

The Smoke Ring

The man sat in a deck chair on the patch of green grass he called a lawn, his panama hat tipped over his eyes. He was, on the whole, a contented man, asking no more from life than he already possessed... Well... not much more. He did wish at times that his garden was a little larger than it was, and he wished he could live by the sea which he loved in all its moods. But, Jean, his wife, was a little afraid of the sea, especially at night, when it seemed so dark and menacing. A day here and there was quite enough for her. Dear Jean!

He was content. He had recently retired from a rather boring office job. The house they owned was paid for now. He had a wife who he dearly loved; two children settled in life; five grandchildren; a small car; and it was pension day on Tuesday.

He was thinking of the annual holiday that he and Jean were planning to take in two weeks time. A friend had lent them a caravan trailer with which they hoped to tour the South Coast of England, calling on one or two relations on the way. For a while he let his thoughts wander here, there, and everywhere. He was glad to be retired. This year was the first time there was no need to hurry over anything. They could go where they pleased, taking their time for one whole month. Other years they had stayed in hotels and boarding houses, especially when the children were young. Twice they had taken narrow boats on the canals, and had enjoyed unforgettable holidays. He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, letting the warm sun and soft wind begin to sooth him off to sleep with the scent of roses drifting in and out of his dreams...sleep!..dreams!

He jerked up in his chair and groaned. He had forgotten about his sister, Rose! Older than him by six years, she had bossed him and the family about ever since he could remember, and still fancied herself as part of their lives. She still loved to lay down the law. They ought to do this, and they ought to do this, she would say, still bringing a certain amount of pressure to bear on their actions and movements.

She came to stay with them periodically, usually just as the time drew near for their summer holidays. She always managed it so that she came to stay two or three days beforehand so that they felt guilty for not asking her sooner. But he and his sister had never really got along together...a Mrs Knowall! Her coming meant so much more work for Jean, and the strain was great.

"Mrs Knowall!" he muttered, "Why can't she go on the canals with Joe?"

Joe was Rose's son. He owned his own narrow boat which he hired out during the year.

"Why can't she go to Rustington to stay with Vera? Vera has no young children to worry about?"

Then, after a moment or two, he felt ashamed of himself for his meanness.

Poor woman! Who does she get along with? Who could get along with her? If only she could control her tongue!

He puffed away at his pipe, then gave a sort of gurgling sigh. He tried to sink back into the lazy oblivion of his day-dreams. He felt the soft breeze on his face, playing round his greying hair. He thought of his father. It seemed as if the breeze was whispering to him in his father's voice. He nodded his head as if sleepily agreeing to conversation. He came to with a start. His sister had come into the garden with a basket of washing to put on the linen line. She spoke to him. Her voice came to him from a far distance at first, then became a jangle of noise in his ears. He puffed away trying not to hear her.

"Why you have to smoke that disgusting old pipe I shall never know! It is a horrible, smelly thing. You are just like Father. He used to smoke first thing in the morning and last thing

at night. Thank goodness I made him give it up when he came to live with me. I've never liked that tobacco you smoke any way. You won't be able to smoke next week when we are on holiday in a caravan, I can tell you! There is no getting away from it at all. It gets into the food, into your eyes, and hair...."

"Stop nagging, woman" he muttered, trying hard not to let a note of irritation creep into his voice. It was like this so often when he was with her. But she went on and on....if only she would stop!

"You'll have to stop now that I have put the washing out, or else move further down the garden, or into your potting shed."

The blue-grey smoke from his pipe seemed to give a little shiver of annoyance. The man almost felt the vibration in his left hand, as if someone had taken hold of his wrist and shaken it to gain his attention. He refilled his pipe with difficulty and lit it with his father's old lighter that had been a retirement present to him when he retired from work.

He thought of his father. Easy going, gentle Dad! He was never without his pipe. It went everywhere with him in the top pocket of his jacket. It was in his mouth unlit at times. The man recalled one afternoon when he was about fifteen years old. His father was wandering around the house looking for something and when asked what it was he was looking for he said it was his pipe. Knowing the importance of the pipe, everyone stopped what they were doing to join in the search. This went on for one exhausting hour until with a cry of,

"Dad..!" twelve year old Vera pointed to the pipe. "You have it in your mouth!"

