

Portrait: Old South

I AM the grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation. The older people in my family used to tell such amusing little stories about it. One time, several years after the War ended, two small brothers (one of them was my father) set out by themselves on foot from their new home in south Texas, and when neighbors picked them up three miles from home, hundreds of miles from their goal, and asked them where they thought they were going, they answered confidently, "To Louisiana, to eat sugar cane," for they hadn't tasted sugar for months and remembered the happy times in my grandmother's cane fields there.

Does anyone remember the excitement when for a few months we had rationed coffee? In my grandmother's day, in Texas, everybody seemed to remember that man who had a way of showing up with a dozen grains of real coffee in his hand, which he exchanged for a month's supply of corn meal. My grandmother parched a mixture of sweet potato and dried corn until it was black, ground it up and boiled it, because her family couldn't get over its yearning for a dark hot drink in the mornings. But she would never allow them to call it coffee. It was known as That Brew. Bread was a question, too. Wheat flour, during the period euphemistically described as Reconstruction, ran about \$100 a barrel. Naturally my family ate corn bread, day in, day out, for years. Finally Hard Times eased up a little, and they had hot biscuits, nearly all they could eat, once a week for Sunday breakfast. My father never forgot the taste of those biscuits, the big, crusty tender kind made with buttermilk and soda, with melted butter and honey, every blessed Sunday that came. "They almost made a Christian of me," he said.

My grandfather, a soldier, toward the end of the War was riding along one very cold morning, and he saw, out of all reason, a fine big thick slice of raw bacon rind lying beside the road. He dismounted, picked it up, dusted it off and made a hearty breakfast of it. "The best piece of bacon rind I ever ate

in my life," said my grandfather. These little yarns are the first that come to mind out of hundreds; they were the merest surface ripples over limitless deeps of bitter memory. My elders all remained nobly unreconstructed to their last moments, and my feet rest firmly on this rock of their strength to this day.

The woman who made That Brew and the soldier who ate the bacon rind had been bride and groom in a Kentucky wedding somewhere around 1850. Only a few years ago a cousin of mine showed me a letter from a lady then rising ninety-five who remembered that wedding as if it had been only yesterday. She was one of the flower girls, carrying a gilded basket of white roses and ferns, tied with white watered-silk ribbon. She couldn't remember whether the bride's skirt had been twenty-five feet or twenty-five yards around, but she inclined to the latter figure; it was of white satin brocade with slippers to match.

The flower girl was allowed a glimpse of the table set for the bridal banquet. There were silver branched candlesticks everywhere, each holding seven white candles, and a crystal chandelier holding fifty white candles, all lighted. There was a white lace tablecloth reaching to the floor all around, over white satin. The wedding cake was tall as the flower girl and of astonishing circumference, festooned all over with white sugar roses and green leaves, actual live rose leaves. The room, she wrote, was a perfect bower of southern smilax and white dogwood. And there was butter. This is a bizarre note, but there was an enormous silver butter dish, *with feet* (italics mine), containing at least ten pounds of butter. The dish had cupids and some sort of fruit around the rim, and the butter was molded or carved, to resemble a set-piece of roses and lilies, every petal and leaf standing out sharply, natural as life. The flower girl, after the lapse of nearly a century, remembered no more than this, but I think it does well for a glimpse.

That butter. She couldn't get over it, and neither can I. It seems as late-Roman and decadent as anything ever thought up in Hollywood. Her memory came back with a rush when she thought of the food. All the children had their own table in a small parlor, and ate just what the grownups had: Kentucky ham, roast turkey, partridges in wine jelly, fried chicken,

dove pie, half a dozen sweet and hot sauces, peach pickle, watermelon pickle and spiced mangoes. A dozen different fruits, four kinds of cake and at last a chilled custard in tall glasses with whipped cream capped by a brandied cherry. She lived to boast of it, and she lived along with other guests of that feast to eat corn pone and bacon fat, and yes, to be proud of that also. Why not? She was in the best of company, and quite a large gathering too.

In my childhood we ate, my father remarked, "as if there were no God." By then my grandmother, her brocaded wedding gown cut up and made over to the last scrap for a dozen later brides in the connection, had become such a famous cook it was mentioned in her funeral eulogies. There was nobody like her for getting up a party, for the idea of food was inseparably connected in her mind with social occasions of a delightful nature, and though she loved to celebrate birthdays and holidays, still any day was quite good enough to her. Several venerable old gentlemen, lifelong friends of my grandmother, sat down, pen in hand, after her death and out of their grateful recollection of her bountiful hospitality—their very words—wrote long accounts of her life and works for the local newspapers of their several communities, and each declared that at one time or another he had eaten the best dinner of his life at her table. The furnishings of her table were just what were left over from times past, good and bad; a mixture of thin old silver and bone-handled knives, delicate porcelain, treasured but not hoarded, and such crockery as she had been able to replace with; fine old linen worn thin and mended, and stout cotton napery with fringed borders; no silver candlesticks at all, and a pound of sweet butter with a bouquet of roses stamped upon it, in a plain dish—plain for the times; it was really a large opal-glass hen seated on a woven nest, rearing aloft her scarlet comb and beady eye.

