrings any old time."

"All the same, he'd rather have shoestrings."

Mame rested the spoon again for a second. "Sometimes," she said succinctly, giving Dan, Jr., a level look across the table, "you get too big for your britches."

But after he was gone, her eyes were uneasy for him. She had never in her life seen anybody so excited over anything. He had been talking about that program for two weeks. Ever since the beginning of this year's school. All about how the PTA was going to have it, and it was going to be a dad's-night program—just a program for the dads, so that the dads could get acquainted with the school, right now when it was just beginning.

Mame and Dan had never been to a program at Dan, Jr.'s, school. Mame didn't belong to the PTA. She had never considered she would have very much business up there. Sometimes she read in the paper about the monthly meetings of the Terrace School PTA, with the president, Mrs. Dowd Baker, presiding, Mrs. Edgar Jones, III, secretary, Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., as program chairman; but that was all. Mame guessed she wouldn't have very much business up there with those women.

But Dan, Jr., thought he was as big as anybody up there. He didn't have a doubt that he was. He was always coming home and saying things like, "Me an' Miss Hannover had to clean out the library shelves today." Or "Me an' Miss Hannover had to clean off all the blackboards today."

"Yeah," Mame would tell him in tender derision, "to hear you tell it, you and Miss Hannover are just about running that third grade."

As she gave the cake batter a final brisk stirring, Mame was reminded of a certain program of her own time in school. Ever since Dan, Jr., had been so excited about this program at his school, talking about what he was going to do and all that, she had kept remembering that time.

Two ladies had come into her room one day at school and had whispered and talked with the teacher. Then the teacher had announced that the ladies wanted to ask some of the little girls to be on a program—a program of spring—that one of the clubs in town was going to have. All who took part, the teacher had announced enticingly, would wear crepe-paper dresses and be daffodils or roses or poppies.

The ladies themselves chose about eight little girls and asked them to come to the front, the ladies smiling at each little girl and calling her by name, which just meant that the ladies already knew the little girls or at least knew their mothers. Then the teacher had looked over the room and politely had asked if anyone else would like to be on the program. And that was when Mame, quick as a shot, had slid out of her seat and marched to the front. She could laugh at herself now, every time she thought about it.

The ladies had been surprised and upset, because this was something they hadn't calculated on. Then they had said sweetly, "Who is this little girl, Miss Cruce?" With the accent on the "this."

"Isn't she a little tall?" the worried ladies had asked the teacher, trying to find the best excuse they could. Then the teacher had said in a nice way, "I don't believe we'll need anybody else this time, Mamie. But you can be on the next program."

She never had yet, Mame told the cake batter humorously, as she poured it into the pan, worn a crepe-paper dress.

It was just since Dan, Jr., had been so excited about this program at his school that she had kept thinking of that time. She didn't know why it kept sticking in her mind. Those ladies had probably forgotten all about the kind of hats they had worn that day. It probably would surprise them if they knew anybody had remembered. But she had. It was one of those times that you remembered for no particular reason, she told herself. She could still see even the color and shapes of the hats the two ladies had worn; she could still hear even the tones and shades of meaning in their voices.

Mame put the cake in the oven, and then called the little girls in from the yard and gave them some sandwiches.

Mame had seen Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr.—that is, to know who she was—but as far as she knew, she had never even seen any of those other women who were at the head of the PTA up there at Dan, Jr.'s, school. Except that she knew, of course, that Mrs. Edgar Jones, III, was the wife of Judge Jones' grandson, whom the judge had reared, and that the wife and her children had come back here to make their home with the judge while the grandson, who was a captain in the Air Force, was in England. Mame knew this from the paper only, just because the paper always printed anything it could about Judge Jones and his family.

But one Sunday afternoon last winter, she and Dan and the children had gone to the picture show. And while Dan and Dan, Jr., waited outside to buy the tickets, Mame and the two little girls had gone inside the little glassed-in foyer to be out of the cold. It happened that just then, when they went in, only two other people were in the warm, quiet place—the girl at the popcorn popper and one other person, a pretty blond young woman in a fur coat.

The young woman in the fur coat did not look at Mame and the children as they came in—or if she did, it was only a glance. And after they were in there, she still stood looking serenely straight in front of her, as though not even knowing that anyone else had come in. Mame tried to be equally polite and incurious, and she didn't once look directly at the young woman either, yet not a detail of the softness of the blond hair escaped her, not a single rich marking of the coat.

Then, in just a second or two, a big, good-looking, broad-shouldered young man—though not a bit broader of shoulder or any better looking than Dan when he was cleaned up—had come in, and he and the blond young woman started on into the show. And Dan came in directly afterward.

