

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, dogmaticness 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.

She brewed an almost endless variety of wines and beers. She had stored away hundreds of bottles of these home-made goods. She seldom drank any of her own concoctions; they were made principally for distribution to her friends. Each bottle was named after some British notable.

His Majesty King George was represented by a heavy wine; H. R. H. the Prince of Wales had a lighter one made in his honor. There were, too, a General Allenby wine, made of dandelions; a General Haig wine, of beets and sugar; and a Curzon wine, of apricots and raisins.

The bottles were dated, sealed with wax and placed in what Mrs. Dolby called the "brewery"—a storeroom containing a vicious parrot, an ancient piano, and an enormous number of old newspapers and magazines. The shelves of a cabinet seven feet high were laden with bottles of wine and beer. Her beer was good. She gave much of it to the janitor, and always had a bottle on ice when some one called. She was often asked why she did not try to sell it. Why didn't she become a bootlegger? The suggestion annoyed her British sense of respectability.

"In the first place, I might get arrested; and in the second place, I make wine and beer for purely sentimental reasons. I like to cheer people up. I like to see them happy. People tell me that my beer is much better than Bass' Ale."

The beer exploded into generous fountains of foam when the bottles were opened. It was heady and stupefying stuff; the wines were likewise invigorating, vital. The old lady took an enormous lot of care in making them. She selected the best beets and fruit on the market; her hops were obtained at a special place in the lower section of Manhattan; and she spent hours in cooking and bottling the ingredients. She distilled no whiskey, because it could be got at the corner drug-store. Moreover, she considered whiskey a trifle too crude to drink, too inflaming.

All of Phoebe Dolby's friends received bottles of home-made wine at Christmas.

These were tied with gay ribbons and wrapped in tissue paper. She could not afford to spend money on conventional Christmas presents. Anyway, she thought that the bestowal of home-made wines was a more intimate form of recognizing the holiday.

"At home, we were always accustomed to table wines," she would say, with an airy wave of her hand, the fingers of which often sparkled with imitation diamonds. "We were never without them. Prohibition is a curse," she added, vigorously. "The law should be repealed at once. I don't see why intelligent people stand for it."

She would talk for hours about the evils of Prohibition, but if one of her roomers got drunk and showed himself in public she blazed in haughty indignation.

Wine, she maintained, added to the grace of life; it had a civilizing influence when used in moderation. She spoke constantly about the graces of life; she cautioned her male roomers on the necessity of politeness. She embroidered existence, and evaded its harsh realities by creeping into her imagination. She was a romantic lost in the hurry of a brash and blatant world.

II

Phoebe Dolby gave music lessons to stubborn children and bemoaned the idiocy of modern parents. The classics, she thought, were in a lamentable decline. Jazz was vulgar—too insufferably low to be considered at all.

The three pianos in the Dolby apartment were hoary with age. They had been purchased twenty years before and were, in Phoebe's estimation, as good as ever. She had draped them in the overflowing sentiment of her nature.

The chairs and sofas in the apartment were likewise antiquated, but she wouldn't think of throwing them away. She detested the new, the novel; people and things had to be old, enveloped in a tradition, before they were trustworthy.

Her sister, Edith, who was ridden with

rheumatism and older than herself, took care of the apartment. Phoebe was concededly unable to make a bed. Some people, Edith pointed out, are born that way; they are deficient in practical sense. Phoebe dispensed her music lessons and enacted the florid rôle of the *grande dame* who lived in her spectacular memories. Edith willingly assumed the domestic obligations.

Phoebe often spoke of the vast estate she had once owned in the British colonial possession.

"When Mr. Dolby was alive, I never had to bother about money. 'Here,' he would say to me, 'take this'; and then he'd throw a bag full of money in my lap. Oh, we lived then! I never had to worry about the rent, the iceman, or the gas bill."

Then she would ramble off into a long tale about her big house, her servants, her pets, and the notable people she used to meet. The recitation was punctuated with tragic sighs, and augmented by aloof comments from Edith, who remained in the back-ground, allowing her more expansive sister to dominate the conversation.

The two were perfectly mated. Phoebe's deficiencies of character were rectified by Edith's virtues. Phoebe was soft and yielding, and she sometimes reminded you of a mass of putty. Edith, although outwardly gracious and gentle, was hard and factual. She was the stern realist, while Phoebe was a futile romantic.

