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Edith Tries to Smile

BY RALPH KEYES

Now and again my grandmother tried to smile. She seldom succeeded. Her lips would begin to turn upward, hesitate, then collapse in a frown, as though stitches had been taken on each side of her mouth. Grandma had pale, watery eyes that never seemed to focus fully on what she was looking at, such as her grandchildren. When we visited her cramped apartment in Pittsburgh, Dad's mother murmured to herself as she hovered over its kitchen sink. Beside this sink two steps led to the tar-papered roof of a garage. Every morning my tall, stout grandmother lumbered up these steps and out onto that roof. There she'd throw clouds of oatmeal flakes to dozens of pigeons who swarmed about her head like a plague of swollen locusts. They were her only visitors.

Grandma died when I was in college. Dad was not eager to go to Pittsburgh and clear out her apartment. I offered to go with him. During our days together in the dark, musty setting where she'd lived for three decades, my father reminisced obsessively about what it was like to be raised by this woman. He told me about being switched with branches his mother broke off the maple tree outside their home in Jamestown, New York. Sometimes she'd stay at this task until drops of blood formed on his calves. On other occasions she was more creative. When my four-year-old father threw a cow pie at a playmate, Edith woke him up that night, disguised as a policeman come to take him to jail. A few years later, as Dad was about to leave for Boy Scout camp against his mother's wishes, she saw him off at the train station with a tongue-lashing for "deserting" her. My father spent the trip to camp sobbing on a friend's shoulder. Back in Jamestown his mother herself could often be heard through the window of her second-story bedroom weeping piteously. Friends sometimes asked Dad what was wrong with his mother. He had no idea.

Since Edith never held a job, Dad told me he often went to school

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in britches patched creatively with cloth of different colors. These made him feel like a circus clown. In a trunk inside his mother's apartment we found a note he'd written her as a teenager. In this note he apologized for disobeying Edith's orders not to get a paper route, explaining that he had to do something to help pay the family's bills. In another trunk we found a scrap of notebook paper on which my father had scribbled in a child's hand, "I tried to be a good boy. Good-Boy."

As we rummaged through the contents of his mother's trunks Dad told me about working for a butcher during high school. His boss once said that my deliberate father looked like someone whose feet told each other, "Okay, you lift this time, I'll lift next time." Dad thought his hesitant manner resulted from being broken of left-handedness, always having to pause and consider which hand to use. It might also have had something to do with being raised by a resolute woman who saw no reason not to tell her son and daughter which playmates they should befriend, where they should go to college, what they should study, and whom they should marry.

When Dad enrolled at Penn State instead of the University of Pittsburgh, which was closer to her, his mother berated him for this selfish decision. Although he and his sister, Leida, routinely sent her a third of whatever meager salary they were earning, Edith said that wasn't enough. She continually accused her two children of betraying her, of wounding her, of wanting her dead. "I am now a PAUPER, Scott," Edith once wrote him, "thanks to you, but you will not have to trouble about getting RID of me, about PLACING ME IN MAYVIEW OR WOODVILLE [insane asylums in Pittsburgh]. THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY. Sorry this had to happen, dear, at Christmas. Always, Mother."

Needless to say, Edith did not approve of the woman her son chose to marry, and took every opportunity to remind them. Apparently the fact that Charlotte Schachmann was Jewish had something to do with her disapproval. A decade after she married Edith's son, my mother received a forty-page letter from her mother-in-law. This was a response to what Grandma called Mom's "'HAIL MASTER' letter so typical of your race alas!" In that letter Mom had let her mother-in-law know that a toy cash register she'd sent me for Christmas had arrived in pieces. Edith accused my mother of smashing the cash register herself as part of a campaign to destroy her children's affection for their grandmother. Only for the sake of her beautiful grandchildren had she silently endured snubs that "very FEW MOTHER-IN-LAWS would

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have FORGIVEN," wrote Edith. "Most of them would have set about to get you out of the FAMILY and quickly, and most of them would have ACCOMPLISHED it too." Her son once told her that his wife's immaturity was steering their marriage toward the rocks, Edith continued. She herself had felt for a long time that Mom was "wistfully gazing" at greener pastures. Her son-in-law, Leida's husband, found his sister-in-law unattractive, selfish, and crude, Edith said. She thought this might be a matter of her heritage, or lack thereof. CULTURE, Grandma explained, takes generations to transmit. It seemed to have bypassed my mother. Among other things, she spent too much time reading detective novels—not to educate herself as Edith did—but as a means of escape. "It is hard to ESCAPE from YOURSELF isn't it Charlotte?" wrote my grandmother. "I know your tragic background, Charlotte, your racial background, your ancestral background, the background of your forebears and your humble parentage, all of which have played their role in developing your terrible inferiority complex that you have suffered all your wretched life alas!"