Just as the young man was going in the door, he turned and saw Dan there behind him. "Why, hello, Dan," he said in a friendly, surprised way, just as though it really pleased him to see Dan. "I didn't know that was you out there behind me."

As soon as Mame and Dan were seated in the crowded darkness of the show, she had whispered against his shoulder, "Who was that?"

"Who was who?" he had whispered back.

"The one who spoke to you as we came in."

"Marvin Moody, Jr.," Dan answered, keeping his voice as low as possible. "I used to see him a lot when I worked for his father down at the lumberyard."

"Is that his wife with him?"

"Yeah," Dan had whispered back.

Tonight, Dan came home about six. Mame had pushed the furniture against the walls and spread up the beds, but she hadn't had time to do very much more than that. Icing the cake and cooking the supper had taken more time than she expected. "Shoot!" she told Mrs. Armbruster, the woman who rented the other three rooms of the house, just to prove to Mrs. Armbruster that she wasn't tired. "I could do more than this in a day if I had to."

When Dan came up on the front porch, walking heavily, almost like an old man, she hurried to meet him to show him the house. "See here," she said enthusiastically. "Claudette and Norma will sleep on the day bed, right here in the living room, just like they did in our other place. But this"—she said, leading him to the little side hall—"is what sold me on this place." Without the luxury of her enthusiasms, life, for Mame, would have been too meager a thing. "Did you ever see a cuter room than this makes for Dan, Junior? Now his cot won't have to be in our room. It just means we get four rooms for the price of three. That's what it means."

Dan said it was as nice as it could be, because anything she did about a house was always all right with him. But as soon as she had finished showing him, he spread a newspaper on the bed, to protect the counterpane from his overalls, and lay down across it. Mame called to him not to lie down in his wet clothes, but he said, "They're almost dry now. I won't take cold."

When she called him to supper, he was so sleepy that he had to stand in the kitchen door, blinking at the bright kitchen light for a minute or two, before he could go on over to the sink and wash his face and comb his hair.

The cake, iced in yellow, because Mame had decided that would be prettier than white, was right there in the center of the table, but even after Dan had sat down, he still hadn't seen it. Though, even if he had noticed it, he wouldn't have guessed it was for him.

But the two little girls, who had been squirming and giggling, could stand it no longer. "It's for you!" they told him shrilly. "This is your birthday!"

"Why, hello!" Dan said, looking at the cake. And then, as he realized it further, "This is something pretty fine, looks like to me. I guess maybe this is my birthday, ain't it?" he said slowly, out of his tiredness, looking at Mame, his eyes asking her the reason for a cake.

"Oh, I just took a notion to make you one," she said, quickly picking up the plate of chicken and offering it to him.

When she offered him the plate of potatoes, he said, "No, thanks. I don't believe I want any."

"See there," Dan, Jr., said wisely. "I told you he'd rather have shoestrings. I told you he didn't like 'em mashed."

Dan shot a suddenly alert look from Dan, Jr., to Mame. "Yeah," he said smoothly, holding out his big hand for the potatoes, "I believe I do want some of them too. I like 'em fine that way when we have gravy."

Mame told Dan regretfully that if it weren't for the program they had to go to at Dan, Jr.'s, school he could take all the time he wanted about eating.

"About the only program I'll be going to tonight," Dan said comfortably, now that he was wider awake and more rested, "is out there at the yards. We've got another banana train coming in tonight."

"See there!" Dan, Jr., dropped his fork against his plate with a sharp clatter. He looked only at Mame. "I knew he wouldn't go! I told you all the time he wouldn't go!"

"What's he talking about?" Dan asked Mame. "What kind of a program is it? We'll go with you to another program sometime, son," he promised, as if thinking that would satisfy any boy where school was concerned.

"It's a dad's-night program—a program for the dads," Mame explained. "It's the one I told you he was crazy for us to go to. He's been the craziest thing about it you ever saw—you'd think he

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I'd guess that Jack and Jill had awfully poor body coordination.

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was going to be the whole thing. He acts like he thinks he's going to be the biggest thing in it. It's the PTA that's having it."

"The PTA?" Dan repeated after her, trying to get that straight in his mind.

"They're the ones who are putting it on. Mrs. Dowd Baker is president of it, and Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., has something to do with it. They're some of the ones who run it."

"Mrs. Marvin Moody, Junior?" Dan said, with recognition. Then that seemed to relieve him. "We wouldn't have much business up there, would we?" he asked Mame.

"Sure!" Dan, Jr., piped up, as full of confidence as anybody could be. "I'll say you would. They want everybody to come. Everybody!" he repeated with a wide, trusting sweep of his arm. "And I'll betcha we get the prize for having the most dads." Dan, Jr., was bouncing back full of hope in a second, which was the way he could be, quicker than anybody. Up or down, first one way, then another. "We'll beat that ol' fourth grade so bad!"