Many years before, Phoebe had cared for a man totally blind. Mr. Elos was essentially an aristocrat, she maintained, and his blindness was a great tragedy. He played the organ beautifully and had composed numerous pieces for the piano, some of which were published. His care had been Phoebe's dominant concern for a long while.

She was the kind who attached herself to a person or thing and refused to let go. The blind man, originally a roomer, evoked her voluminous sense of pity. It was necessary for her to have some one around upon whom she could bestow her generous impulses.

"Mr. Elos was a great man," she often

said. "He would never admit his blindness. He had a fine mind, too. That's what I always look for in a man . . . his mind. He saw with his mind. He was very sensitive."

Mr. Elos lived in the Dolby apartment for years, faithfully cared for by Phoebe. She was convinced of his musical genius; whoever became associated with her was naturally a superior person.

She worried about her blind roomer when he was abroad in the streets of New York. She became utterly absorbed in him, and a great romantic attachment existed between them. When he finally died and was buried from her apartment, Phoebe's grief demoralized her. For weeks, she was unable to eat in a normal way, or sleep for more than an hour at night. She consulted spiritualists as to his presence in the world beyond. She knew, she said, that he was still alive.

Shortly afterward, in order to submerge her grief, she became occupied with the care of birds. The old apartment was cluttered with canaries, parrots, wrens and other fowl. Each of them became a highly personalized individual to her, with a name, eccentricities of character, and definite wants and habits. They were treated as human beings. They flew about the rooms all day, but at night were carefully replaced in their cages. The two old ladies loved and revered them.

But when one of them died, thus destroying the unity of the family, the rest were released or given to friends. The sole remnant of the aviary, a bitter, depraved parrot, was Edith's particular pet, and she positively refused to let it go.

III

While Phoebe could never forget Mr. Elos, she was also much interested in her subsequent men roomers. Her romanticism was not blunted with age; rather, it seemed to become more active. She would array herself in a gay dress, place a string of false pearls about her neck, and invite a favorite roomer into her seedy parlor and give him wine and cakes.

Edith cautioned her sister about these romantic tendencies, but Phoebe was not deterred. Her curiosity about men was inexhaustible, and, she much preferred them as roomers to women. If a male lodger was at all intelligent, or made the slightest appeal otherwise to her emotions, she became absorbed forthwith in his destiny. She was profoundly stirred by his ambitions, and set herself the task of assisting in their accomplishment.

"I have you on my mind; I am worrying about you," she would say to a roomer in difficulties. "I pray for you every single night."

Phoebe was not religious in any conventional sense, although she was a member of the Church of England. She was bitterly against all Catholics; and would rave for hours on the subject. She never took Catholics as roomers, and while one of her best friends was vaguely of that faith, she often said that she would rather see a child of hers dead than a Catholic.

"No dogma for me! My religion is based on common sense. If I see a man who needs a crust of bread, I give it to him. I don't need a priest to send me to Heaven. Nothing has ever dwarfed my intelligence and nothing ever will."

She never went to church, but she would listen for hours to sermons over the radio. She was completely unafraid of death, she said; she didn't believe that God was a vicious fellow Who punished little boys for their sins.

Phoebe doubted the authenticity of Hell, but she never turned a beggar away from her door. If she was unable to assist him, she apologized.

"You'll have to excuse me, please," she would say, gently. "I can't help you today."

She seemed downright superstitious in the matter. She likewise contributed small sums to public charities when she could. She had a small income derived from some property in her British colonial possession; it had dwindled and she had lost money in various petty speculations. Although she

was unaware of it, her name was on a sucker list. A great deal of mail, soliciting funds for various projects, came to her.

The only door to her apartment was always locked. It was never opened until whoever rang the bell was properly identified. Phoebe carried a police whistle in a large pocket-book. If she were attacked on the street or fell, she planned to blow the whistle. But it was principally for use in the apartment, for both sisters were afraid of burglars.

Old books, ancient bits of statuary, a porcelain clock of distinguished lineage, and decrepit furniture cluttered the place. An enormous amount of rubbish accumulated, but it was never removed. Pieces of brass and silver a hundred years old were hidden in an ancient trunk. Heirlooms handed down from generation to generation resided in a rusty metal box.

If a piece of furniture had been placed in a certain way years before, it remained so indefinitely, and no one dared displace it. It was Edith who was most sensitive in this matter. She maintained the Dolby traditions with a fanatical severity. Phoebe wasn't always so particular.