There it was, held firmly between father's clenched teeth. This was something he was always reminded of with great affection, when anything was missing afterwards. Father was, and here, Rose was right again, rather untidy. As a family, the members were all rather slap-dash except Rose, who was the odd one out. After their mother had died, Rose, being the eldest, took on the role of head of the house. The young ones, trained by Rose's eagle eye, managed to get by without too much bother, but Dad was in constant hot water and frequently had the sharp end of Rose's tongue. It was unfortunate that she was the only one in a position at the time to care for him when he became ill. Poor Dad! He always thought the best of every one and made the best of all situations. The man could almost hear his father's voice saying to him,

"Don't worry, boy, every thing will work out alright, you'll see."

The man gave three or four hard pulls at his pipe and let out a series of smoke rings that rose higher and higher into the air, so firm at first and blue-grey in colour. He watched them give little jerking movements before they began to lose shape and disappear from view.

"I wish you'd lose shape and disappear," he said to the retreating figure of his sister. Sensing something she turned to look at her brother in a puzzled sort of way. Catching his eye, she gave a contemptuous sniff and passed into the house.

He stayed where he was for a moment with his pipe, warm, and to him, fragrant, in his right hand. Just as he was about to knock the pipe out on the heel of his shoe, she came out again with some sheets to put on the line.

He waited until she had finished and was walking back towards the house. Then, putting the pipe between his lips as if he were a trumpeter about to sound, he let out a series of smoke rings that rose high into the air, but which did not lose their shape. They were firm and steady and kept their blue-grey colour. He saw with astonishment that they were drifting towards his sister. As they reached her they grew larger and hovered over her head. One by one they descended, pirouetting lightly before coming to rest on her head like a hat. She began to cough and splutter, with tears streaming down her face. She waved her arms in front of her face to disperse the smoke which she thought was coming from a neighbouring bonfire. The man watched them travel toward his sister, willing them to settle on her. He knocked his pipe out on the heel of his shoe saying as he did so,

"Ok, ok. I suppose I'll have to put it out now."

The pipe seemed to move in his hand as he walked slowly after her as she made her way into the house. The rings of smoke sailed gently along keeping at a distance of about six feet in front of him. When Rose was within ten feet of the house, he blew at them a long, steady puff of breath. They danced and twisted, rose and fell. They expanded to a yard in circumference, then retracted to their original pipe size. He gave another puff. This sent them scudding through the air at a furious rate until they came to Rose. They settled on her head, and began to expand once more, and one by one to slowly slip over her, coming to rest like a fur collar. She started to cough again, putting one hand on her chest and the other on her head. For a moment or two it seemed as if she might collapse, so violent did the attack become. Tears streamed down her face. She could not speak, although her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Once inside the house, she sank down into the nearest chair and closed her eyes. Jean, the man's wife, went to her side.

"Whatever is the matter with you? I saw you from the window waving your arms about and coughing. This is not like you, Rose!"

"It's the smoke, Jean! I don't know where it came from but it nearly choked me when I was in the garden just now."

"I saw no smoke at all - only John smoking his pipe - and he was sitting at the bottom of the garden."

"It was smoke, I tell you! It was Father's tobacco smoke; I'd know it anywhere. It was Old City tobacco."

"You were quite alright half an hour ago" said Jean. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please, Jean,. I don't feel at all well. I think I will go and lie down for a while. I may have a cold coming. If I don't feel any better tomorrow, I think I will go home."

The man following her into the house paused in the doorway. Turning to look skywards, he waved his pipe several times at the mistiness the smoke rings had left behind. He put the pipe away carefully into its rack on the wall, patting it in an affectionate and conspiratorial way.

"Keep up the good work, Dad." he said.

"What did you say?" asked Rose sharply.

"John always says that, and "Goodnight, Dad" when he has been smoking Dad's old pipe." said Jean.

"Is that Dad's old pipe?" gasped Rose.

"Yes, it is..." answered John with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"You had better look out for yourself, old dear."

So saying, he strolled down the garden to pack up his deck chair and disappeared into his potting shed.