"Oh," Dan said, suddenly half smiling for a second. "So there's a prize in it." Because he could understand how a kid would feel about a prize.

Mame cut the cake and passed it. But Dan sat there, breaking off little pieces of his, moving the little pieces neatly about on his plate, looking at them, yet not seeing them. The cake could have been bread or anything. Dan, Jr., didn't eat his cake either. He was sitting on the very edge of his chair, watching Dan. The two chubby little girls were the only ones enjoying their cake.

"If I thought the train wouldn't come in until about nine-thirty or ten, we might could go," Dan decided slowly, still looking down unseeingly at the little pieces of cake on his plate. "If you think maybe we ought to go ——" he asked Mame, suddenly looking up at her. Then he worried some more about it. "We're so short-handed out there. We can't spare a hand if there's a train in. The help we have got is so green. You'd think any kind of green help could ice a train, but I swan if they don't bungle it."

"Mrs. Armbruster could tell 'em to call the school," Mame said quickly. "She's going to keep Claudette and Norma for me. And they'd have to call you over her phone anyway. She could tell 'em to call the school. . . . You all have got a phone up there at the school, haven't you?" she asked Dan, Jr.

"My good night, of course we've got a phone!" Dan, Jr., said, scorning any school that wouldn't have a phone.

"Maybe they won't call," Dan said hopefully.

All the way up the avenue, Mame had to keep telling Dan, Jr., to slow down. "We'll get there in time," she kept telling him. "I don't reckon," she said, with a little uneasiness in her own voice, "they'd go on and start it without you."

But when they reached the bottom of the hill that had the school at its top, they could see that people were still going in, and the children were still playing on the swings in the side yard.

The minute they were at the top, Dan, Jr., darted away to the side yard, leaving Mame and Dan alone there on the walk in front of the school.

"Do we just go on in?" Dan asked Mame.

"I guess we do," she said.

But a pretty young woman standing at the front door came to the top of the steps to meet them, so that they didn't have to go in by themselves, after all. "I know you're Dan, Junior's, mother and father," she said, "because I saw you coming up the hill with him. I'm Miss Hannover. I teach the third grade."

And Mame answered as warmly. "We've heard a lot about you, all right," she told Dan, Jr.'s, teacher.

In the big hall, not far from the front door, three or four men were standing in a little group, talking together and trying to look as if they were having a good time while they waited for the program to begin. Mame's quick eye saw, first thing, that one of them was Marvin Moody, Jr.

When Marvin Moody turned and saw Dan, he said, "Why, hello, Dan. I didn't know you had a kid up here."

But Dan would have gone right on down the hall with Mame, it wouldn't have occurred to him to stop there with those men, if Marvin Moody, Jr., hadn't caught hold of Dan's arm and said, "Here, you better stop here with us, Dan. You might get into trouble if you get back there with those women. I don't believe they're quite ready to start the fireworks."

Then, still holding Dan by the arm, just as though he thought a lot of Dan, Marvin Moody introduced him to the other men. "Judge Jones," he said, "this is Dan Haley. He used to be with dad. . . . Dowd," he said, "you know Dan, don't you?" and Mr. Baker said, "Sure, I know Dan. How are you, Dan? Dan's helped me ice my fish basket every Sunday morning this summer. That is," Mr. Baker added with mock bitterness, "when my wife has left me enough gas."

Mame went on over and stood against the walls with Effie Blackmore, who was from her own neighborhood. Effie was like Mame; she didn't know many people in the school either.

Dan would have stood there with the men, listening to their talk, but he wouldn't have tried to say anything himself. But Marvin Moody, Jr., asked him questions, so that he had to talk. "You're having some banana trains through now, aren't you, Dan?" Marvin Moody, Jr., said. And then when Dan had answered, he said, "I thought so. I've noticed the platform lights have been on out there at the yards nearly all night."

Then the men kept asking Dan about the banana trains and listening respectfully to his answers, as though they considered him an experienced man in his line, just as they were experienced in theirs, and that, as an experienced man, he could tell them about something in which they were interested. "Yes, sir," Mame heard Dan say, "we're having a good many more through now than just after the war started. . . . No, sir," she heard him say, "they don't come regular."

"I didn't know whether to come or not," Effie confided to Mame.

"Me neither," Mame admitted. "I remember a program I would have busted a hamstring to be on once," she said nervously, absently, trying to give half an ear to Effie and at the same time hear the talk between Dan and those men who were being so nice and friendly to him.

