

Dark Angel in a White Apron

Aunt Ann

I think I must have known “Aunt” Ann from the time I was born. She hushed my first wail, and many another. She gave me my first bath, and many another. Much of my early childhood seemed surrounded by her stiffly starched and neatly ironed white apron.

Whether my survival was due to, or despite, her ministrations of sugar tits, catnip tea, fat-meat suckers, horehound syrup, and asafetida bags, I don’t know. But I do know they were faithful ministrations.

I must have been a puny baby, very puny indeed, I have heard them say so many times. Mama was a frail, ladylike little slip of a girl who supposed—until shortly before I came—that babies grew on rosebushes.

At birth I weighed four and one-half pounds; at nine months, nine pounds; and even at a year old, they said I could have slept in papa’s shoebox. Of course I didn’t, for by that time he had bought me a cradle of latest design and wide rockers. He had

added to that a fancy lace-trimmed, wicker baby-buggy—big enough for twins two years old, Grandma Ussery said.

And in his workshop out in the backyard he had made me a trundle-bed—a low flat bed on rollers, which took up all the space under Mama’s big, high-headed, golden oak family bed in daytime and was rolled out beside the big bed for me to sleep in at night.

But with all those—cradle, trundle-bed, and buggy—I spent most of my first fifteen months on a pillow. Much of the time that pillow was in Aunt Ann’s arms.

Even with all that Aunt Ann did—and Mama and Papa and both Grandmas and Dr. Biddle and Rose, the hired girl—it took the combined concern and dozens of remedies, suggestions, and prescriptions from other relatives and friends and neighbors—and not a little praying and conjuring, said Aunt Ann—to pull me through. Let the credit or blame fall where it may.



A Feather-Bed Lap

My earliest memories of Aunt Ann are of her feather-bed lap and her two-pillow bosom. Loneliness began when I grew too big for her to rock me to sleep.

A Feather-Bed Lap And A Two-Pillow Bosom

I remember well looking up at her round black face, glistening with sweat beads that became trickles. Aunt Ann's face seemed as dark and shiny, also as round, as the buckeye she carried in her pocket to ward off "rheumatiz." Her face was always framed with a halo of white flour sack.

Somewhere I have seen a picture that was like my child-mind's portrait of Aunt Ann's face. It was a landscape silhouette with a black sun outstanding in a white sky. Aunt Ann's face was that sun; her white head-rag was the sky.

Wherever she went and whatever else she wore, her principal garment, according to my recollection, was always a stiffly starched and distinctly creased white apron—three deep creases up and down and three creases crosswise. Of course, Aunt Ann had a "checkeredy" apron that she put on over the white one when frying fish or splattery doughnuts, or when leaning against the tub on washdays. But when she "appeared," she was two-thirds enveloped in a fresh white apron with a deep hem at the bottom, two large square pockets on the front, and a butterfly bow of wide and well-starched "strings" at the back.

As a child takes a below-the-belt view of life, I classified women largely by the aprons they wore or didn't wear; but even so, I began to suspect that the apron-test was not always to be relied upon. There was one woman in the neighborhood who wore a lace-frilled organdy apron with heart-shaped pockets and a small blue ribbon bow on each pocket. But for all its fanciness that apron never seemed as ladylike as Grandma Jones's checked gingham, nor as attractive as Aunt Ann's starched, bleached domestic.

During the Aunt Ann era of my childhood, Monday seemed the most important day of all the week. Monday was Ladies' Aid Day. That meant Mama must always go, for Mama was secretary. Being secretary meant that she must spend hours on Monday morning writing up the minutes and hours Monday afternoon waiting to read them. That gave me a full day at Aunt Ann's house.

Aunt Ann did our washing on Monday and ironing on Tuesday for a dollar a week. She came early on Monday morning to get the clothes, and, as it was "Aid Day," to get me. As soon as I had finished breakfast, she dressed me in a starched-up dress to go home with her.

Her house was a short block away beside the railroad, but on our side of the tracks. Aunt Ann wouldn't have lived on the other side. She had a husband, Albert (I don't know why I never called him "Uncle"; he was always just Albert); a daughter, Louise; and a grandson, Burton. In addition there was a boarder, a man

named Jim who worked at the mill and slept in a little back room off Aunt Ann's kitchen.

