

DRY TEXAS

BY ALBERT LINDSAY O'NEALE, JR.

SATURDAY, August 18, 1928, was hot in Dallas, Texas. The song of the locust sounded like an airplane passing over. All the water-elms, unless they were mighty healthy, had begun to shed their leaves. In every neighborhood fretful, whiny children were dotted with red chigger and mosquito bites. Women who had to stand over cook-stoves or ironing-boards sweated cruelly. The same was true of men chopping weeds on vacant lots, or shingling roofs.

About noon, the hottest time, I caught an Oak Lawn street car and rode downtown. Everybody on the car was wet between the shoulders; when a woman stood up to get off she reached her hand behind her and pulled at her clothes. The boy sitting next to me had his sleeves rolled up, but his vaccination mark hadn't tanned and it looked like the thumb-print of a murderer.

I got off at Elm street, sometimes humorously called Ellum, the gaudiest and profanest street, I do believe, in the whole Southwest. Drove of people were pushing and weaving up and down the blistering sidewalk. Sunburned arms dangled everywhere; lips, swollen and bloody with lipstick, seemed to protrude several inches before the women who owned them. Two girls without stockings scooted along, their legs shaved, their breasts loose, their hips energetically bringing up the rear. In the doorway of a music store, where a loud needle was playing hot mamma music, several young men lounged and leaned. Street cars clanged, traffic bells shrilled, automobiles honked. The Southwest likes noise. Our sun may make us look like

leather, but it can't chase us into dark holes.

I decided I would go to a certain furniture store where I do much of my hanging out. On my way I passed a movie theatre, and the iced air swam out to the sidewalk and enveloped me. The temptation to buy a ticket and go inside was hard to resist. These movie magnates are wise. What could be a cleverer lure than refrigerated air on a hot day? The weather burned me as with fever, but here was the offer of relief. An enticing feel of it emerged to the pavement. In the gilded ticket-box sat a pretty round-faced brunette. It would be pleasant to buy a slip of pasteboard from her. With every ticket she gave a smile; it was a part of her job. Since everything seemed to urge my going inside, I began to look at the posters, which told what the show was about. The first thing promised the prospective art-lover was a man and woman grappling on a divan in a sumptuous living-room. I passed on. It was simply too hot for amour, even in a cooled theatre.

I reached the furniture store where I do my loafing. In an easy chair made in a furniture mill up in Arkansas, I sat down. A ceiling fan was revolving directly above me. My friends Walter and John, who are salesmen in the store, were sitting there, and we talked some, though not much. I took off my stiff straw, and wiped my brow. Two months ago, when I had bought the straw, it was white, but now it looked like an old bird's nest. Even in the soft chair under the fan you had to keep pressing your handkerchief against the back of your hands.

It was a big store, long and wide. Over-

stuffed furniture covered almost an acre. Gay-shaded lamps were as thick as saplings in a grove, and all around them was an underbrush of smoking stands, sewing cabinets, and fancy stools. The place sold radios, and the demonstrator was tuned in on "The Stars and Stripes Forever." In one of the big windows porch swings with gay canvas tops were displayed. Mirrors and tapestries hung on the walls. The elevator was going up and down. Walter got a dining-room customer. John was called back to the telephone in the book-keeping office. I was left alone under the fan.

II

Gus came up.

"Feel like one?" he asked.

"I don't care," I said.

We poked out into the glare and heat. The rasping street sounds struck us an almost physical blow. Tar bubbles blistered the paving, and the imprint of heels and the tread of automobile tires were stamped there. The car rails dazzled like silver. Gus and I walked up deep Elm, past the pawn shops, the old clothes stores, and the small second-hand furniture places. No shade was on the sidewalk.

Gus's Ford was jammed against the curb, and a car touched the front bumper and another the rear.

"You're in tight," I said.

"Hell! I can turn this baby on a postage stamp."

We climbed in and started the engine. It was a 1920 model. Gus wrestled at the wheel; he turned, twisted, and grunted. He got red in the face and cussed. Two fat Jewish women stood in the doorway of a store and watched us. They said things to each other and grinned, but the wreck we were sitting in made such a terrible racket that we could not hear what they said.