Grandmother was by nature lavish, she loved leisure and calm, she loved luxury, she loved dress and adornment, she loved to sit and talk with friends or listen to music; she did not in the least like pinching or saving and mending and making things do, and she had no patience with the kind of slackness that tried to say second-best was best, or half good enough. But

the evil turn of fortune in her life tapped the bottomless reserves of her character, and her life was truly heroic. She had no such romantic notion of herself. The long difficulties of her life she regarded as temporary, an unnatural interruption to her normal fate, which required simply firmness, a good deal of will-power and energy and the proper aims to re-establish finally once more. That no such change took place during her long life did not in the least disturb her theory. Though we had no money and no prospects of any, and were land-poor in the most typical way, we never really faced this fact as long as our grandmother lived because she would not hear of such a thing. We had been a good old family of solid wealth and property in Kentucky, Louisiana and Virginia, and we remained that in Texas, even though due to a temporary decline for the most honorable reasons, appearances were entirely to the contrary. This accounted for our fragmentary, but strangely useless and ornamental education, appropriate to our history and our station in life, neither of which could be in the least altered by the accident of straitened circumstances.

Grandmother had been an unusually attractive young woman, and she carried herself with the graceful confidence of a natural charmer to her last day. Her mirror did not deceive her, she saw that she was old. Her youthful confidence became matriarchal authority, a little way of knowing best about almost everything, of relying upon her own experience for sole guide, and I think now she had earned her power fairly. Her bountiful hospitality represented only one of her victories of intelligence and feeling over the stubborn difficulties of life. Her mind and her instinct ran in flashes of perception, and she sometimes had an airy, sharp, impatient way of speaking to those who didn't keep up with her. She believed it was her duty to be a stern methodical disciplinarian, and made a point of training us as she had been trained even to forbidding us to cross our knees, or to touch the back of our chair when we sat, or to speak until we were spoken to: love's labors lost utterly, for she had brought up a houseful of the worst spoiled children in seven counties, and started in again hopefully with a long series of motherless grandchildren—for the daughters of that afterwar generation did not survive so well as their mothers, they died young in great numbers, leaving young

husbands and children—who were to be the worst spoiled of any. She never punished anyone until she was exasperated beyond all endurance, when she was apt to let fly with a lightning, long-armed slap at the most unexpected moments, usually quite unjustly and ineffectually.

Truth was, when she had brought her eleven children into the world, she had had a natural expectation of at least as many servants to help her bring them up; her gifts were social, and she should never have had the care of children except in leisure, for then she was delightful, and communicated some of her graces to them, and gave them beautiful memories. We loved the smell of her face powder and the light orange-flower perfume she wore, the crinkled waves of her hair, the knot speared through with a small pointed Spanish comb. We leaned upon her knee, and sniffed in the sweetness of her essential being, we nuzzled her face and the little bit of lace at her collar, enchanted with her sweetness.

Her hands were long since ruined, but she was proud of her narrow feet with their high insteps, and liked to dress them in smooth black kid boots with small spool-shaped heels. When she went “abroad”—that is, shopping, calling, or to church—she wore her original mourning gowns, of stiff, dull, corded silks, made over and refurbished from time to time, and a sweeping crape veil that fell from a peaked cap over her face and to the hem of her skirt in the back. This mourning had begun for her husband, dead only twenty-five years, but it went on for him, and for her daughters and for grandchildren, and cousins, and then brothers and sisters, and, I suspect, for an old friend or so. In this garb, holding up her skirt in front with one black-gloved hand, she would walk with such flying lightness her grandchild would maintain a heated trot to keep pace with her.

She loved to have us say our prayers before bedtime in a cluster around her knees, and in our jealousy to be nearest, and to be first, we often fell fighting like a den of bear cubs, instead of christened children, and she would have to come in among us like an animal trainer, the holy hour having gone quite literally to hell. “Birds in their little nests agree, and ’tis a shameful sight,” she would remark on these occasions, but she never finished the rhyme, and for years I wondered why it was

a shameful sight for little birds to agree, when Grandmother was rather severe with us about our quarreling. It was "vulgar," she said, and for her, that word connoted a peculiarly detestable form of immorality, that is to say, bad manners. Inappropriate conduct was bad manners, bad manners were bad morals, and bad morals led to bad manners, and there you were, ringed with fire, and no way out.

She was an individual being if ever I knew one, and yet she never did or said anything to make herself conspicuous; there are no strange stories to tell, no fantastic gestures. She rode horseback at a gallop until the year of her death, but it seemed only natural. Her sons had to restrain her from an engineering project, which seemed very simple to her and perhaps was really simple: she had wished to deflect the course of a small river which was encroaching on her land in Louisiana; she knew exactly how it should be done, and it would have made all the difference, she felt. She smoked cubeb cigarettes, for her throat, she would say, and add that she had always imagined she would enjoy the taste of tobacco. She and my father would sit down for a noggin of hot toddy together on cold evenings, or just a drop of good Bourbon before dinner because they enjoyed it. She could not endure to see a horse with its head strung up in a checkrein, and used to walk down a line of conveyances drawn up around the church, saying amiably to the dozing Negro drivers, "Good morning, Jerry; good morning, Uncle Squire," reaching up deftly and loosing the checkrein. The horses hung their heads and so did the drivers, and the reins stayed unfastened for that time, at any rate.

In a family full of willful eccentrics and headstrong characters and unpredictable histories, her presence was singularly free from peaks and edges and the kind of color that leaves a trail of family anecdotes. She left the lingering perfume and the airy shimmer of grace about her memory.