Aunt Ann's house was a most desirable place to visit. I don't know why. It just was. A plain little weatherboarded cabin, it was innocent of paint, grayed with soot and cinders, with a door that always stood open. Inside was a tiny entrance hall with half-closed door on the right, the parlor; and a wide-open door on the left—Aunt Ann's room. Back of this room was the dining room and back of that the kitchen, always dingy but always fragrant. Once its ceiled walls had been painted sky blue, but a kitchen next door to a railroad couldn't stay sky blue for long; so Aunt Ann seemed reconciled.

The dining room had only the big cloth-covered table, some chairs, and the "safe." The bedroom had a dresser, a wardrobe for everyday clothes, a table for the lamp, two rocking chairs with fancy "tidies," and two beds covered with white counterpanes which were changed every Saturday. One bed, I understood, was for Aunt Ann and Albert; one for Louise and Burton. There was, of course, a red lambrequin around the mantelpiece.

This lambrequin, together with the turkey-red embroidered cherubs on the pillow shams, and the scrap of red flannel pinned to the short wick in the clear-glass oil-lamp bowl, always caught my eye. At Aunt Ann's windows were two pairs of many-times-washed and many-times-mended lace curtains. Not Nottinghams! The dream of Aunt Ann's life was to own a pair of real Nottingham lace curtains.

But it was Aunt Ann's hall and, most of all, her parlor that were the show places of the house. The hall held the big hall-tree with its brass umbrella stand on each side. Albert had bought that hall-tree at a sale and had paid five dollars for it, Aunt Ann said; so that piece of furniture was really important.

It had brass hooks for hats and coats and a streaked and freckled mirror set too high for use, but on the lower part, on the box-like shelf between the two umbrella stands, reposed the chief object of art of the entire household, a polished tray holding a pitcher and six glasses of the most peculiar bright and mingled colors. I asked Aunt Ann many questions about that water set, as she called it, but she answered with such a big word I never could remember what she said by the time I got back as far as the dining room. I learned later from an antique dealer that glassware of that kind is known as "Iridescent."



A Honey-colored Room

Aunt Ann's parlor, which I always peeked at through the half-opened door, was a sight to be remembered. It seemed to have a honey-colored glow over all, caused, no doubt by the close-drawn honey-colored window shades.

In one corner was the "company" bed, plump and covered with a lace spread over pink cambric. The pillow shams, too, were lace over pink. And both the shams and the spread had

patterns of huge peafowls, with flowing tails, right in the middle of each. Sometimes Aunt Ann's company bed wore a yellow petticoat and yellow pillow slips under the smooth lace spread and shams. Then the parlor was honey-colored indeed.

Of course, Aunt Ann's parlor had a sofa, one with sky-blue velvet "muffins" and gold buttons across the back. On this was kept the family's Sunday clothes. It also had a carpet of red and green and a parlor lamp on a parlor table. But it had something else. Across the room from the bed stood a white-framed picture on three tall white legs, an easel, she called it. That picture, I was told many times, was Louise. But just as many times I doubted. Louise was a fat and roundish woman when I knew her. The girl in the picture was slim.

Aunt Ann's parlor mantelpiece always wore a crepe paper lambrequin ruffled all around and fastened with brasshead tacks, just as our parlor lambrequin at home was attached. In fact, the tacks all came out of the same box. At spring cleaning time Mama always gave Aunt Ann what tacks were left over after our own lambrequins were changed.

Sometimes Aunt Ann's lambrequin was pale blue, sometimes pink, at other times light green or bright yellow. One time, I remember, it was flowered with large red roses. Some seasons it was gathered and draped in the middle. Other times it hung in box pleats all around. But I've heard Aunt Ann say that in whatever way she arranged it, it always took a whole bolt of crepe paper (10 feet) to make a parlor lam'kin look right.

The parlor was frilly; the bedroom was neat; the dining room was dark and cool. But we spent most of our Mondays in the kitchen. Even before I left home on those Monday mornings I knew exactly what we would have for dinner—chicken and dumplings! Always chicken and dumplings on Monday. I don't know why, unless it was because Monday came after Sunday, and Sunday meant chicken and dressing. At any rate, while sheets, towels, and counterpanes rolled and bubbled in their suds in a copper-bottomed wash-boiler on the front of the stove, the chicken and dumplings rumbled in their black iron pot on the back of the stove, and I sat in the high chair inhaling and watching as Aunt Ann would rub and wring, rub and wring, and drop the clothes over into the boiler.

