

Sam Elkin

THE SUNNY SIDE

THE MEMORY I LIKE BEST of my Uncle Barney happened in a quiet community off highways and byways, amid open fields, small forests, running brooks and things like that—a place I shall call Pinesville because the name, though common enough, sounds like some place untroubled and untouched by modern conveniences and other noisy disturbances. Today, of course, civilization performs its hectic duty all over poor Pinesville. But in the years I'm writing about, some forty years ago to be exact, all the good Lord's bucolic treasures existed there in profusion. Then, as it had been for half-a-century before, Pinesville was a small community consisting of two dozen and one homes (an addition of only half-a-dozen since 1890) culturally and practically bound to a church, a general store, a barber-shop, a log-cabin one-room schoolhouse—and a cemetery, which was situated at the foot of a hillock just outside the church in a wooded glen.

The cemetery was Pinesville's most proud possession, and it was my Uncle Barney who made it so. In his eighty-ninth year he took it upon himself to beautify the grounds. He planted flowers and ivy and bushes, paying for everything out of his own pocket. Then he gathered some of the younger Pinesvillians together to cut down trees, others to rezone graves, and still others to dig up and flatten down little paths which wound gracefully around the grounds so that, in time, the place looked positively cheerful. So much so, that all the breathing citizens began to refer to it as "The Garden Spot of Pinesville."

But one day a curious situation developed. A nameless and dateless headstone appeared at the east end of the cemetery on a gentle slope that caught the first rays of the rising sun. Of course, it was my Uncle Barney's, and the idea had come to him while he was beautifying the cemetery. After choosing his spot with infinite care, he carved out a headstone all by himself and in the very early spring of 1917 got me to help him place it at the head of his chosen site. Then, during the late spring and summer months, and usually just after noon when the sun was warmest,

he would stroll out the Brookside Road to the cemetery and sit on a stone in front of his grave to gaze at his headstone with what I can only describe as a passionate serenity.

Now all this might have gone unnoticed for longer than it did if it had not been for the Dundee Sisters. Emma and Sarah Dundee, it must honestly be said, were themselves a curiosity since spinsterhood was hardly any career for women in Pinesville. True, many years before, long before I came on to the scene, there had been a good deal of talk about my Uncle Barney and Emma. That is to say, Uncle Barney started out with Emma until all the talk had him walking down the aisle with her (which she didn't deny), so he left her to take up with Sarah. But that lasted only until the talk had him marrying Sarah (which *she* didn't deny), so he went right back to Emma. Talk in town merely shifted first names (without even so much as an indrawn breath), and everybody had my Uncle Barney once again walking down that elusive middle aisle with Emma. But my Uncle Barney wasn't fazed one bit. He dropped Emma a second time for Sarah, and that was far as it went. A serious breach developed between the twin-sisters. They stopped speaking to each other. They moved into separate parts of their house, ate their meals at different times, would not even be seen at community functions to which they had always gone together. When the church yearly social came around and neither sister made an appearance because one or the other might be present, my Uncle Barney, like the gentleman he was, stepped into the breach and informed the sisters (separately at first) that he loved each of them so much he could not marry one at the expense of the other. And when he finally managed to maneuver them into the same room at the same moment, he told them that twin-sisters were meant to go through life together and how could they expect him to live with himself knowing he would be the cause of their separation? Further, he said to them, if they wanted to he would consider it an honour and a privilege to escort both of them, but *both* of them, to any future function or affair Pinesville might have to offer.

The sisters agreed. The sisters also agreed that my Uncle Barney's gesture was noble and honourable. So did everyone else in Pinesville. The ladies, that is, were quick to point out to their husbands that Barney Vreehold was a true gentleman. One or two of the husbands, of course, kind of smiled to themselves and gave my Uncle Barney the long wink when they met him in Frisby's General Store, and pulled him off into a corner, and sort of suggested that maybe "practical" and "cagey" were better words than "noble" and "honourable". But my Uncle Barney smiled rather mysteriously, and that only prompted the husbands to ask point-blank about those long nights he spent at the Dundee home—doing what, Barney? Drinking

tea? Holding long conversations about the weather? The husbands' smiles were appropriately cynical, but they couldn't beat down that short wisp of a mysterious smile on Uncle Barney's lips, and the only words they got out of him about it was: "Why should I make one miserable when I can make both of them happy?" As a matter of fact, that was the only time my Uncle Barney ever again mentioned anything, anything at all, about himself and the Dundee Sisters, except some thirty or forty years later when he talked about them to me, for completely different reasons, and not too long after Emma and Sarah found out about his headstone.

When first they saw it they were puzzled by its namelessness and datelessness. Then, by counting bodies, they came to the conclusion that no body was missing among Pinesville's breathing citizens to account for the headstone. Finally, they actually caught a glimpse of my Uncle Barney during one of his early afternoon musings.

They didn't speak to him about it then, but they spoke to everybody else about it in Pinesville.

I didn't realize how serious the situation had become until people began stopping me in the general store to ask me about "your poor, poor Uncle Barney." Had he dreamed of passing away? Had there been some other omen? Was he losing his mind? I shrugged away the first two questions, but the third one got me sore. "Uncle Barney losing his mind? Why he's a lot saner than anybody in Pinesville."

"Then why the headstone?"

"That's his business."

