

By SLOAN WILSON

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"A Summer Place," "A Sense of Values,"
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learned it's not the wrapper that counts—but what's inside

Harvard. Perhaps I imagined that there would be faculty committees to make me feel at home or some sort of "big brother" system to enable seniors to help freshmen. I did not realize then that part of the genius of Harvard is to teach young men early that if they don't have enough drive to prove their own worth, no one in the great world is really very interested in proving it for them.

MY "FACULTY ADVISER" proved to be a naval officer attached to the local ROTC unit who himself was new to Cambridge and who had problems of his own. We had a brief embarrassed meeting and my faculty advice was over.

If I expected the older students to go out of their way to relieve my loneliness, I was speedily disenchanted. "Harvard indifference" was not a phrase coined by enemies of the institution, but a quality pursued as a virtue by a large part of the student body. A real expert at "Harvard indifference" could coolly avert his face without a word when greeted by an acquaintance he considered a social or intellectual inferior. Rudeness was considered by many to be sophistication.

A Boston boy who lived across the hall from me in my dormitory was friendly on the first day, but I shall never forget his thin smile when I asked him whether he considered it necessary to own a dinner coat.

When I went down to get my mail in the morning, I discovered that most of the other young men in the dormitory were deluged with heavy cream-colored envelopes containing invitations to coming-out parties given by Boston debutantes. It seemed that only I got nothing but bills, advertisements, and invitations to Y.M.C.A. dances. The problem, I suddenly felt, was not how to avoid becoming a snob, but how to survive in a world where everyone seemed to be an aristocrat except me.

"Without nobility"—that's what I was in one sense, at least, when I started at Harvard, and like many of my peasant forefathers who brokenheartedly left Europe for a new country, I didn't like it. I wanted up.

And like so many people without nobility, I discovered all the wrong methods, all the short cuts. I found the right tailor and got a new wardrobe. I met a few boys of ancient Boston lineage and went out of my way to become their friend. Most assiduously I sought to acquire what I thought to be the habits and knowledge of a gentleman. I studied books about wine and bought English tobacco. Letters home no longer began with "Dear Dad" but acquired the salutation, "My dear father."

By the time I got home for Christmas vacation I was transformed. The careless clothes I had picked up at small-town haberdashery shops had been supplanted by elegant tweeds and flannels. A slight Boston accent had slurred the almost regionless diction I had acquired from my parents. "You've changed," my father said quietly.

"EVEN IN A democracy there's nothing wrong with being a gentleman," I replied, echoing an elegant senior I had once met.

"How do you define a gentleman?" my father asked, harking back to his maddeningly academic ways.

"I think that, first of all, a gentleman must understand good cigars, good wines, and good women," I said, echoing that senior again.

"Tell me about the good cigars first," my father replied with scarcely a smile.

"You can tell a good cigar by the texture, the aroma, and by the fact that the ash doesn't drop off easily," I said.

"What's your favorite brand of cigar?" he asked.

I had him there, because I knew the name of a 50-cent cigar, and I didn't think he thought I could come

up with one. I told him, and he smiled. "That's a good cigar, all right," he said.

That Christmas I received an expensive box of cigars bearing the name of the brand I had told him about. During the remainder of my vacation I smoked one after every meal, and my father seemed unusually curious about my reaction. "Is the aroma the way you want it to be?" he often asked.

"Oh yes," I said, sniffing the cigar.

"Excellent."

"The texture?"

"Great!"

"Does the ash hang on long enough?"

"Of course."

I ENJOYED the cigars, and I was astonished when, shortly before it was time for me to take the train back to college, my father called me into his study and, shoving a box toward me, said, "Here—I want you to have your 50-cent cigars."

"But I smoked them!" I said.

"They were nickel cigars that I rewrapped," he said with a touch of weariness. "I'm glad you enjoyed them. I hope you enjoy the real thing as much."

I took the long unwrapped cigars without a word, but I didn't feel much like lighting one of them. All I could think of was my father sitting alone in his study, rewinding 50 cigars, carefully exchanging bands, all for the sake of giving me a much-needed lesson. "I've made a fool of myself," I said, tears starting to my eyes.

"Better early than late," he said, and he gave me the first hug I had received since returning home. "Anyway," he concluded, "I've just taught you half a lesson. Distrust the wrappings—but don't think that such a thing as real quality doesn't exist. These things really are good cigars," and he lit one of the monsters he had stripped of cellophane. "They really are excellent," he said.



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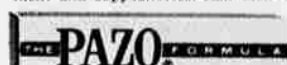
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