Phoebe was the living member of the pair. Her joviality, her wines and beer, her love of good food and companionship, brightened the hoary old place. She always sought, she said, the bright side. And she had a strange and hearty appreciation for risqué stories.

"Not too naughty, of course. Now, Mrs. Garry can tell a story of that kind, and not offend you. I can't stand vulgarity."

Mrs. Garry was a silver-haired woman who did extra work in the motion picture studios on Long Island. Phoebe, hardly aware of the modern world at her door, listened while her gallivanting, sixty-eight-year-old friend told her naughty stories and drank Prince of Wales wine.

Phoebe, however, would never let her sister know that she listened to Mrs. Garry's stories.

"Edith would be shocked. She never lets me do anything."

IV

Phoebe was familiar with all the recognized masterpieces of music. Her rôle, she pointed out, was that of the appreciator; others created art, while she responded to it. She seemed to consider it her duty to respond to the classics. During half a century she had heard every opera singer of any importance. She spoke of eating lobsters at Delmonico's after the opera. She used to sing, she said, and had ambitions to go on the stage. But family tradition prevented.

She had been taught to reverence the family as the central unit of civilization. She submerged herself to maintain the integrity of the Dolbys, though she and Edith were the sole surviving members of the clan. She couldn't understand the disorganized family life of the present day. She abominated flappers, rouge, short skirts, and the general indecency of the age. The lack of discipline in the young was tragic to her.

But modern life only incidentally intruded on her. She clung tenaciously to her memories. Her ideas had been generated in the middle nineteenth Century, and she applied a Victorian point of view to the neurotic life about her. Thus she manifested a firm adoration for the works of Dickens and Thackeray, and often quoted Micawber. The greasy sentimentality of Dickens had captivated her years before, and she had always retained her enthusiasm.

Phoebe subscribed to a New Thought magazine, and had its editor pray for her and Edith in his office. *Unity*, "a magazine of practical Christianity," came to her regularly and was passed on to others in spiritual difficulties. She bewailed the size of the Sunday papers and could find nothing to read in them. A monthly journal came from her British colonial possession, but she seldom read it. Evidently her experience in the colony had been a bitter one.

Phoebe often referred to that glorious evening, years ago, when she had seen "Fun in a Photographer's Shop." Modern humor, however, was usually lost on her,

although she quickly understood Mrs. Garry's stories. The motion pictures likewise seemed insane; they hurt her eyes and were obviously manufactured for the consumption of half-wits. She was proud of her intelligence. She had a firm hold on the verities of life, she often said.

"I am eternal," she once told a startled roomer, with a magnificent wave of her hand. He had rashly asked her how old she was. "I'm as young as I feel, and that's much younger than you think."

But life weighed heavily on her, and within she constantly battled pessimism. As Edith's rheumatism gradually grew worse and rendered her unable to perform the household duties, the indolent old *grande dame* courageously tried to assume the burden. But she was utterly devoid of domestic conscience. Edith, indeed, had maintained the household for such a long time that Phoebe was stunned when confronted with its glaring realities. Some of the roomers left because the apartment was neglected. One of them complained that he had discovered a bed-bug in his bed.

Phoebe was outraged when this discovery was reported to her. Such a thing was a direct thrust at her imperishable respectability. She swore that the roomer had carried the insect in on his clothing. Or it had entered via a library book. Books from public libraries were notorious carriers of vermin.

"We have lived in this apartment for thirty years," she said, calmly but indignantly, "and we never heard of such a thing. Surely there must be some mistake."

"I'll show you," said the roomer. He led her into his room and indicated a blood-smear pillow case, but Phoebe was not convinced. Thereafter, she never mentioned the episode. She shut it out of her mind completely, and the roomer was given to understand that he could leave the apartment at once if he persisted in bringing vermin in with him.

Everyone in the neighborhood was aware of her dignity. Her butcher, whom she had patronized for thirty years, was not sur-

prised when she grandly ordered twenty cents worth of steak to be delivered at a certain hour. He merely smiled and admired her. She was fully aware of the value of a manner.

"I have no debts," she said. "I always pay on the spot. It saves trouble. I never buy on the instalment plan. I'd rather go without than buy that way. You see some people wearing expensive clothes which are not paid for." She referred to a neighbor who considered her somewhat pompous. "They wear fine clothes, but they haven't a penny to their names. My clothing is ordinary, but it is paid for when I buy it." She uttered all this in tones of supreme disdain.