What was this woman's problem?

As my father and I excavated the trunks, boxes, and stuffed Manila envelopes in his mother's apartment, answers to this question gradually emerged, like a Polaroid picture slowly coming into focus after being pulled from its camera. Their key could be found in Edith's relationship with her father, Horace.

Deep in a tattered steamer trunk we found a studio shot of a somber young Edith in a dress with a lacy collar. On its back was scribbled:

At 13 I looked like this. Mrs. M tried to get me to smile and so did the pater [her father] *but I felt so lonely. Grandma had just gone, gone away for all time and I seem to be lost. Nobody seemed to care or to know. Nobody seemed to understand poor little one. This dress was blue serge, and the velvet doily blue, almost black. The pater and I went shopping and this was the material we selected for one of my winter dresses. It was bright September and morning. That afternoon Grandma was stricken with paralysis and at night she had left me forever. I shall never forget this little dress. I had to go to the dressmaker alone and design it. I had begun to grow up.*

This photograph was taken in Aberdeen, South Dakota, where Edith Scott grew up. Her parents had separated soon after she was born there in 1886. In due course Horace Scott and Myrtie Lacey Scott divorced. When their daughter was five, Myrtie contracted tuberculosis. Among Grandma's papers we found a copy of her mother's will,

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dated eleven days before she died in early 1892. According to a yellowed obituary that Edith also kept, "Mrs. Scott suffered a great deal at times. As she approached the end she declared to her pastor and others that she was not afraid but felt prepared to go." Myrtie was twenty-nine at the time of her death.

Myrtie's parents took in their granddaughter. Six years later her grandmother died. Thirteen-year-old Edith then moved in with her father, who owned a drugstore in Aberdeen. They ate their meals at the Ward Hotel across the street from Horace Scott's Central Main Street Drug Store. According to a menu Edith saved, the two chose from dishes such as *Prime Roast of South Dakota Bison with Mushrooms, Stuffed Green Goose*, and *Braised Prairie Chicken à la Ward*.

Horace Scott was a tall, dapper man-about-Aberdeen. In sepia-tone photographs he examines the world coolly through pale eyes above a handlebar moustache. One portrays him scrutinizing three portrait shots that he holds like fanned playing cards.

Horace was a hard man. As we perused several pictures of his grandfather that Edith had saved, Dad told me he'd heard that as a boy Horace made a string noose for an aunt of his, saying he intended to "hang the bitch." This was in Danby, Vermont, where my great-grandfather grew up in a large, destitute Quaker family. In letters from Horace that Edith kept, her father portrayed himself as a neglected product of poverty-stricken parents who had too many children (seven). Horace told his daughter that his own mother had been simply "multiplying misery" by having so many progeny. "She created much sorrow for me by bringing me into a wicked world," he said. "I blame my parents for nothing," Horace added, "only bringing into the world a human being and then being compelled to abandon that being to a cruel, heartless people before he was equipped by understanding or money."

Horace fended for himself from his mid-teens on. At nineteen he bought a camera, tripod, and horse and buggy, then left Vermont for parts west. Edith's father looked back on this period as one in which he was "alone on the prairie," surrounded by strangers, in constant danger, eating only once a day to save money. Six years after Custer died at Little Big Horn and eight years before the massacre at Wounded Knee, Horace alighted in Dakota Territory. Outside Aberdeen he worked a homestead, then apprenticed himself to an Aberdeen druggist named Seth Lacey (Myrtie's father) before opening his own drugstore.

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Long before he wrote *The Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum sometimes wrote about Horace Scott in his *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* column. After Horace refurbished his pharmacy in 1890, Baum reported that he "smiles behind his glistening window panes with a satisfied air." In an imaginary portrayal of Aberdeen five years after the Depression of '91, Baum told readers, "Here was Scott's Drug Store offering to sell patent faith cure at ten cents a bottle an' Scott's Lymph cure for sour stomachs at a dollar a can." When South Dakota's legislature made pharmacists obtain a permit to sell medicines containing alcohol, Baum wrote, "I went inter Scott's store for some borax, an' you orter heered him talk! He says he can't sell patent medicines without a license, because they all hez alcohol in 'em. 'I'm goin' ter quit the town,' sez he. So I didn't buy the borox, as I wasn't gon' ter patronize anything but home instertutions, and I goes over to Lacey's [the pharmacy of Horace's ex-father-in-law], an' Doc he says—Them prohibish fellers is pritty hard on our perfeshin, but so long as they lets us sell Soda water with a wink in it I guess we'll pull through."

