

[After All These Years]

Roaldus Richmond Recorded in Writers' Section Files

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"I'm just an old gal now," she said. "I'm getting old and fat, and I don't give a damn. If people don't like me the way I am I can't help it. And I'm not crying about it, or wasting any time worrying about it. I'm satisfied. I had my day and it was a good one. Now I'm just another old gal."

Ida Bergeron was typical of the older office girls. She had supported herself for many years. It gave her an independent and self-reliant man's attitude toward life. She talked and acted rather like a man. She drank and, on occasion, swore like a man. Her dark bold face had once been handsome. Her voice was coarse and overloud; her laugh rough and rasping. Nothing disturbed her almost brazen composure. Close to forty, she had an excellent position, commanded a good salary. She was a lonely figure. A bachelor girl growing old.

"I remember when you were the belle of the border," Roberts said. He was a big man with an increasing waistline. He had been an athlete, a splendid figure of a man. Now he was about the age of Ida Bergeron. His well-out features looked blurred and coarsened. Roberts, like Ida, now held a good position in one of the State departments. He too was a bachelor. Both drove new automobiles and maintained comfortable apartments, well-stocked with clothing, liquor and smart knick-knacks. Both spent a good deal on amusements. Like Ida, Roberts was 2 representative of the moderately successful office-worker on the brink of forty, single and independent — and alone.

"Yes, yes," said Ida Bergeron. "Belle of the border all right. Look at me now. And I can remember when you were slim and keen, Robbie, a swell looking guy. My hero in that

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Customs uniforms. Oh boy, the good old days. Gone forever, Robbie. We had a good time up north there though. But I couldn't stand living in Island Pond now. My God, what a place! I have to go up about every weekend, but I hate it. My mother is pretty bad, you know. She's been in the hospital for months. It's quite a drag on my bank account too, believe me. And my brother Ben's no help. Just lost his job again the other day. He was sending five a week to help pay the bills up there. Now he's out. I get him jobs and he gets himself fired. It's happened time after time. I'll got him no more jobs, I tell you that. I'm all through this time. He's no good. I wash my hands of him. I hope he lands in the gutter. That's where he belongs. I've done everything for that boy. This is the thanks I get. At a time like this when I need him the most. He's let me down for the last time. I don't want to ever see him again. That's the way I feel about him. I'm all through."

"Oh, I know you better than that, Ida," chided Roberts. "You'll be sending him five or ten every once in awhile. You're not so hardboiled as you sound."

"That's what you think," said Ida. "I won't send him a dime this time. Not a cent. I don't care if he starves. He got to playing around with the Elks Club crowd in Burlington. 3 Thought he was a bigshot. He'll find out how many friends he's got when he stops spending money and buying the drinks. He'll find out about his fine-feathered friends when his pocketbook's flat. I know that crowd. I know what people like that are like. Ben'll begin to learn too. If he's able to learn anything at all. I'm beginning to wonder. Robbie, what happened that time when you left the Customs?"

"Didn't you hear about that, Ida? I thought everybody knew. I got into a little trouble up there, that's all. Took the rap for a friend of mine, too? I thought he was a friend of mine. Anyway I got the gate."

"Oh yes, yes. Sure, I remember now. I heard you got a raw deal. You always were too big-hearted, Robbie. Too good a fellow. I knew you'd take a beating for it sometime. You got to be tough, Robbie. You can't be soft. Not is this world. Nobody ever gave me anything."

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I had to get out and take all I ever got. Boys oh boys, I'll say I did! Well, what did you do after that, Robbie? How come you escaped matrimony anyway? I thought some sweet young thing would lead you to the altar."

"Almost got me once or twice, Ida," admitted Roberts with a laugh. "But I always woke up, or sobered up, in time. Plenty of time yet to settle down. Well, after I left the Customs I didn't do much of anything for a couple of years. Couldn't find anything worthwhile. Then I got a job as athletic instructor in a CCC camp. Did some teaching too. It wasn't much but it was something. I was in Maine and New Hampshire, and then I went to three different camps in Vermont. It kept me in shape, Ida. I didn't start getting fat while I was doing that. But 4 I've certainly put it on since I got planted behind a desk. No exercise at all the last few years. Nothing more than dancing and elbow-bending and driving a car. I don't like it, but what can you do about it?"

Ida laughed harshly. "Can't do a damn thing about mine, I know that. I just lay around and watch myself grow. I don't mind any more. Free, fat and forty. That's me. I'm like Popeye the Sailor: I am what I am because I am."

"I didn't even go deer hunting this year," said Roberts. "I used to do a lot of hunting, you know. Great country for that up around Island Pond. [?] County's a wonderful place to hunt and fish. Look at all the streams and lakes right around Island Pond."

"You look at them," said Ida. "What would I do with streams and lakes?"

"I used to get my deer every season," Roberts said sadly.

"I never got my dear," said Ida, laughing mirthlessly. "The only dear I ever really wanted, I mean. If I get one now it'll have to be an old buck, I guess. I still like 'em young, Robbie. But an old man with plenty of money and not long to live wouldn't be bad. I could stand it. Sometimes I get tired of working. And coming home to this empty apartment after work."

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"It's a nice apartment. [Do?] you cook your meals here?"

"Most of the time. Until I got sick of my own cooking. One of the girls eats here with me usually. We split on the groceries. She's an old maid too. But she's got a steady boyfriend. I don't envy her him though. Not even if his old man did leave him the small fortune he made out of granite. He's 5 a dope. Betsy two-times him plenty. He's too dumb to know it. Last summer she was playing round with one of his own stonecutters. The guy could hardly talk English. But Betsy claims he had his good points, and she ought to know! Oh, why be catty? I have my moments too. This place has seen some pretty warm parties. Boys oh boys, I guess it has!"