V

When her sister went to bed with her rheumatism, Phoebe's worries increased. The music pupils became an enormous strain on her vitality. There was no creative response from them, she complained. She longed to meet a child of intelligence, whom she could mould into a great musician. This, she decided in despair, was a futile yearning.

In other years, assisted by the blind Mr. Elos, she had given musical instruction to dozens of children. She had likewise taught French and German. But now her pupils had dwindled to insignificant proportions. Most of them wanted instruction in jazz, but she refused to dispense any such a barbarous knowledge; she would not teach her pupils how to play tricks on the piano. She insisted on a sound musical foundation, which required loads of work, intelligence and patience. But the modern child and its parent demanded speed, an enormous lot of impressive noise, and overnight accomplishment.

"They teach you how to play the banjo or the saxophone in four days now," she said, scornfully. "And I am expected to make stupid children musicians in the same time. It can't be done."

She was anything but speedy, and only

her florid gestures could be called noisy. She had no strain of jazz in her antiquated spirit.

The ancient apartment got seedier, but Phoebe continued to make her wines and beer. The woman of normal domestic instincts would have cleaned up the house, or, during the Summer, preserved fruit. But Phoebe brewed beer. She was not made for domesticity; not, anyway, for the conventional, child-bearing, sacrificial kind.

She knew that if she had had a child and it had failed to consummate the lofty destiny her romanticism demanded, the resultant tragedy would have killed her.

"The bearing of children is a great responsibility," she said. "Half the parents of today don't realize how great it is. If a child of mine were a boy, I'd want him to be a barrister, or a great statesman like Lloyd George or Asquith. No girls. And I'd never let a son of mine be a minister. There is something dry and dead about ministers."

Instead of rearing children, and grandchildren she would seclude herself in her disorderly kitchen and place an enormous pot of hops on the gas stove to boil. She was highly nervous and irritable while the brewing was in progress. No one dared to come into the kitchen and disturb her.

The beer bottles had to be repeatedly scalded; their caps were purchased from a definite store. The odor from the hops permeated the entire apartment. Sweat poured from the old lady's brow; the old dress she wore hung on her like a loose sack. She was completely absorbed in her task, and worn out when it was completed.

When dozens of bottles had been filled with the brew, they were taken to the "brewery" and stored in a dark place. Occasionally the tomb-like quiet of the store-room was shattered by a violent explosion. Then Phoebe's agitation almost prostrated her. She was sure that a Prohibition agent or a neighbor had heard the explosion.

When the beer had been aged for several weeks it was fit to drink. Perhaps Mrs. Garry would come in and sample it.

"You ought to try and sell some of this, Mrs. Dolby. Stuff much worse than this is sold every day. It costs twenty-five cents a glass."

"I never was much of a hand to sell anything, Mrs. Garry. Won't you have another glass?" Phoebe merely sipped it herself; she had a stout bottle of old brandy hidden away.

"Well, just one more glass, and that's all. This is about the best beer I ever did taste. It's too bad you can't make some money on it." Mrs. Garry drank copiously. "Did I ever tell you the one about the woman who had nervous prostitution—?"

Phoebe chortled and drew her chair closer.

"Heavens, the things they do and say nowadays," she marveled, when Mrs. Garry had concluded the story. "Have some more beer, Mrs. Garry. There's plenty of it."

"Well, just one more glass. I mustn't take too much because I've got a job in a picture tomorrow." She wiped her lips and nibbled the cheese Phoebe provided.

Thus the two old ladies would sit in Phoebe's antiquated parlor for hours, talking and sipping beer. Then they'd consult the ouija board, or play bridge.

"You must take a bottle of wine with you," Phoebe would say to Mrs. Garry upon her departure. "I just made some new General Allenby, and I want you to try it."

Mrs. Garry preferred gin or beer, but she never refused any of Phoebe's wines.

When Mrs. Garry was gone, Phoebe would sit alone in the parlor, thinking of her tragic past. An evening of gayety with Mrs. Garry was invariably followed by sad introspection. She thought of the time when she was a hostess in her big house in the British colonial possession. She thought of what she might have been and now was. She recalled poor Mr. Elos, who might have been such a great man if he hadn't been blind. Life was so infinitely sad, so unsatisfactory. It contained so much pain and worry. An idealist like herself was lost in the world.