All that remains of Horace Scott's drugstore are a few mementos his daughter squirreled away in one of her trunks: an advertising handbill, a small wooden vial of "Kidney Backache Pills, Prepared for H. F. Scott," and some letters on letterhead that read *H. F SCOTT / CENTRAL MAIN STREET DRUG STORE / Largest Drug Store in the State*.

While examining these artifacts, Dad said that his grandfather often sat in the back of his drugstore at night writing poetry and reading philosophy. Since this store was burglarized so often, Horace kept a baseball bat handy behind the counter. "I have played a base ball bat solo around the head of the hostile," Horace once wrote Edith, "and they backed off fast enough so that a call for the coroner was not sent in."

Horace Scott's world was filled with crooks, scoundrels, and enemies of many stripes. My great-grandfather was embroiled in constant lawsuits. The worst was a harrowing case that dragged on for years involving a widow whom Horace had evicted from a house he owned who later accused him of selling opium to her late husband. In a letter to his daughter Horace described how the plaintiff's brother approached him outside the courtroom:

He was a bully and tough. I came close to cutting his Swede block off. He is young & strong but I landed him instantly. I grabbed him and jammed him up against the wall and was fully determined to call the undertaker but I got him so quick that his brute instinct told him he was looking at his coffin. I only had my long slender knife which

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was made in Germany before this war and it is a good tool. But I didn't have to kill him and I am not sorry but he is more pleased than I am.

Horace eventually lost this suit (due to bribery and chicanery, he assured his daughter). Other contretemps had better outcomes. "The people that bothered me have met horrible deaths and for this I feel truly grateful," Horace wrote.

Before enrolling at Penn State my father visited his grandfather in Chicago, where he'd become a stock speculator in the mid-1920s. Horace showed his grandson around the polished marble of Chicago's stock exchange, then gave him a guided tour of its downtown, commenting on the value of each building they saw. "He and I get along together rather well," Dad wrote Edith about her father. "He has a dry New England humor, and outside of his pecuniousness and his 'know it allness' and his, well, twisted outlook that everybody is trying to do him and everybody else, he is quite likeable."

Horace made and lost a fortune playing Chicago's stock market. Fifteen years after he left South Dakota, vowing never to return, my strapped great-grandfather took refuge in a rental property he owned in Aberdeen. Horace warned Edith not to tell anyone there the real reason for his return. He then gave a front page interview to the *Aberdeen American* about the joys of coming home to the finest state in the union, the one with the best climate, the warmest people, etc., etc. To cap this interview the newspaper published Horace Scott's poem on "South Dakota." It included these lines:

The landscape of green
And the sunny blue sky
Are a gorgeous sight,
That will brighten the eye.
There is billions in wealth
'Neath our sunny blue dome,
Gentle women and men,
Come and build you a home.

"South Dakota is a great place to raise hell and Swedes," he'd once written Edith. "But I did not go there for that purpose. My plan was to develop the Great Scott." When his fortunes improved Horace moved to Pasadena. He died there in 1944. His funeral was held at the Orange Grove Friends Meeting house.

Even though we never met, I've gotten to know my great-grandfather

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well by reading the hundreds of letters from him that Edith saved for four decades, including ones headed "BURN THIS." Throughout, he presents himself as the compleat individualist, asking nothing of others and wishing they'd ask nothing of him. Edith's father called those who couldn't help themselves "human shaped things." When Dad was in grade school, Horace told him about a large family whose members shared one bed. "They ought to be chloroformed," he advised his grandson. In the depths of the Depression, Horace wrote Edith, "Miserable dogs here, the young and strong in muscular strength, 'Can you give me a nickel for a cup of coffee?' I would give them rat poison."

What comes though most clearly in Horace's letters is loneliness and despair. Not that he'd agree. With one breath Horace complains that he has no friends; with another he says he needs none. "If I was alone in the world I would feel better," her father wrote Edith.