When we finally got free, we continued up deep Elm a few blocks and turned to the left. We cut around other corners, and came out on a rough back street. Avoiding the bumps and holes was impossible, and the

gray thick dust looked not unlike the hide of an old elephant. As the wheels of the flivver bit into it, they raised a cloud.

We went behind red-brick windowless warehouses, and jolted over some railroad tracks. Passing a line of Negro cabins, we arrived at more tracks, where a row of tank-cars stood. They were directly in the sun, and God, they looked hot!

Right there, before a scrap of paling fence, we pulled up. Lizzie's radiator was smoking and churning. Except for that, everything seemed mighty quiet, even isolated. The quietest spot in the world, I suppose, is a dull, silent railroad track on a hot day. One of the tank-cars, I noticed, was dripping oil on the red cinders. The skim was iridescent in the blazing sunshine.

Another auto was already here; we parked just behind it. Beyond the fence, partly buried in parched Johnson grass, crouched a small unpainted cottage. It was about the color of a horned frog. At one corner of the sloping porch a peach tree was dying. The porch was about the size of your hand, and a couple of warped two-by-fours held up its roof, whose shingles were buckled and kinked. The front door and window of the cottage were heavily curtained.

"Well, pile out," said Gus. "Have you got paralysis?"

The picket gate was hanging open on one hinge, and we went up the path to the two spongy steps. Three stray buff hens and a blue rooster, from the line of Negro cabins not far off, got out of our way, but we had to be careful where we put our feet down. On the porch our steps were heard; we didn't have to knock. The front door curtain was pushed aside, and there were Harry's bright black eyes and thin nose peering at us. Seeing we were friendly Indians, he did some unlocking, and we edged in.

"Hello, boys," Harry whispered. He was tiptoeing, and we did likewise.

The hall was narrow and dim, and fairly cool. Harry locked up after us. Everything

was as bare as the sole of a new shoe. We went to the back room, where there was a big round dining-room table, with chairs. To enter this room, we had to push by a dirty orange drapery that looked like a former bedspread. Three men in shirt sleeves were leaning their elbows on the table, in the center of which was a one pound coffee can sending up thin spirals of smoke. It was a receptacle for cigarette butts.

"Sit down, boys," said Harry, still whispering and tiptoeing. He indicated vacant chairs.

"My name is Liefert," said one of the men sitting at the table. Gus and I acknowledged the news, and told our names, giving false ones. The other pair kept quiet.

At a small stained sink in a corner of the room Harry rinsed two beer glasses and slid them across the table to us. Then he lifted the lid of a small ice-box and rattled out a pair of brown bottles. An odd thing about that ice-box was that it was small and frequent withdrawals were made from it, but it never got empty. Opening the bottles made a pleasant sound in the stealthy room.

"Like a lot of foam?" Harry asked. I answered yes, so he poured the beer a long way; Gus answered no, so he held the neck of the bottle down in the glass. The other fellows were already fixed up; in fact, Liefert was well past his meridian. A large swarthy man, too much made him look sullen and bloated. His eyes were tired. Still, he was a pleasant sort, with a desire to be sociable.

"Harry's beer is no good today," he told us sadly. But his condition indicated it had taken him a long time to find it out. "What he had here last week was sure fine beer, wasn't it, Harry?"

"Finest I believe I ever made," Harry said. "This batch I got running now is going to be good, too. I tested it this morning. Six per cent already. It'll be about twenty-two per cent when it's done. It'll be fine beer."

"That last week was sure fine all right,"

Liefert said. "I don't guess I'll ever forget the flavor of that beer. Did you boys get in on any of that?"

Gus and I said we hadn't. Personally, I never do. The fine beer has always just been drunk by the time I get to a place, and the next fine batch will not be ready until next week.

