

LIFE IMITATES FICTION, AND IT CAN BE DEADLY

by Jim Cox © 2012

(From [Radio Recall](#), April 2012)

During a peak war year the color cover of Radio Mirror's 96-page March 1943 issue carried an image of uniformed nurse Patricia Ryan who earned her livelihood as a radio actress. At 15 cents a copy, Radio Mirror was a popular fanzine of its day, emanating from a Macfadden Publications empire that included a stable of newsstand favorites like The Dance, Dream World, Ghost Stories, Love and Romance, Master Detective, Model Airplane, Photoplay, Physical Culture, Sport, True Detective, True Experiences, True Romances, True Stories, and Your Home.

As it turned out Patricia Ryan—the smilingly dimpled blonde blue-eyed girl who graced the front of that Radio Mirror—had been there on a previous cover, too. That sometimes happens when one's star is rising or has already ascended. Ryan appeared on the face of the fanzine's October 1941 issue, having then only recently completed a concise primetime run in CBS's serialized Claudia and David. That show had filled Kate Smith's half-hour slot during the singing legend's 13-week summer hiatus.

Ryan, who starred opposite actor Richard Kollmar, may have peaked in her radio career at the time. But the London-born actress found many other chances to exploit her talent on the air, having begun when she was but six years of age. Many of her roles were portrayed in semi-subdued obscurity, however.

When she was eight she and Estelle Levy debuted in the leads of The Adventures of Helen and Mary (Ryan was Mary), a children's fairy tale bowing over CBS June 29, 1929. The title was altered to a more memorable Let's Pretend on March 17, 1934. Ryan, 13 then, segued into a repertory company of adolescent thespians for the weekly plays. Later she joined a troupe of juveniles broadcasting over an NBC equivalent children's theater that appeared at varying times under the labels The Children's Hour, Coast-to-Coast on a Bus, and Our Barn (1936-41).

Ryan eventually won the recurring part of Kathleen Anderson in radio's laugh hit The Aldrich Family and the role of Elly Parker in The Parker Family sitcom. She turned up in character roles in multiple 1940s crime dramas like The Adventures of the Thin Man and Special Investigator and in dramatic anthologies like Aunt Jenny's Real Life Stories, Grand Central Station, Little Women, and Manhattan at Midnight. She also maintained running stints in the daytime serials Joyce Jordan, Girl Interne [sic] and Just Plain Bill.

While performing in the cast of the Jordan drama her 1943 Radio Mirror interview revealed that Ryan—as volunteer nurse Myra Wilder—was impressed that she should be giving something tangible to the nation's collective wartime service. Persuaded she could become a nurse's aide like the part she was then playing, even as she concurrently pursued her professional goals, Ryan entered training at Manhattan's Misericordia Hospital.

After earning a diploma there she devoted three mornings a week from 7:15 to noon at the hospital. Her afternoons were spent on the air and on most evenings she was at the Stage Door Canteen. "In her spare time," according to the 1943 article, "she lectures for the American Theater Wing. She writes three letters a day to soldiers, another three to the mothers of soldiers she meets at the Canteen—and a very special daily letter to a Private overseas. She also entertains for service men, and particularly likes to give parties for British seamen." Furthermore, Ryan expressed a desire "to go to England as a nurse." Several uncles, aunts, and cousins from her mother's side of the family were then members of the British Royal Air Force.

It was her final ethereal outing for which Ryan is undoubtedly recalled best. On Monday evening, February 14, 1949—Valentine's Day—during an NBC broadcast of the Cavalcade of America, she appeared as a woman possessed by migraine headaches. Silver screen actor Glenn Ford worked

opposite her in a half-hour live drama titled "A Valentine for Sophia." Appearing in the namesake role of Sophia Peabody, Ryan's character suffered blinding headaches prior to her nuptials to 19th century novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. The yarn ended conversely on a triumphant note nevertheless.

During the brief span that the coast-to-coast show was airing meanwhile Ryan herself complained of severe pain at the back of her head. A couple of actresses standing nearby (veterans Alice Reinheart and Agnes Young) stepped into the gulch of resulting dead air to read her lines for her until Ryan sufficiently recovered and returned. The stricken actress was treated by a studio physician following the night's broadcast and subsequently returned home.

A short time after arriving at the New York apartment she shared with her husband George Robert Gibson, the 27-year-old Ryan turned in for the night. The next morning she was unresponsive when he attempted to waken her. Gibson summoned a rescue squad that soon declared her dead in her bed. Following an autopsy the press paradoxically reported that she had succumbed to a cerebral hemorrhage during the night. It was one of the most stupefying broadcasting deaths recorded in which life imitated fiction.

The referenced magazine picture story of Patricia Ryan reported something rather odd, particularly in light of what transpired a half-dozen years hence: "Pat claims nothing very exciting has happened to her in radio, except that once she was knocked out by a microphone when she was twelve. An announcer was adjusting a mike just over her head and it came loose and beamed her. They brought Pat back into this world just two minutes before the program went on the air and she played her part. 'Although,' she says, 'I had a slight headache.'"

Would that in even the slightest way seem to be related to the circumstances surrounding her death? While no evidence has surfaced that any further investigation was pursued, could the incident when she was 12 years old have precipitated her demise fifteen years afterward? Perhaps not, but knowing that little detail seems to turn the Radio Mirror piece into a more intriguing—and even ominous—revelation.