

(continued from previous page)

redeeming the errors of his youth by spending his middle and declining years perfecting a very good win-and-place system could not reconcile me to the fact that he had been for the greater part of his life both shifty and shiftless.

I felt the conversation had gone on long enough.

"Aunt Mabel," I said, "What about a beer?"

Aunt Mabel looked startled. It was true she often accepted a small beer before dinner (Ale, as she genteelly termed it, gave her an appetite, she said, though we had never noticed that she lacked one), but drinking in the evening, she complained, made her feel sleepy.

"Just a little something I ran up myself," I said. "Didn't have much kick, so we put it aside for the children's party."

Was it imagination, or did disappointment flicker behind the bi-focals?

"Thanks," said Aunt Mabel, "I don't mind if I do."

\* \* \*

REVERENTLY I got out three bottles. It was my best brew, considered too potent for universal application, but this was a special occasion. Two glasses. Biscuits and cheese.

Aunt Mabel and I seated ourselves at the table. I poured.

"This reminds me," said Aunt Mabel, "of the year dear Mother (your grandmother) spent with me just before she died. Every night at supper we used to sit down with a bottle of stout (doctor's orders), biscuits and cheese and pickled walnuts."

I rose, went to the kitchen and returned with a jar of pickled onions. Dubiously Aunt Mabel sampled one.

"It isn't quite the same," she said.

I got out another bottle of beer, just in case. I didn't like the air of a seasoned campaigner that Aunt Mabel was, sip by sip, assuming.

"Yes," resumed Aunt Mabel, "your Uncle Percy was a peculiar boy. Although I think a lot of it was due to your Aunt Catherine. She was a Spence, of course. I don't know what he wanted to marry her for. The Spences were all very peculiar. The only one I liked was Minnie Spence, the one who had her front teeth knocked out by the milkman's horse that time. She went to America afterwards and married a drummer, she said. They were a very musical family. Yes, she did come back once, the time she brought you that glass ball with Niagara Falls inside it."

"She didn't," I said.

Aunt Mabel looked at me, blinked and looked again.

"How peculiar," she said. "For a moment you looked just like Second-Cousin Claude. He was Minnie's godson, your Great-Uncle George's second boy. Minnie didn't have any children of her own, and she wanted to adopt you, but George wouldn't hear of it. Pity. You might have been President by now instead of Mr. Truman."

I poured out the second bottle. With practised ease Aunt Mabel siphoned up the froth.

"They did adopt a little boy, but it was rather a mistake. He didn't become President. They had to sit up every night doing his homework for

him, and in the end he went to Hollywood and got a job in a night-club. He sends me Christmas cards with trumpets on the outside."

"It's the thought that counts," I murmured mechanically, uncapping the third bottle. Aunt Mabel's monologue was strangely soothing; it rose and fell with Whitmanesque rhythm, but it had also a rhythm in space, now booming near at hand, now blowing with the faintness of horns of Elfland. Similarly Aunt Mabel's pince-nez now shone with headlight glare, now glimmered like faint evening stars upon some far horizon.

"Second-Cousin Henry was a great one for Christmas. Never shall I forget the time he put a match to the brandy and set Great Aunt Georgie's toupee alight..." "Horace was a great drinker but always carried it like a gentleman. That wasn't why he was asked to resign from the Club..."

"... the brains of the family but Grandfather said that no daughter of his..."

"... she would never have accepted his offer if she had known he cheated at cards..."

"Aunt Mabel," I said.

I set both feet squarely on the floor, pinned down my chair with both hands and rose to my feet.

"Aunt Mabel," I said. "I do not approve of women drinking." With a wide sweeping gesture I indicated the three empty bottles. There was a heavy crash.

"Oh, Percy," said my Aunt Mabel, "mother's good glass! She will be very upset."

"Aunt Mabel," I said. "It is high time you went to bed. It is high time I went to bed. Good-night."

Eluding the groping arms of the furniture, I steered my way into the swimming darkness.

\* \* \*

"BERT," said my wife. Bert!

"I'm awake," I said. "You needn't shout."

"Bert," said my wife. "I don't know what you could have been thinking of last night. You left all your clothes in a heap on the floor and you forgot to put the milk bottles up. And the cat was asleep on that new crushed velvet cushion that your Aunt Mabel gave us. I know you were anxious to finish your book (by the way, where is it? I must take it back this morning), but I do think you might have been a little more thoughtful. And I did expect you to see Aunt Mabel safely into bed. After all she's getting on—"

"Seventy-six," I said.

"and she needs these little attentions. There she was filling her own hot water bottle—"

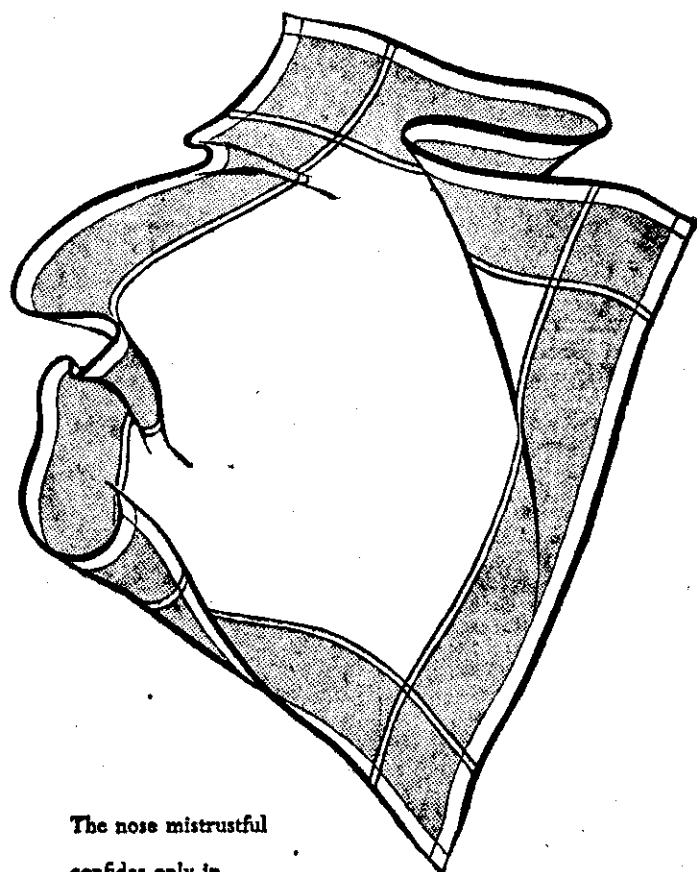
"Was she very upset?" I asked.

"I don't think so," my wife admitted grudgingly. "She seemed quite cheerful. She was singing."

"Singing?" I said.

"Nothing wrong with that, is there?" said my wife. "I asked her if you'd made her a cup of tea and she said you hadn't. I do think it was rather selfish of you. After all, she is your aunt."

"Yes," I said, sitting up in bed. "She's my aunt and by God I'm proud of her!"



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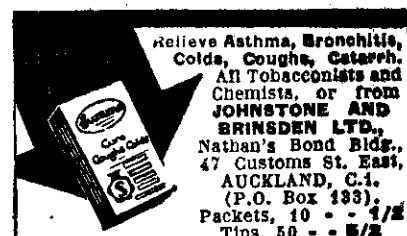
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