I've known many men like Horace Scott: hurt, suspicious men, quick to anger, trusting no one but themselves. Like so many of them, Horace put his faith in money. My great-grandfather considered a dollar bill man's "best and surest friend." Dad told me more than once that his miserly grandfather complained if he had to spend so much as a nickel. Horace's letters were sometimes written on the back of canceled checks, or on the reverse side of envelopes that he'd cut open and laid flat. In one he observed sardonically that if his grandson kept squandering money on cigarettes he wasn't likely to earn much money. "He can suck his away," Horace wrote Edith, "in tobacco stuck in his face."

Combining his views on food and money, Horace sometimes made a meal of two shredded wheat biscuits. He also shunned meat. This reflected his unorthodox views on how to stay healthy. Horace massaged himself daily with ammonia and hot water. He loathed doctors, lawyers, and preachers. When in need of dental treatment, Horace instructed the dentist on how to treat his teeth.

My great-grandfather wasn't just a dyspeptic miser and curmudgeon, however. He also was a devout atheist whose views on war were those of a near-pacifist. After World War I ended, Horace reprimanded Edith for letting her nine-year-old son be photographed in a soldier suit.

"I do not like uniforms on children," he wrote his daughter. "War is too horrible to think about." During the war itself Horace had said, "How glad I am that your boy does not have to stand in the cold mud and be shot to death at the first opportunity by the enemies of man-

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kind. At the time he reaches a soldier's size there will be no need of armed conflict. Wars will have banished and order will be maintained throughout earth. Then, with a reasonable population, it will not be so bad to live here."

Horace shared further thoughts on this subject with Edith:

I simply feel crushed to think the young men of this earth have to be bullied into killing each other.

* * *

I have dreaded the thought of going out on a battlefield to shoot some poor human being or being shot to pieces myself. How I pitied those suffering soldiers covered with frozen mud and lice till overcome by more than the human body could bear. Then relief by death.

* * *

All over Europe, little ones . . . are scattered and dead. To me a mother is a mother. All little ones are the same, and the crime is as hateful to one mother as another.

For the sake of style alone, I've always found my great-grandfather's letters engaging. Horace expressed his views with vigor, conviction, and bite. He had strong opinions and plenty of them. Lawyers are crooks. Christmas is for suckers. Religion is for saps. Women are fools. Children are brats. Paupers should be euthanized. Doctors will kill you. Work is the best medicine. Money is the only thing you can rely on.

Horace's letters to his daughter and her son included regular nuggets of wisdom that would help them navigate their lives:

Be kind, but be careful. Do not trust people.

We are in a dangerous world where right and truth are only a poor fourth in the race for wealth and money.

Destruction is pressing and approaches masked in many forms—principally friendship.

The fury of a hungry human being is to be feared above all that is terrible.

The poor that you pity would kick you for your favors. They are no good.

Meat eaters are in many cases vicious.

You will be all right if you keep away from Docs. They will skin you and scare you.

Do not speak ill of the dollar. It is the real reliable.

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The good of this world—and the bad of this world—will not come from a God but from man.

I am my own supreme being.

Horace Scott was not an easy man to live with. When my teenaged grandmother could no longer take it she began shuttling between distant relatives, family friends, and—finally—a boarding school where she feuded by mail with a father who considered his daughter an addled embarrassment. "You have caused me nothing but trouble since you were born," he once wrote her.

I may remember my grandmother as prim and dour but apparently this wasn't always true. Decades after the fact Edith recorded some memories of her life in Aberdeen during the "gay nineties." She recalled two "sporting houses" outside the city that serviced men of different means. Grandma also remembered the occasion during a high school pageant when she "turned myself to [fan dancer] Sally Rand," lifted her skirts, and removed a safety pin to fix the trousers of a fellow performer who'd popped his suspender buttons.

In her early teens Edith took up with an Aberdeen plumber. This offended her status-conscious father, who shipped his daughter off to the All Saints School in Sioux Falls. A few weeks after she arrived at All Saints, Horace wrote her:

You ask me the question, that if you were a poor little girl, would I love you just the same? In reply I will say that, all that you have, all that you are, and all that you hope to be, in this world or the world to come, you owe to me individually. And I stand ready to love, guard and protect my little daughter, when she becomes a loving obedient child (not by words, but by acts), to me.