III

Nevertheless, there at the round table, Gus and I drank our beer. Salt was in a baking powder can, with holes punched by a nail in the top. Gus used lots of salt. No crackers, no pretzels, no cheese, no little pickled onions the size of marbles, no goose liver sausage, no dill pickles, no corned beef, no conviviality. Just the beer. Like so many mouse-traps, we sat in the dim, fairly cool room behind the dirty orange bedspread, and drank our beer and flipped cigarette snipes into the coffee can. All the doors were locked, all the windows curtained. Everybody rapped for another round, and paid spot cash, bottle for bottle, as he went. Twenty-five cents a bottle, twenty-two cents of it pure net profit to Harry.

One of the other men at the table was tall, dark, and cadaverous. His big hands and thick wrists were covered with black hog bristles. He had a bad slouch and a long mean neck, which some two-bit barber in the wagon-yard district down by the courthouse had shaved square. He looked as if he ought to have been out in the hills or on the plains holding up the Texas & Pacific near some lonely water tank.

His companion was a small, red, wrinkled runt, somewhere between twenty-eight and a hundred and twenty-eight years old. When he spoke or smiled he looked down. But somehow you felt he was a beer drinker, with a capacity of twenty bottles of Harry's beer at a sitting—something like that, and still able to navigate. He reminded me of a tomato I saw once. It was hanging late in the season on a withered vine on an abandoned farm in East Texas.

This small, reddish, wrinkled, beer-drinking runt made me think of that tomato.

Two more customers eased in. They come in pairs; at least, one seldom comes alone. The new arrivals were upper-crust, undoubtedly. Their clothes, manner and sunburn were decidedly country club. When they requested a private room in which to drink their beer, I even suspected them of being Episcopalians and Republicans.

Harry was the busy one. A small, slight man, he was as quick and agile as a mocking-bird. He flitted around the room like a feather in a breeze. At the sink he rinsed glasses under the cold-water faucet. He clinked the ice in the ice-box, and drew out the cold frosty bottles, brown and slick. He used his opener. With a wet rag he wiped up the rings on the table-top. He washed the empties. He emptied the coffee can of its cigarette refuse, and hurried forward to wait on the impatient and arrogant customers in the private room. At all times he was taking in money and making change.

Harry was adept, good-natured, accommodating, and perfectly candid about his business and the profits he was making. Some months, he admitted, he made a thousand dollars net. Think of that! And all out of beer in a bone-dry State! A vice-president of the American Exchange National Bank hardly makes more, and the American Ex is the largest bank in Dallas. Think of a weasel in a leaky cabin on the edge of nigger town having an earning capacity almost equal to that of a great official of a great bank!

Of course, Harry worked hard, far harder than any torpid banker. Eighteen, nineteen strenuous hours a day he worked. He had to brew his beer and then cap it with a caper that bruised the palm of his hand. Then he had to sell it, wait on the trade. He was manufacturer and merchant both. It kept him so busy that he had little time in which to spend his profits; a lump of savings, six thousand dollars, it was said, made a bunion in his shoe. But in spite of hard work and little leisure, he was happy.

He disappeared into an adjoining room, and immediately a rumpus arose there.

"You ain't going to make me pay, are you?" a voice asked.

"Pay me, boy. Don't fool with me," we heard Harry say.

"You said I could drink free for that chore I done for you."

"I told you you could have one bot. You've had five. Pay me a dollar."

Harry and a big buck Negro man came into view through the open door.

"You mean to make me pay full price?"

"That's what. I said one bot and you drank five. Don't fool with me, boy."

The Negro paid and left by the back door.

After he had gone, Liefert called him a string of dirty names, and said he wished he would come back so he could have the pleasure of throwing him out. Liefert then folded his arms on the table and rested his head on them.

"Niggers are moochers," the red-headed runt declared.

"Yes, they're all alike. They're moochers."

"Mooching's in their blood. Get something for nothing. That's niggers."

There was a sound at the window.

"What're you calling me?" It was the big buck; we could see his outline through the heavy curtain.

"Go on, boy," Harry half pleaded, half ordered. "Don't start anything around here."

"Don't be calling me any names," the Negro warned.