Monday



Aunt Ann placed her tubs midway between the kitchen stove and the window, and usually she put my highchair by

the window. Even when I was a big girl, as I thought, I sat in the highchair at Aunt Ann's house because from there I could see out the window and, as she said, being up there kept me out of drafts on the floor and kept my dress clean.

If the weather was warm, I could play on a clean rug on the floor. If it was very warm, I could stay in the sun on the back porch. For a playmate I had my rag doll, Susie Jane, in her red calico dress. Sometimes I had a crayon pencil that Albert gave me to color paper dolls. Louise had given me a pair of little blunt-pointed scissors that I could use in cutting ladies from an old mail-order catalogue.

Thus, the Monday mornings passed. When the noon whistle blew down at the mill Aunt Ann left her tubs and began to "hustle up" dinner. She moved my highchair to the damask-covered table in the dining room "h'isted" me into it, and began to dish up chicken and dumplings with a saucer and to fill her green-flowered soup tureen and the deep and flared soup bowls.

She set a bowl before me on the shelf of my highchair, tied a napkin under my chin, and gave me a spoon. Then, by force of habit, I suppose, because the table looked so bare, she would go to the "safe" and bring out that marvel to me, that glass and silver "salt-pepper-and-vinegar thing"—caster, I believe they now call it. To me it was something to want very much, but she set it right in the middle of the table where I couldn't possibly reach it.

“No, no, Honey,” Aunt Ann would say. “Dumplings don’t need salt. Pepper’s not good for chil’reen. We don’t use vinegar on nothin’ ’ceptin’ turnip sallet.”

So I ate dumplings, good though they were, still wanting to sprinkle them with salt, pepper, and vinegar, just to get my hands on that beautiful caster.

Next, Aunt Ann brought out of the “safe” that tall glass-stemmed cake stand with its five-layer, chocolate-covered marble cake, left over from Saturday’s baking for Sunday’s dinner. The cake was good—Aunt Ann’s cakes always were. But still I couldn’t forget how much I wanted to get my hands on that caster. I think I still want one.

Aunt Ann, Albert, Louise, Jim, and Burton, after he was old enough, ate their dumplings in the kitchen. I’d much rather have stayed in the kitchen with them, but Aunt Ann wouldn’t “hear to white folks eatin’ in colored folks’ kitchens.” So I ate, lonely as royalty in the big dim dining room.

I didn’t see much of Albert except as he came through the dining room during those Monday dinners. Usually he was carrying a small sack of red and yellow all-day suckers for Burton and me. I scarcely saw Jim at all. He always came and went through the back door and was in the house only long enough to eat his two bowls of dumplings. But I remember Louise as being much like Aunt Ann, except a lighter brown in color; and Burton as being a very satisfactory playmate.



It Was July

One day when I was about four years old something truly unusual happened. I was permitted to go over to Mrs. Well's next door to home to stay for a long time. It really was unusual for me or anyone else I knew to set foot in Mr. Well's yard because the Wells had a biting dog. But on this day the dog was in the cellar, and Papa handed me over the high back fence to Mr. Wells, and I stayed and stayed. Mrs. Wells showed me lots of things in her house and told me about her little girl, Minnie, who died with meningitis. Minnie and meningitis! The similarity of those two names is what I remember best about the entire visit. At last I was passed back over the high fence again and went into our house.

In Mama's room everything was dark and Mama was in bed. That in itself frightened me. Aunt Ann was there and Grandma; and they told me I must be very quiet. My trundle bed was pulled out in the middle of the floor—that had never happened before in daytime as I remembered—and Aunt Ann called me to the side of the little bed, drew the covers back, and told me to look at my little sister. All I could see was a little round red head, a squirmed-up face, and two little-bitty fists—and they called that a sister!



They Called That A Sister

I don't remember feeling very favorably impressed. I do remember being furious that they had put the thing in my bed. I remember wanting to know why Mama was in bed. They told me she had to stay in bed to keep the baby warm. But that explanation didn't satisfy me for the baby was in my trundle-bed and Mama was in her big bed—and it was July.