"And why does he go out there every day to sit before his grave?"

"Look," I said. "Uncle Barney's an old man. He's lived a long life. He's worked hard and the only thing I can figure out is that I can't tell you what's on his mind. Why not ask him yourself?"

This they decided to do and, quite naturally, the Dundee Sisters were chosen as chief questioners. They stopped him one afternoon as he was walking slowly towards the cemetery along the Brookside Road.

"Barney," Emma said right off the bat, "are you going out to that cemetery again?"

Uncle Barney tipped his hat and smiled, "I am."

Sarah sighed, "What kind of foolishness are you up to?"

Emma said, "Do you realize people are saying you've gone balmy?"

Uncle Barney was really surprised. "Why?"

Emma frowned. She had a quick, sharp way of talking that made her seem angrier than she actually was. Besides, though the years had dampened all their

appetities considerably, she felt that it was still within her province to speak to him directly and pointedly. "Does it seem reasonable for a man in his right mind to choose his burial ground, place a headstone over his grave, go out there every afternoon and sit there in front of—of—*it*—admiring *it*?"

Uncle Barney smiled. "Sounds reasonable to me."

"Barney!" Sarah said and was truly shocked. "I honestly think you're looking forward to—to *it*!"

"I'm not looking forward to *it*," Uncle Barney said. "But I'm ready for *when* it comes." His smile broadened. "What's wrong with a man choosing for himself a nice quiet peaceful place? Comfortable. Where the sun'll shine on him and warm his bones. Someday I'll sleep there until eternity. Always warm. Always comfortable. Always peaceful. Isn't that something to look forward to?"

Both women backed away from my Uncle Barney as though he were a special messenger of—*it*.

That little conversation took place during the early spring months in the first full year of World War I. Only a few families had sons of military age, and I was one of them. I was due to leave in a couple of weeks, but just before I did my Uncle Barney had a very serious talk with me. It happened after he returned from the cemetery one afternoon while I was out in the front yard cutting grass.

"Son," he said, "come sit with me on the porch a minute."

I could tell by his voice that he was troubled. I followed him silently up the porch steps. He settled in a rocking chair and I leaned against the porch railing. He stared out at something in the front yard without speaking for some time. Finally: "I met the Dundee Sisters at the cemetery this afternoon."

I was silent, wondering how the Dundee Sisters could possibly have anything to do with the way he felt.

"They were waiting there. Right by my headstone. I thought they were just out for a walk. But they were really waiting for me."

Again my Uncle Barney grew quiet, staring out at something in the yard. And as I watched his face, his lips came tight together and he smacked his right hand down on the arm of the rocker.

"I won't do it," he said.

"Won't do what, Uncle?"

"I won't give it to them," he said, but then his anger seemed to run out. He sighed and looked sadly at me. "I need your advice, son."

"About what?"

"They're a nice old couple," he said, once again turning his eyes to some spot

in the yard. "I wouldn't want to hurt them for the world. Fact is," he said, "maybe I owe them something." He shrugged and faced me and smiled. "Guess I'm a damn fine salesman. Guess I painted such a good picture it set them thinking."

"Uncle, will you please explain what you're talking about?"

"This afternoon they asked me if I wouldn't give up my plot of earth. Will it over to them so that when their time came they'd be able to rest side-by-side in the sun to eternity."

It was an incredible request. "You told them what it means to you," I said, and as he didn't answer: "Didn't you?"

"They said they knew it was asking an awful lot."

"Well, I should *think* so."

Uncle Barney shook his head. I'm sure he never noticed my sarcasm because he was looking out into the yard again and now spoke in a soft and low voice. They've been together so many years and they don't want to be separated even in their final sleep."

"What about yourself?"

"It'll be a comfort to them." He turned his eyes to me. "Besides, I'm the one who said twins ought to go through life side-by-side. Why not in rest, too?"

"But can't they find comfort in another place? Do they have to ask for yours?"

"Mine's the best spot in the cemetery."

I looked at him a long time before I said: "Uncle, are you arguing for or against yourself?"

He smiled and leaned over and patted my hand. "You're a good boy, son," he said. "God bless you."

I was in France two months when I got word that my Uncle Barney had caught a cold, developed the flu, then pneumonia, and finally stretched himself out at the age of ninety years, one month, and twelve days—which might seem an odd way of putting it, but reasonable when you consider that to the aged, especially those reaching ninety, each added day alive (like the newborn's) is an unusual and noteworthy event which seems to call for an age recount.

Anyway, I returned to Pinesville in the late spring months of 1918. That was a warm and sunny day, as I remember it. After seeing everybody and feeling quite lost in the change that, even then, was beginning to rumble through Pinesville, I strolled out the newly-paved main street towards the cemetery.

That hadn't changed. It was still behind the little white church. It was abundant with flowers and trees and bushes. I went over to the east end of the cemetery

at the foot of the hillock facing the warm sun. And right there I saw what today is the memory I like best of my Uncle Barney.

Emma Dundee's headstone.

Sarah Dundee's headstone.

In between *their* headstones—my Uncle Barney's headstone. Looking down at all three of them (the Dundee Sisters left this earthly world about a month before he did), I was sure I could see Uncle Barney's short wisp of a mysterious smile and hear him saying: "Why should I make one miserable when I can make both of them happy?"