

The Snob Cure

A noted novelist recalls with gratitude how he



Young Sloan Wilson felt a bit smug. His father had followed his recommendation in buying the cigars; they bore a brand name that marked them as fit for a gentleman.

ONE BRIGHT summer morning 24 years ago, a mailman handed me an envelope with the austere letterhead of Harvard University.

With trembling fingers I opened it and read the words: "The Admissions Committee is pleased. . . ." Rushing through the rest of it, I ran eagerly to my father. "I got into Harvard!" I said breathlessly.

"That's good," he said mildly. "I hope they don't make a snob out of you."

This surprised me, because I had not noticed in myself any tendency to become a snob. It would indeed have been difficult for any child of my parents to remain a snob for long. My father, the son of a New England schoolmaster, had painfully worked his way through the University of Virginia by driving a physician's wagon on night calls. He had nothing but scornful memories of many young Southern dandies he had met there. A magazine editor and a professor of journalism, he believed only in the aristocracy of personal accomplishment.

"Let me tell you the derivation of the word 'snob,'" he said on that memorable day when I was admitted to Harvard. "In the old days in England, a man's rank was always put after his name. If he had no rank, the Latin words *sine nobilitate* were written. These were shortened to *snob*, and it means quite clearly, 'without nobility.'"

"Yes, Dad," I said. At that age I sometimes felt my father was almost unbearably academic.

The following September I went to Harvard, and although the phrase "Harvard undergraduate" has a certain style and gayety to it, the fact is I was scared to death. I knew no one in the whole Boston area, and the great brick dormitories seemed more like tombs than a friendly place to live.

I don't know what I expected at