

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

By Paulo DePaula

In Somerset Maugham's SUMMING UP he makes an anti-Biblical statement to the fact that he is not his brother's keeper. My Southern Baptist background made me sort of quiver when I first read his statement, then, all at once I decided to adopt it instead of the former impregnated commandment-like idea I had.

~~At least,~~ After reading Maugham's statement I have tried to think I am not my brother's keeper, and that I'll be doing well if I can, at least, take care of myself.

What happens though, is that no matter ~~what happens or~~ where you are, the minute people come into the picture the problem of being one's brother's keeper always comes up.

Tonight, for instance, I decided to have a beer at the Tick-Tock, on University Boulevard. As soon as I went in I saw Eddie, an old friend who got as far as the freshman year at Montgomery Junior College, and is now idling his time away, instead of making use of his G.I. Bill rights. With Eddie there was an older man, a former sailor who saw the II World War in the Pacific, fought it over there. My first impression was that I was coming across a modern time Ahab of Melville's MOBY DICK. The man quoted his Bible at every turn, swallowed his gin and smoked his cigarettes, and I kept waiting, waiting for the curses, for the prejudices, for the search to kill the ~~xxxxxx~~ big white whale. Since this fellow came from Virginia, I even envisioned the whale as a **Big Black One**.

Eddie had been to Baltimore, earlier this evening, and had had a few with companions of his. He'd seen a couple of shows, had a good time. It was his day off, but still, on his way home, he stopped at the Tick Tock and struck up a friendship with Mr. Evans. The man I first thought of as Ahab.

No sooner had I sat down, the waitress was at the table. Certainly I could have a beer, but Eddie would have to wait. He could have a cup of coffee now, and if she felt he could handle another beer the next round, she would serve him one.

So it was coffee for Eddie from then on. I had time to slowly sip three beers, and give Eddie a few ~~xxxxxx~~ words of advice: Don't let that G.I. Bill go to pot; set up a schedule for study and fun; cut down on working hours, so college could be handled as it should... I was being my brother's keeper. After all, why not? Certainly I care much more for Eddie than the waitress who - while cutting him off - was really being her brother's keeper!

But then, as I said before, there was also Mr. Evans. And his Biblical quotations: "Judge ye not lest ye be judged".

All night long Mr. Evans spoke of people he had met, things he had seen, never passing out judgement. Repeatedly ~~did~~ ^{he} mention his ignorance. He said, for example, that the first time he felt like going to a library was when he was in Hawaii. "I was amazed at the number of people reading books and magazines there. I never thought so many people wanted to learn about who we were, what we were here for, and about where we will go..."

Mr. Evans was no Ahab. He even said he declined to mention his religion (and he said he went to church regularly), because our having met him at the bar might make us prejudiced against his sect!

"I work on construction," Mr. Evans said. "Right now I'M working for a music teacher. In Southeast Washington. He's a Negro. I'm there, working away, and that man goes over to his piano and plays. Now, if that isn't an inspiration! His concentration and care in playing every note just so right, makes me so responsible for the job I'm doing, that I guess I just take double the time I'd normally take. I mean, his music comes out so beautiful, and I know it will only last that moment. Then I look at my mortar and my brick. Well, I know that's going to stay there a long time. Boy, do I learn something from that piano playing..."

Mr. Evans left before we did. Funny I should ever think of him as a modern day Captain Ahab. Maybe because of his being in the Navy, his Biblical quotations, his peg-leg...

Eddie was not completely sober when we left. The cool autumn air seemed so invigorating that I did not offer to drive him home. I walked with him in the direction of his car. The two of us stayed there for awhile, talking about the past and friends we had in common, until I felt he was well enough to take the wheel himself, and then, he said: "Why don't you drive over and we could have breakfast together."

Good night, Eddie. I am not my brother's keeper. Why should you be your brother's keeper?

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