



THE EMERALD LITERATOR



When things were as fine as could possibly be, I thought 'twas the spring; but alas! it was she.

—Photograph by Don Jones

The First Edition Proudly Introduces . . .

A New and Able Writer: Harold Ostergren; His Prize-Winning Story: 'Heir Apparent'

OLD AUGUST felt all of his seventy-one years this morning. He felt them in the urgent hammering in his pulse and in every burning muscle and throbbing joint, for he was walking fast.

It was a mile and a half from his two-room bachelor's bungalow on the city's outskirts to his cabinet shop on Third Avenue downtown. On other days this jaunt was an enjoyable prelude to the day's work for Old August; now he was sure that somehow the distance had stretched overnight. It terrified him with its endlessness, this feverish chasing of his long bent-legged shadow down the shoulder of the highway.

He unbuttoned his grey sweater, and it fishtailed behind him in a grotesque, off-beat rhythm with his surging gait. At every stride his lunchbox rattled. His face became an alarmingly ruddy contrast to the drift of snowy hair that topped it, and he breathed noisily through the unfilled pipe that wobbled between his teeth.

"Gud . . . Fader," he prayed in Swedish, "Om Gud vill . . . let me be there first . . ."

As he half-walked, half-trotted, Old August anesthetized himself by letting his mind run free. It left him, jumped backward over intervals of time, and—like a cat—began to search out recent wounds and lick them. Throughout the resulting kaleidoscope of mental pictures there flashed persistently the grinning countenance of one Roscoe Gibbs, cabinet-maker's apprentice.

It was just one month since young Roscoe had entered the cabinet shop on Third Avenue, his youthful shoulders swaggering under the padded breadth of a bright blue sport jacket. His feet, in the clumsiness of adolescence, had snarled in the electric cord for the table-saw motor, and he had sprawled in the shavings. But the boy had gazed with rapture at the array of tools above the workbench, so Old August had hired him and removed the window sign which read: "Wanted: Young Man To Learn Cabinet Trade."

Roscoe confessed total lack of woodworking knowledge, but that satisfied Old August perfectly. When he had specified need for a young man to learn the trade he had meant just that.

"If you want to learn the business you learn all of it," he told the boy. "From sweeping up shavings to paying the building rent every month."

Roscoe had grinned, "Okay. Where's the broom?"

Roscoe was quick to learn. Within a week he had discarded the startling sport jacket for a faded blue shirt, and his knife-edged trousers for paint-daubed jeans. He knew

that the "Yankee" was a geared-up screwdriver, and instead of saying "I need some of those medium-sized nails," he demanded: "Where are the six-pennies?"

Old August was gratified, and he showed his pleasure by grumping: "You're not blind boy. The sixes probably are just where you left them last."

And: "Not so thick! You spread glue like lady frosting a cake."

The old man felt a gap in his life closing, a gap of wintry loneliness that had grown of being unmarried and childless.

After the second week of Roscoe's apprenticeship Old August remarked, with a reddening of his already pink face, that the boy seemed "almost like a grandson."

"Okay with me," Roscoe laughed. "Then I'll call you 'Gramp!'"

"Gramp!"

Roscoe explained hastily: "Well, it's a lot easier to say than 'Mister Lindstrom'."

"Hvilken dumhet! Couldn't you think of something sillier, boy?" Old August scowled, but in his secret elation he missed the nail he was driving and pounded a half-moon dent in the side of a pine bookshelf.

Later in that same day Old August was leaning against the potbellied stove in the center of the shop. The stove, used for heating both the glue and the room in winter, was cold. Old August was stuffing his pipe with tobacco and watching Roscoe sand the sides of a medicine chest that lay on the workbench. Between the chest and the rough surface of the bench was an old towel, yellowed with wood dust, placed there to prevent scratching of the chest as it was sanded.

Old August nodded approval, and ripped a match across the side of the stove. Lighting his pipe with jerky blue puffs, he ambled over to the workbench beside Roscoe.

"Looks all right," he said.

Roscoe looked up, grinned, and went on sanding.

Old August removed his pipe and cleared his throat. "You work much better than you did ven you come here."

Roscoe grinned again.

Old August returned his pipe to his mouth and pulled at it for several moments. Then he lowered it and asked:

"How you like the work by now, boy?"

Roscoe stopped sanding. "Why, it's okay, Gramp. Why?"

"You t'ink you like cabinetmaking?"

"Sure. Yeh, I like it . . . what I know about it." Roscoe looked questioningly at him, but Old August concentrated on his pipe. When he had a blue cloud floating around his head he spoke again.

"I t'ink you could be a cabinetmaker, in time. If you wanted."

* * *

He turned his back and went over to the stock pile to pick out material for a chest of drawers. Maybe . . . he toyed with a thought that had wandered mistily through his head for the past several days . . . maybe Roscoe had found a more permanent job than he realized. Maybe the cabinet shop on Third Avenue need not die with the passing of its old proprietor.

Old August damned himself, in Swedish, for a sentimental fool, and began furiously to clatter among the boards in the stock pile. But the thought warmed him. He had dared bring it into the fore part of his mind, and he fondled it occasionally while walking to or from work. To Roscoe, he said nothing further on the matter.

"There is time," he said to himself. "Let the boy make up his own mind."

The old cabinetmaker's optimism was short-lived. The first disheartenment came when a chest of drawers was returned because two of the drawers didn't fit properly. The cabinet was some of Roscoe's work, and Old August had neglected to examine it before it was sent out. With a patience born of working with knotty wood, Old August showed Roscoe how to fit the drawers and wax the drawer slides.

Another time Roscoe attempted to remove the side of a small cedar chest by inserting the claw of his hammer between the side and the bottom, and prying. Old August's eyes bulged in horror. He dropped his pipe and twelve centuries of civilization, as he bellowed in the voice of a Viking sea captain:

"Stopp!"

The boy froze, and Old August danced to his side.

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