For a Rosebush Has Briers

One day, three years later, I came home from a visit to Grandma's to find the room dark again and Mama in bed. Aunt Ann soon came into the room with a grape basket. She turned back the towel to show me another round, red head, a little brother, she said that was. She said Dr. Biddle had found him in a rosebush and had given him to her to give to us. I didn't believe a

word of that because I knew how many briars the rosebush had, and that baby wasn't scratched at all. From that time on I was skeptical about a lot of things.

But when Elsie, the sister, and Clarence, the brother, and Burton, Aunt Ann's grandson, and I were all large enough to turn loose in Aunt Ann's back-yard to play by ourselves on Ladies' Aid Day, we had fun. We made mountain ranges in the ashbank, tunnels under the garden fence, rivers below the hydrant, and a surprising amount of "geography" all over the place.

We also conceived what to us was superb mischief and adventure. The railroad had a part in that. Burton said he had heard that if you rubbed soap on the railroad rails the train couldn't go. We didn't believe a cake of soap could stop a train; so the four of us, three against one, argued long and earnestly. At last we decided to try it. Burton sneaked into the kitchen, stole a sliver of yellow soap from Aunt Ann's washboard, and came back to the yard with it deep in his pocket.

We had the soap, but who would grease the rails? All of us had been forbidden to open the gate in the high board fence between the backyard and the railroad tracks. There was much discussion about that. Finally it was decided that Burton, being the black boy, would have to do the work—white folks didn't soap railroad rails, we told him. He finally gave in, but he wouldn't open the gate. None of us would be so bold as that.

We found a place, however, where he could crawl under the fence. That hadn't been forbidden.

He soaped the rails well as we watched and directed him, each through a knothole or a crack between the boards, and then he rushed back and crawled under to our side of the fence again. Jesse James never felt more wicked than we. Then we all took our stands again, each at a knothole or a crack, to watch Mr. Engine get caught in our trap. We watched and waited patiently; it seemed hours, and the sun beaming down on our backs was hot.

While we waited, Burton got another idea. He said he had heard that if you would cross two pins and lay them on the railroad tracks, when the train went by you would have a pair of scissors. We decided to try that too. Again Burton must obtain the pins, just as he had the soap. It was his house, we told him, and his Grandma, and certainly with three against one, the white vote carried.

He found two pins on the bedroom dresser but only two. That would make one pair of scissors—but whose would they be? I thought I ought to have them because I was the oldest, and a girl. Elsie thought she ought to have them because she was the youngest, and a girl. Boys didn't use scissors. Burton reminded us that, after all, they were his Grandma's pins. Clarence, for once, didn't join the argument. He was still watching for the engine to get stuck on the yellow soap.

The ownership of the scissors-to-be was still unsettled when Burton scrambled under the fence again and under our direction carefully crossed the pins on the hot black rail. Again we took our places at our respective knotholes to wait for what seemed hours. In fact, the Ladies' Aid meeting was over, and Mama had called for us, but still no train had come.

We lost the pins and argument, and we never did know whether an engine could pull on a yellow soap skid.



A Trap for Mr. Engine

The Aid Was Endangered

When I first learned that Aunt Ann was going to move, I was shocked beyond believing. I thought we couldn't, simply couldn't get along without her. The first blow was that I would never have another clean, stiffly-starched, and carefully ironed dress.

Then I realized there'd be no more five-layer chocolate marble cakes on Saturdays and Sundays and no more chicken and dumplings on Mondays. And the Ladies' Aid! I was sure that Aunt Ann's moving would break up the Ladies' Aid. There would be nowhere else for us to stay while Mama was secretarying. It didn't occur to me that Grandma and Grandpa Ussery lived across the street from us on Mondays as well as other days, and that we could just as well stay there—except for the fact that Grandma didn't approve the Aid.

She did move, however, and the Society and the rest of the world went on. She moved all the way across town to the farthest edge. She continued, though, to do our Monday washing and Tuesday ironing and to come back and help with the Saturday cleaning and baking for a dollar a week until her rheumatiz got her down. And she continued to be my "Aunt" Ann even after that.