Edith considered All Saints a jail. After spending a couple of years there she fled South Dakota—"pitch poled out" as her father put it—to live with Horace's brother George and his family in Gowanda, New York. At Gowanda High School my grandmother touted herself as the privileged daughter of a wealthy merchant in Aberdeen. That and the romance of her frontier childhood intrigued Gowanda boys. A football player named Sherman Keyes won her hand. Soon after they graduated in 1904, Sherman and Edith engaged to marry.

"Edith has her peculiar manner of doing things of importance," Horace wrote Sherman shortly before their wedding, "and her way is

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in many cases, most decidedly wrong." Since he approved neither of his daughter's way of life nor her marriage plans, Horace said it would be hypocritical of him to attend Edith and Sherman's wedding. (He later relented.) Horace thought no one under thirty should be allowed to marry anyway, especially not his addleheaded daughter. On the eve of the ceremony he wrote her:

> *Your name will soon cease to be "Scott," yet I shall regard you, who for twenty years has borne that name not as becomes a young lady at all times—and not to your credit—or my glory—as a misguided and misdirected irresponsible child, and will watch with interest your young womanhood.*

For the next four decades Horace and Edith conducted a turbulent correspondence. Their attempts at communication read a like a verbal sword fight. He thrusts with a put-down. She parries with babble. He counter-attacks with biting recrimination. She defends herself with longwinded self-pity. Horace demands "just the facts, no B.S." Edith sends him fifty-page tomes. "You could have written on two pages all that I cared to read," her father responds, adding that she should stop sending him newspaper clippings. Edith's letters continue to be fat with clipped articles. Horace insists that she should spend no more than two cents for surface mail postage. His daughter affixes double air-mail stamps on her letters. "You must be nuts," he concludes. She responds by writing more long letters filled with capitalized words underlined in blue and red. He tells her they read like the ravings of a "dope fiend."

When Edith was a young mother a doctor told her that she was out of her mind and ought to be committed. When Edith told Horace about this, he chastised his daughter for wasting money on doctors. After Edith and Sherman separated when my father was eight, Horace missed few opportunities to berate his daughter in letters accompanying the monthly checks he sent her. Although he complained bitterly about having to do so, Edith's father was dutiful about sending his daughter an allowance—even when he felt she was squandering every penny. Horace called this the "manly" thing to do.

Reading Edith's exchanges with Horace and reviewing the contents of her trunks gave me a new perspective on my grandmother. With a troubled life like hers she was understandably morose. Edith's melan-

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choly made her a lifelong pilgrim. She moved often, between cities and within them. In middle age my grandmother returned briefly to Aberdeen, but felt uncomfortable in a city much different from the cozy hamlet where she'd grown up. Her final years were spent in a series of Pittsburgh apartments where she spent her days writing long letters of recrimination to sundry correspondents.

Edith wasn't content to be despondent on her own. Others had to join her. Grandma's means of accomplishing this goal was torture by blame. First she would tighten the screws of guilt until her victims started to moan. When they began to plead for mercy, Edith would reach over as if to loosen the screws, then tighten them some more. Even her grandchildren weren't exempt from this treatment. In a letter to me when I was a teenager, Grandma complained that she'd sent my older brother a diary for Christmas and hadn't received a word of thanks. "I don't understand, she wrote, "as he loved me so dearly when he was a little lad. But after he graduated from high school he stopped writing me. Why I don't know. I only know that my HEART ACHES. I hope you too do not stop."

I still don't know whether to hold my grandmother accountable for being malicious and bigoted, or to forgive these transgressions as an understandable reaction to her trauma-filled life.

This wasn't Grandma's take, of course. In Edith's own mind some bad breaks had left her bereft, but she was working to turn things around. This did not call for actually working, of course. Although she was destitute for most of her adult life, Edith believed that the daughter of a man who once owned the largest pharmacy in South Dakota should not have to become someone's employee. When her son suggested that she get a job during World War II—an act that could be considered patriotic—Edith demanded that he stop hurting her feelings. Anyway, she already had work to do. Edith was busy writing. Her output consisted of florid verse, melodramatic stories, inspirational essays, and plays that featured unsavory characters with names such as "Jacob Goldleaf" and "Max Asher" who said things like "It won't take LONG TO VOO THE GENTILE." Manuscripts that Edith submitted to magazines for publication "at your usual rates" filled her trunks. Aside from two brief essays that were published by a small religious magazine, none of my grandmother's decades' worth of submissions ever appeared in print. The rest fill cartons in my basement, not far from file cabinets stuffed with manuscripts that her grandson submitted for publication, hoping for the usual rate.

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