"Phoebe," the rheumatic and irritable Edith would call from the bedroom, "you must come to bed now. It must be after twelve o'clock." Edith was still dominant, despite her invalidism. Phoebe had to be watched.

Phoebe sighed and got to her feet. She moved to the apartment door, saw that it was secured, and then got the police whistle and placed it under her pillow. She locked the door and prepared to retire.

"You shouldn't be staying up so late," Edith complained. "You're always doing something to worry me."

Accustomed to her sister's domination, Phoebe said nothing. She slowly took off her clothes, extinguished the light and got into bed. In the morning, she had to bottle some more beer.

AMERICANA

ALABAMA

ADVERTISEMENT in the *Crimson-White*, student publication of the State University:

ANNOUNCEMENT

To My Patients and Friends:

I wish to announce that I have gone to New York to take Post Graduate Work on the Eye. Will return within Ten Days.

DR. PAGE F. REED

SPECIALIST IN OPTICS

Alston Building On The Corner
TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA.

ARIZONA

THE war heroes of Phoenix put the kibosh on the First Amendment:

In keeping with their stand against Communistic activities in Phoenix and its vicinity members of the John C. Greenway Post No. 50, American Legion, have requested city councilmen to notify them whenever Communistic speeches are to be made in Phoenix. At the same time, the Legionnaires voted unanimously at their last meeting to commend City Commissioner J. A. Godwin and the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce for their coöperation and foresight in combatting any Communistic movement that might destroy American democracy. A committee of three Legionnaires of the post has been selected by Commander Glenn A. Snodgrass who will thoroughly investigate any and all Communistic activities in Phoenix. The committee consists of D. D. Douglas, Capt. James A. Palmer and Wesley F. Dains.

In lauding City Commissioner Godwin, Captain Palmer declared that Godwin stood for the principles the Legion stood for, and it was for his determined stand against Communistic activities in Phoenix that the Legion commended him. Concerning the principle of free speech, Captain Palmer declared the Communists, given freedom of speech as provided in the Constitution of the United States, immediately begin to undermine and attack the Constitution with a view of revising it entirely to suit themselves.

ARKANSAS

EDITOR BEN M. BOGARD elucidates a difficult text in the celebrated *Baptist & Commoner*:

Sister W. W. Sherman, Maydelle, Texas, writes for an explanation of First Corinthians 11th chapter, especially the 10th verse. It will be too

big a job to explain that long chapter in one issue of the *Baptist & Commoner* and too many other things are crowding for us to run a continued article; it will be necessary to barely touch the chapter in what is said here. The first part of the chapter teaches that men should wear short hair and women long hair. Just how short man's hair should be is not stated and just how long a woman's hair should be is not stated. Man's hair will not grow as long as a woman's if let alone and that is why "NATURE" teaches that men should have short hair and women long hair. Let alone man's hair at the longest is not quite as long as woman's hair at the shortest, on the average. Since God has given men and women the "NATURE" they have as to the length of hair they should conform to it as closely as possible. The tenth verse says women should have a covering, either in hair or some artificial covering "because of the angels." Angels are present in all our religious assemblies and their presence should be respected.

CALIFORNIA

VIRGIL M. PINKLEY, editor-in-chief of the *Daily Trojan*, student paper of the University of Southern California, reveals what it means to imbibe the higher culture there:

Yesterday noon I had the privilege of attending the Southwest Optimist Club luncheon. One can't help but feel at home when he visits that branch of the international club, since Gwynn Wilson, graduate manager, is president, and Burdette Henney, most famous of all Trojan yell kings, is song leader. Dixon T. Bell, owner of the print shop that prints the *Daily Trojan*, *Wampus*, *Pigskin Review*, and a host of university printed matter, is also a member. Warren Bovard, vice-president of the university, is a member of the same organization, but belongs to the downtown chapter. It's a great thing for men to get together, call each other by their first names, act young again, develop a higher sense of business ethics and take as their objective the helping of youth. *Optimist* is a word which breathes hope, and stimulates a feeling of help and good will to the rest of mankind.

METEOROLOGICAL news in the Los Angeles *Express*:

There is some possibility of showers tonight, according to Col. H. B. Hersey, government meteorologist, although it is probable there will be no rain.