I touched Liefert on the shoulder. "He's back," I whispered in his ear. "The nigger is back, if you want to throw him on his royal."

Liefert opened his eyes sleepily. "Go to hell!" he said.

Everything was quiet for a moment, then the dark shadow at the window disappeared. We could hear him crunching cinders as he walked off.

"He'll make trouble," somebody said. "He's liable to turn you in, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "He's a good coon. He just got a little sore. I've been knowing him a long time."

"Shall we drink again, Gus?"

"One more."

"Fill 'em up, Harry!" We flourished our glasses and struck them merrily on the table, in an effort to raise a little joyousness and feeling of brotherly love. But the effort failed.

IV

When we left, Harry, like a good host, saw us to the door.

"Good-bye, boys. Come back again. That batch next week will be fine."

Outside, we squinted, and heard Harry locking up again. We crawled into the flivver; the seat was like a skillet over a hot fire.

We simply sat there, making no move to start. Gus was thoughtful. He contemplated the oil cars with a sad steady gaze. White heat flames danced on their round metal bodies.

"That's no way for a fellow to have to drink his beer, is it?" he asked at last.

"No," I said.

He started the engine angrily. With a savage twist of the wheel, he turned the Ford in the deep gray dust of the side street, and we headed back toward town.

GRANDE DAME

BY JOHN ARMSTRONG

PHOEBE DOLBY's flaccid, wrinkled countenance was punctuated by intelligent, very sad eyes. Her head was large, impressive. She had lost most of her hair after the death of Mr. Dolby, and now wore a wig. She was inclined to obesity; her generously scaled body was kind of spongy, bulbous, as if she constantly wore bustles. Her hands were wrinkled with age, but they did not tremble. The old lady's breasts seemed to flow without interruption into her abdomen.

Phoebe Dolby was thoroughly British, despite her thirty-odd years of residence in America. She refused to become a citizen because she had penetrated the illusion of Americanization. She firmly resisted the American manner: she detested speed, efficiency, bemoaned the lack of leisure and grace, and otherwise held that America was a barbarous country. The solid, dogmatic essence of Great Britain would always reside in her weary bones.

Something of the faded queen seemed to flourish in the gentle old lady. She was gracious and charming with an ancient, majestic dignity. She brought to mind the plush, exceedingly respectable grandeur of Queen Victoria, whose subject she had been and whose memory she now revered. A small plaster statue of the Queen rested on her dilapidated glass book-case. In Phoebe's estimation, Victoria was the greatest woman who ever lived.

In spite of the seedy surroundings in which she lived, she seemed immersed in an aura of magnificence. There was a deliberately noble *motif* in her every attitude. She uttered her precise English in a rich, grand voice; her gestures were elaborate,

regal. The roomers in her antiquated apartment were always referred to as lodgers. If you spoke to her of a roomer, she became indignant. She thoroughly detested the designation of landlady. She merely offered hospitality to a few desirable people, who appreciated the advantages of a home.

Her habitually florid manner struck one as hopelessly incongruous when the disorderly Dolby kitchen was observed. The *grande dame* had absolutely no domestic sense. She was accustomed to servants, she always said, and her chaotic kitchen was perhaps indicative of the truth of this assertion.

Her respectability was severely pronounced. Even at the age of sixty-three she seemed constantly afraid that some one would compromise it. Her moral convictions were positive, admitting of absolutely no qualifications. While she was outwardly gracious and gentle, once her rigid sense of the proprieties had been disturbed, she became a ramrod of scorn and denunciation.

Once one of her roomers, a young woman, came into the apartment intoxicated. Phoebe was profoundly shocked. The girl was ordered to leave the place instantly, and thereafter the old lady took in women mature enough to know that it wasn't respectable to be seen in public intoxicated.

Nevertheless, Phoebe Dolby thoroughly detested the Prohibition Amendment. She believed that liquor should be taken moderately, or not at all. She was infinitely happy when some friend of hers came to New York from the British colonial possession she so often mentioned, bringing her a bottle of authentic rum. She demanded the real stuff, or nothing.