"I'm surprised you didn't get married, Ida. You must have had plenty of chances. Good looking woman like you."

"Yes, yes, I'm a beauty all right, Robbie. Sure, I had my chances. But the one I wanted didn't develop, you know. These long drawn-out affairs usually don't. Well, I learned my lesson. Too late to do me much good, of course. I could [?] these young girls some damned good advice though. Give 'em nothing, keep 'em guessing, make 'em pay off in wedding rings. [Hook?] 'em quick, Robbie, and hold 'em hard."

Roberts nodded. "I remember now, Ida. You were practically married. Nice fellow too, fine fellow. He had everything to offer you. Everyone thought it was all settled. Too bad, Ida."

Ida protested. "Lay off, Robbie. Let's forget all that stuff. Maybe I'm better off single. You [knew?] Mona was married, didn't you? She got a good man too. Only known him about three-four months. She's a lucky gal. I told her so at the shower we gave her. Mona's attractive, but she's played around a lot. You don't find guys like she got hanging on trees. Mona's a nice girl but she's kind of [eccentric?] and flighty. Scatterbrained." 6 "Guess all the girls play around, don't they? All these office girls."

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“Why not?” said Ida Bergeron shortly, the [harsh?] laugh rasping her throat.

“I like this place you have,” Roberts said. “I think it's swell, Ida. How long have you been here?”

“Six years. Long enough, Robbie. Too long, by God. I've seen a lot of people come and go here. They're always moving in and out of this apartment house. There've been some queer ones, too. There was one fellow who ran around in his underwear all the time. Or he'd wear a bathrobe with nothing on under it. If he met a girl in the hall the robe would come open. Accidentally, you know. What you call an exhibitionist, I guess. He got thrown out pretty soon. There were a couple of young girls here who used to entertain all the cadets in Norwick University. Honest, it sounded like they brought their horses with than too! Last summer there were two kid actresses here from the summer theatre. Downstairs when there was anyone around they talked with a fake English accent. When they got up in their room you should've heard them curse and swear at each other. We've had some funny ones. They come and go — and I stay right here.”

“Did you know Ed Poynter, the fellow who committed suicide awhile ago?”

“Sure, I knew him. I know everybody, Robbie. Don't know what good it does me, but I know them. Ed was a strange guy. He'd been around plenty. It cost his old man lots of money 7 getting him out of scrapes. He went to Williams, you know. He was in France when the World War broke out — the first one. He fought with the French army. After the war he tried a lot of different jobs. His mother was dead. His step-mother wouldn't have Ed in the house. Of course he drank a lot. Then he disappeared for six or seven years. Got into some kind of a jam and scrambled out. Nobody knew where he was. He acted funny when he got back here. His father wouldn't help him any more. Ed got a white-collar WPA job. He had a queer look in his eyes. all the time. Shifty and dark, like he was full of hate and scared all the time - of something. He told somebody he was going to kill himself. It was after he'd been on a drunk. They thought he was fooling. He wasn't fooling any! Blew

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his head off. They called his father to see the body. The old man looked at it and went right back to the office. He could've saved Ed. Maybe if it hadn't been for his second wife he'd have tried too. Anyway between the two of them they killed Ed Poynter. That's what I thinks and so do plenty other people."

"It's a funny things" mused Roberts. "People who want to live get killed. People who want to die have to kill themselves. It doesn't make sense."

"What does?" demanded Ida, "You're old enough, Robbie, not to expect things to make sense. Let's not got morbid. When two old friends meet like this they ought to be gay, hadn't they? Did you see any football games this fall? I went down to the Dartmouth-Harvard."

"I saw Cornell at Dartmouth. Not much of a game. Cornell was too good." 8 "Remember when you pitched for Vermont and beat Dartmouth, Robbie? Was I proud of you, boys oh boys! You were my hero, Robbie. I was nuts about you."

"You're a good girl, Ida. But don't kid me."

"I'm not kidding you. You're still pretty nice. Even with that belly. Let's go out somewhere and celebrate this reunion. What do you say, Robbie? Two old veterans back from the wars. We haven't licked the world, Robbie, but we've done all right for ourselves."

"Sure," said Roberts. "You've done swell, Ida. Always had good jobs, made good money. They tell me you just about run that department of yours."

"If I do I'm underpaid," Ida laughed. "Let's go dancing somewhere. Haven't danced much for quite awhile. You used to be pretty smooth, Robbie. How are you now?"

"Oh, still smooth. Still pretty smooth, Ida."

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"I'll bet you are, Robbie. We'll take up more space on the floor than we used to, huh? Wait'll I get my warpaint on. Just an old Indian squaw. But I want to get out of this apartment. Funny life we lead, Robbie. Parties in this apartment and that apartment. Boys oh boys."

"Lunch-cart life," Roberts said. "Sometimes I think I'll get married and settle down for keeps."

"Why don't you, Robbie? You've kicked around long enough. Now you got a swell job, money in the bank, and all that. You need a home. You ought to have a wife — and kids. Spend your nights by the fireside with slippers on and a pipe in your mouth. That's what you ought to do, Robbie." Ida Bergeron's voice was almost wistful.

"Maybe," said Roberts. "I don't know, Ida."

They went out laughing together. But there was something hollow and empty in their laughter. Something almost pathetic in the brave front they showed the world.