She could catch parts of what they were saying, but not all. Effie drowned out part of it. But it was the kind of talk that was much more interesting to men than to a woman. How many men were required to ice a car? How long, then, did it take three men to ice a car? How many cars to a train—for the average, say? To how many states were banana trains diverted from this central point?

Then some of the teachers and the PTA ladies went through the hall telling everyone to go to the sixth-grade schoolroom, because the program was ready to begin. The sixth-grade room was where it was going to be.

Mame and Dan went clear to the back of the room and found a seat, squeezing in together at one of the little desks, which certainly had not been built for anybody as big as Dan. Marvin Moody, Jr., sat alone on one of the very front seats. And so did Judge Jones take a front seat. Mame guessed that Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., was going to help with the program, and she guessed that the pretty young girl who came in and sat with Judge Jones was Mrs. Edgar Jones, III.

After Mrs. Marvin Moody had made a little speech, thanking everyone for coming, she announced that the first number would be a song by pupils from the sixth grade. And ten boys and girls came from the cloakroom, and, making a neat straight line of themselves across the front, sang a song. When they were finished, they didn't go back to the cloakroom, but filed, instead, out into the hall, where some of the teachers were waiting to see that they were kept quiet.

The next number was a play acted by four little girls. And then Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., announced that some of the pupils from the third grade would sing.

This time, eight little boys and girls came from the cloakroom. And Dan, Jr., was the last one to come out. He stood at the end of the line. But when they began to sing, Dan, Jr., sang bigger than anybody. There was nothing Dan, Jr., liked as much as singing. He sang with his entire body as well as with his voice. He was a sight to see when he had good jaunty music to sing to. He kept time with his eyes, his head, his shoulders. Even his ears, that outlined his peaked face so sharply, seemed to be keeping time. Anybody could see that the whole audience was watching Dan, Jr.

When the song was finished, all the children except Dan, Jr., marched on out to the hall, the way the others had done. Dan, Jr., went back to the cloakroom. But almost at once he reappeared, and this time two little girls were with him, and the three stood waiting expectantly while the teacher at the piano played the introduction to Short'nin' Bread.

"My land!" Mame whispered delightedly to Dan. "If they're not going to let him sing twice!"

This time the audience began applauding even before the song was ended, and kept applauding until Dan, Jr., and the two little girls had to come back and sing the whole thing over again.

After that, when everybody had finally got quiet, Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., announced that the third and fourth grades had tied for the prize that was being given to the room represented by the most dads. And then she said it gave her great pleasure to introduce a man who needed no introduction.

It was Judge Jones who got up to make a speech. In his old-fashioned lawyer's splendid-sounding voice he paid tribute to the school building, to the pupils, to the teachers, to the ladies of the PTA, and then he branched off to the war, to the boys serving overseas, to everyone who remained at home, to the duty of every man. It was the same kind of speech the judge always made nowadays, down at the picture show at the beginning of a bond drive, which was where Mame and Dan had twice heard him, or anywhere. He brought everything he could think of into a speech and stirringly, inspiringly, made a whole.

Tonight, as an illustration, which he said was fresh in his mind, he even brought in the banana trains. His voice and rich words, resounding against the blackboards, made you see the trains coming in, then the men small on top of the high platform under the lights out at the yards, then the trains hurrying on through the night to big cities. He made you see even Dan's job as a part of something big.

Once Mame stole a glance upward at Dan to see how he was taking it, because she knew he had never expected anything like this up here at Dan, Jr.'s, school. But he was just listening with a solemn expression on his face. Yet she knew it was bound to be making him feel good. Then she looked back at the judge and listened again herself.

After the program was over, the parents were invited to the different rooms to look at the children's work which was on exhibit. And in the third-grade room, Mrs. Marvin Moody, Jr., came up to Mame and said laughingly, "Wasn't your little boy the one who sang Short'nin' Bread? I want you to know, he's the cutest thing I ever saw in my life. That was my little girl who sang next to him."

"Oh, she was cute too," Mame said, returning the compliment as quickly as she could. "I thought she was awful cute."

They were calling Dan from the yards just as he walked into the house. And he didn't come back until after two. He got into bed, and then, when Mame thought he had already fallen asleep—even that soon, because he was so tired—he put his big arm across her and pulled her a little closer to him and said, "Hon, it sure was a fine birthday cake."

"You haven't had a taste of it yet, that I know of," she told him snappily. "At supper you sure didn't eat."

"All the same, it was a fine cake," he mumbled. And this time he was asleep even as he finished saying it. But Mame lay there a good while, being glad that she had made it for him. For some reason, she wasn't tired or sleepy, even after such a day, and so she just lay there thinking about things generally. *We needn't have been afraid to go up there,* she told herself gently, talking wordlessly with herself, the way she did sometimes if she lay awake after Dan was asleep.