

I SANG MY WAY TO HEALTH

by Edna Skinner as told to John Carlova

I BEGAN to live the day I was condemned to die. It happened in a doctor's office in New York. I was 11 at the time and had suffered with severe asthma most of my life. For two days, I was examined, tested and X-rayed.

Then, as I sat in the waiting room, the verdict was given. It was not intended for my ears, but it came to me through a door carelessly left ajar by a nurse. The doctor's voice was softly solemn:

"I am sorry to tell you, Mr. and Mrs. Skinner, that your daughter is beyond help. Her heart is under too much of a strain. Every breath she takes is a battle, and her strength is failing. Your daughter will not live more than a year."

I was shocked. In my painful struggle to cope with life, I had never even thought of death. Now, suddenly, I was vividly aware of the life I was going to lose—the great throbbing city outside, the tall buildings spearing into the sky, even a twittering little sparrow on the window sill.

Why should I lose something I had hardly been given a chance to know! Why should life be snatched from me before I could appreciate its magnificence or feel its vitality!

My quickened breathing brought on an attack of asthma. I fought it. For some strange reason—perhaps because of the sparrow singing on the window sill—I strained to turn my wheezes and gasps into a simple song.

After I returned home from the doctor's office, I lay in bed for weeks, racked by the effort of drawing breath into my lungs.

My only relief came from an electric inhalator. I should have been grateful for this machine, but I hated the hideous little mechanical monster. It had enslaved me and I could never move far without it.

On rare occasions, I was allowed outdoors where I could enjoy my limited world to the fullest. I sang to the trees, the sky, and the birds. I didn't know why, but I had to sing. Perhaps it was as our

"She won't live more than a

year," the

doctor said,

but he failed

to reckon

with a

child's indomitable spirit



wise family doctor explained to mother: "Edna's suddenly discovered she has a spirit. Let her sing."

Although my spirit flourished, my body failed. Six months after the sentence of death had been pronounced on me, I was worse than ever—a weak, wasted shadow of a child.

Then one day my father came home excited. He had just heard of Dr. Harry Wilmer, who was making great strides in the treatment of asthma. I was immediately bundled up and, with my cumbersome inhalator, taken by train to Dr. Wilmer's clinic in Germantown, Pa., where I became one of scores of "guinea pigs."

Allergies were the principal cause of my asthma, and my thin body was punctured with injections. These sometimes set off terrifying reactions. I wanted to cry out in anguish—but I didn't.

Instead I sang. I sang my heart out.

Mother had some doubt about my singing, but Dr. Wilmer tested me and found that singing was actually strengthening my lungs. I had found, instinctively, a therapy that was suited to me.

The decisive battle was fought the night I left Germantown. Mother was taking me to the clear mountain air of the Adirondacks. She tucked me into my berth and went to the dining car.

As the train rushed through the dark night, the ominous "dusty" feeling of an asthma attack began rising in my nostrils. In the confined compartment, I felt trapped and frightened. I wanted to call out, but I couldn't, for I was seized by the worst fit of coughs and wheezes I had ever suffered.

Desperately, I groped for my inhalator. It was plugged in and waiting. Then something stopped me. Suddenly, in the gloom, the gleaming little machine seemed to be grinning. I was its slave. If I didn't break away from it, I knew I would never be free. This was where I had to make my stand!

Although the pain in my chest was nearly paralyzing, I pulled my hand away from the inhalator. Stubbornly, I forced myself upright and began to sing—the strangest, saddest song anyone ever sang.

In the end, the song won out over the coughs and gasps and I won out over the inhalator. Weak but triumphant, I fell into a deep sleep.

That was the turning point in my fight to win a normal, healthy life. After graduating from school, I even went on to become a successful professional singer. For 15 months, I starred on Broadway in "Oklahoma!"

But I didn't particularly want to be famous. I left "Oklahoma!" and set out to see America.

In Montana, I found a ranch and bought it, built it up and, in the process, became a champion cowgirl. Then I moved on to Hollywood, where I played small parts in movies and TV. Between roles I traveled extensively. Right now, I am interested in deep-sea fishing and recently won a women's international championship with a 132-pound sailfish I caught.

As my world expands, so does my spiritual understanding. I now know that the songs which helped me to health and happiness were the symbols of a greater power.

I wasn't just singing. I was praying.

Cover:

According to cover artist Arthur Sarnoff, life isn't all bones and biscuits for man's best friend—not when junior and the family indulge in a little midsummer mischief.

**Family
Weekly**

August 2, 1959

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice-President
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director

Send all advertising communications to
Family Weekly, 153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Address all communications about editorial features to
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

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