

The Prince of Beers

by Con Chapman

Don, the boss's son, went to college, though he didn't study much. He knew the business would be his when he was through, no matter what he did or didn't do. He played basketball when he was in high school but he wasn't much good. He had his mother's body, not his dad's. You can't coach a boy to be taller.

He sat on the bench his senior year, never played but for the last few minutes before the half or the end of the game when it didn't matter. He wasn't as big of a deal as he thought he should be, but he was going on to the University; a lot of kids

would never go any further than the city limits.



We'd see him at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and he'd work at the warehouse during the summer. Sitting in the office, bossin' people around on the loading dock, handing out Cardinals' tickets to the guys who owned the bars and liquor stores. He was being groomed, as they say, to take over the business some day.

Fall of his senior year, I went up to a football game and saw him at college. He had a hip flask and was drunk by halftime. "All I want," he was heard to say, "is a date with a really good-looking woman before I go away." I guess he thought it was his right; he was going to be a big fish in a small pond.

He wanted one taste of the world before he was done.



That night, he was pretty down. Got even drunker, we were worried about him. He graduated but it was a close call. He showed up to work the first of July, didn't look too thrilled about it all. He started dating Janey, he'd known her in high school. She, like him, hadn't gone very far. She wanted to be a mom, that was all.

She was the one he settled for when he came home, Less of a success as a frat man than he'd hoped. His folks bought them a house catty-corner from my mom's. Pretty nice digs to start out with. Everybody thought they were all set, figured she'd have kids soon, he'd get the drinking under control, his old man would hand things over to him bye and bye.



It didn't work out that way. She started showing up at nights, crying, her face red. Nothing more at first. She blamed herself, and my mom would take her in for awhile. I'd hear about it afterwards. "There's trouble in that marriage," mom would say. "I don't know why, they've got everything going for them." I didn't know what to do or say—I was far away.

Don's parents didn't want to hear about it. Said they'd take care of it, mom needn't interfere. Just the ordinary troubles young couples go through, didn't mean to bother you. Still, mom'd sit and smoke on the patio, in the morning and at night when the temperature went down, worrying about the two, or rather just the one. She knew who the enemy was.

Sunday nights at the country club everybody'd be polite if on Saturday they'd had a good night. Then they stopped

coming in with his folks. Janey wouldn't show her face much at all; she'd sit off by herself in a chair by the pool in sunglasses, smoking, reading a magazine so you knew not to interrupt her. She'd wait for him to finish playing golf.



It was on a Sunday in the odd still of the night after thunder had struck, with that ozone smell in the air, that Janey showed up. She asked mom if she could stay for awhile; a tooth was loose and her eye was swollen. Mom put her to bed, nothing more was said. She called a doctor and filled an ice bag for her head.

Don showed up later, banging on the door. "I need to talk to Janey," he yelled, plus a lot more that mom wouldn't repeat to me. "Janey's resting, she can't see you," mom said. To her credit, she didn't open up. "She's gone to bed."

That set Don off, and he started to yell. Mom got on the phone and called his folks to tell them to come over and take him home, but he wasn't taking Janey—she was spending the night. If they wouldn't take care of her, she would.

The two women, young and old, kept company for some time after that. There was no connection—we'd never been friends, didn't know her folks. Don would fume and cuss when he was with the men, but he never had the guts to do anything about it. He couldn't go to court, he knew that. So Janey stayed with mom, a prisoner of sorts.

Last I heard they got divorced. There weren't any kids, it was kept quiet—of course. His dad kept his hand in the business, then they sent the heir away for more schoolin'. They ended up selling out a few years later, the boy moved away. Mom says she and Janey still get together, once a week at least; at the verge of war, she forced a peace.

Mom used to recite “Barbara Fritchie” from memory, without a trace of mockery. After she died I went down to Frederick, Maryland, where some amateurs were putting on one of my plays. They were just kids, and didn't know Whittier's poem or what supposedly happened in their town. I recalled it for them: “‘Shoot me, if you must, this old grey head,
But spare my country's flag,' she said,” and

Stonewall Jackson commanded his troops to march on.

They laughed, it was so elevated in tone and melodramatic. It seemed to me as I sat there, eating, drinking wine and talking about Art with them that there are worse things than having a heart with some starch in it; one that's capable of anger and not just sympathy, and a foot that can draw a line that crosses another, catty-corner.

