

The Devious Grandfather

BY AMOS ARTHUR HOLMES



THE DEVIOUS GRANDFATHER

Isn't it funny how people will try to hide their ignorance? They simply will not own up to the fact that their knowledge is incomplete. This defense is very strange because knowing everything about everything would be an impossibility. If you do not know the procedure involved in heart transplants you very honestly say, "I know nothing of that procedure." But there are people who somehow feel inferior if they don't know the heart transplant procedure and will answer, "That's an interesting question. Heart transplants? Yes, I know something of that procedure. Of course I'm not a doctor but my studies in that field reveal to me the...ooooopppppssss...I have to run. We'll discuss this later."

You say to somebody, "Does the word dinner have one n, or two?" The person doesn't know the answer. Spelling is not one of his strong points. He will look you right in the eye (hoping he will never see you again) and say, "Dinner has one n."

You stop your neighbor, and say, "I'm doing an article on the island of Malta and I'm not sure where the island

is located or who owns it. Could you help me out?" Your neighbor has never heard of Malta, but he replies, "Malta? Yes, I believe I can help you. It is an island located just to the east of...uh...uh...just to the east of Borneo."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, It has been there for years and is owned by...uh...it is owned by Germany."

This method of saving face, this bewildering deception, has always been repugnant to me. Why in the hell can't a person feel at ease by simply saying, "I do not know the answer to your question."

But something happened yesterday that made me doubt my own sincerity and I'd like to tell you about it.

I was sipping coffee when the phone rang. The caller was my granddaughter's teacher, and she said, "Mr. Holmes, I was wondering if Jill's mother could come in today for an interview."

"Could I come instead?"

"That will be fine, Mr. Holmes. Jill is not doing second grade work to my satisfaction and I think it would be beneficial if we talked this over."

I got dressed and went over to the school. The teacher, Mrs. Baker, of-

fered me a seat beside her desk, and said, "It was so nice of you to come. I'm worried about Jill because she is falling behind the other children."

"Just what is her problem?" I asked.

"Well" said Mrs. Baker, "She doesn't know how to change Fahrenheit into Celsius."

If I had been honest I would have admitted to Mrs. Baker that Jill wasn't the only one who couldn't change Fahrenheit into Celsius. I would also have admitted that though I was reasonably familiar with Fahrenheit I had never even heard of the word Celsius. Instead, I registered a look of surprise, and said, "I had no idea that Jill was that stupid. I'm glad we're having this talk."

"Furthermore" continued Mrs. Baker, "I asked her to spell oligochaete and she put an a at the end instead of an e."

"Good Lord." I exploded, "How terribly ignorant." I sat there wishing desperately that I knew the correct spelling of oligochaete. In fact, I sat there wishing desperately that I knew the meaning of the word itself. Was it a mountain? An animal?

"Mr. Holmes" said Mrs. Baker, "Are you familiar with osmosis?"

"Of course," I lied.

"I hate to tell you this, Mr. Holmes, but Jill just can't get it into her head that osmosis is the tendency of a solvent to pass through a semipermeable membrane."

"I can't believe it," I moaned.

Semipermeable? Membrane? Osmosis? What in the hell was this teacher talking about?

Mrs. Baker stood up. "Well" she said, "I want to thank you for coming. You are a writer, aren't you?"

"Yes" I replied.

"I can't understand," said Mrs. Baker, "Why Jill is falling behind when she has you to help her."

"I haven't had time to help her. She is being helped by her grandmother who is really a very dull person."

"I am so glad," said Mrs. Baker, "that you will be helping her now. You are a very brilliant gentleman."

"Thank you," I blushed.

As I walked home I thought about Celsius and oligochaete and osmosis. I thought about my disloyalty to Jill and about all those people who won't acknowledge their ignorance.

And I thought that Amos Arthur Holmes was the most dishonest person I had ever known.