

MAUDIE'S LEGACY

I don't know any Chinese, but I've been told their writing symbol for fight is two women under one roof. The Chinese are smart people.

When my nephew Donald Graham, brought his bride home to the family farm-- November of '67 I think it was--that picture came to mind. One day at sewing circle, just after Donald and Angela were married, my sister Flora complained that Angela was taking over.

Ethel Crawford said, "You have to give in to the younger generation, Flora. I suppose you thought Donald was going to stay a bachelor and look after you all his life."

"No such thing!" Flora sounded miffed. "I expected him to marry. He's a good catch for a nice girl. I just don't think Angela's the proper wife for him."

Flora and Angela were different, all right. Flora always had a taste for sweet stuff. Her husband, Archie, always said she cut a pie uneven so she could get the biggest piece. I knew for a fact she kept a tin of brownies in the back of the cupboard for herself. I pulled them out when I was helping her house clean one spring and kind of raised my eyebrows at her. I knew she was trying to lose weight and I sure didn't think that was the way to do it. I took a couple of pieces. Just to help out. I may be overweight but I don't worry about it.

She said, "I'm keeping them for company, Margaret. I have to keep them hidden. They're not good for Donald." She seemed to think he was still a little boy. Actually, I thought they might be good for Donald. He's the string bean type.

As I said, Flora liked her food, and showed it. Angela was the spitting image of the pictures in those fashion magazines she bought--all bones. I didn't think she'd be much fun for

Donald to cuddle but there's no accounting for tastes. She was from the city, so that probably made the difference. I guess people in the city don't eat as good as we do.

Flora was a meat and potatoes cook, but Angela had studied nutrition and served a lot of raw vegetables (my John called them rabbit food) and what she called lentils, looked like different kinds of beans to me. I'm a meat and potatoes cook, myself, but John has never complained. Angela bought Bone Appetite Magazine and kept trying the fancy recipes she read in it. John said he had no idea what he was eating when he was over there helping Donald with the hay.

When I first met Angela I thought she was a real nice girl. She had a lot of fire and I thought she'd probably set some under Donald. I couldn't figure out why she took up with him, though. He wasn't her speed, at all. Maybe she thought he was the strong, silent type. Tall and strong, all right, but the silent part was mostly because he couldn't think of anything to say. He just stood there, most times, nibbling his yellow moustache until the ends were all ragged, and shifted his weight from one foot to the other like a tired horse. Altogether they were a pretty poorly matched team.

Well, the women did try to get along, but Flora had been head of that house for twenty-five years and she always was stubborn. Angela, of course, thought when she married she would be head of the house. Well, right there is the basis for the Chinese writing. Angela told me she tried to get Donald to talk to his mother but getting Donald to speak about something that was likely to start a row was like expecting a sermon from a stone.

When Archie died back in '63, and Flora only had Donald to look after, she sort of ran out of things to do. She took a Women's Institute course in crocheting and that kind of caught her fancy. She spent most of her spare time at it. As a result, every flat surface in the house was

covered with a doily and every up-and-down surface with an antimacassar. I thought, myself, it was a little bit overdone but it horrified Angela who was into bare polished wood and everything sort of bald. Well, things weren't going too good over there and Donald spent most of his time in the barn.

Then Maudie McLeod died and her little house on the corner of the McLaughlin farm stood empty. The house was kind of run down but Angela saw a solution to their difficulties and talked Donald into proposing that his mother move into it. It's across the road from where Flora and I were born and she'd be close to all the people she grew up with.

Well, when they suggested it, Flora came right over to see me, and was she mad!

"They're trying to put me out of the house I've lived in ever since Archie and I were married."

I tried to reason with her. "Give the kids a break, Flora. You remember what a time you had with Archie's mother."

"Well, I'm a lot easier to get along with than she was."

I could have disputed that but I thought I'd better not stir up any more trouble. "You know you and Angela will never see eye to eye and she's not going to give in to you," I said.

"Why don't you move into Maudie's house? You can do what you want to, there, without any arguments."

She had a lot of excuses. How could she entertain the Women's Institute or the sewing circle in that little place. I reminded her she never liked entertaining and this was a good excuse to get out of it. Then she said she wouldn't have room for a garden. The lot was too small. Jock agreed to let her have a corner of the field behind her house and he'd even work it up for her. When she ran out of excuses she agreed to move.

Right away Angela began looking at wallpaper samples for the farmhouse when she went to Cedarville. I thought she was getting a little ahead of herself. Flora hadn't moved out yet, and it was a sure thing they wouldn't agree on wallpaper patterns. Angela wanted painted walls in the living room but Flora told her the plaster wasn't good enough. That's an understatement. I helped her paste old sheets over most of it to hold the plaster together before she papered it the last time.

Angela said, "We'll tear it out then and put up drywall, or panel it with wood. That's the latest thing."

When Flora told me that, I felt sorry for Donald. Along with being a farmer he was now going to be a house rebuilder. I've always been satisfied with what my parents had, except for a lick of paint or some new wallpaper now and then. I told my John he should consider himself lucky.

Maudie's father built her the house when it became evident she was going to be an old maid. It sits on the corner of the old McLeod farm. Jock McLaughlin owns the farm now. Maudie didn't spend much time in her house. She was a sort of unofficial community nurse, going wherever there was sickness, and she never fixed up her home. I guess she had better things to do with her time.

It's a nice place: a tiny kitchen and parlor downstairs, and two bedrooms upstairs under the eaves, so low you can only stand up straight in the middle. There's a lean-to woodshed on the back though Jock says it's more a lean-away nowadays. Somebody has broken an upstairs window and there's some shingles missing by the chimney. The wood siding hasn't had a lick of paint since old McLeod built it. The tiny yard grows a great crop of dandelions and sow thistle.

Jock was all for Flora moving into it. "I think that's a great idea. A building sure goes downhill in a hurry if it's empty. Makes my whole farm look bad."

He didn't say so but I expect he hoped Donald or Flora would deal with the dandelions.

Ain't fit to live in the way it is," said Donald. "Could be fixed up, but I won't put the money into it 'less it's mine."

Donald went to see Lawyer Brady in Cedarville, who was looking after Maudie's estate, to see about buying the house. It seems Maudie left the house to her nephew, Dougie, whose parents are long dead. Nobody's heard anything of him for years. He was a bad apple when he was a kid and most folks think he probably hasn't improved. Nevertheless, according to Brady, the house belongs to Dougie and nothing can be done with it without his approval. Donald said Brady showed him the will and the deed and everything.

"Can't you make a deal with the lawyer to rent it and repair it with the rent money?" asked Jock.

"Nope. I already asked."

Things were at a standstill. Flora was always talking about what she would do to decorate the little house, and Angela told me the first thing she'd do would be to pitch out the antimacassars. They pleaded with Donald to go ahead and fix up Maudie's house. For once both women agreed on something. But Donald is a careful soul and watches his pennies pretty close. He said he was not about to contribute to Dougie's inheritance in case he came back.

The lines of battle changed. Instead of Flora and Angela on opposite sides and Donald in the middle, now Flora and Angela were on one side and Donald on the other. Just like world politics. Poor Donald. Seemed as if the harder he tried to straighten the situation out the worse pickle he got himself into. I noticed his forehead seemed to be getting higher and there was a deep wrinkle across it all the time. Woman trouble sure ages a man.

Donald was about at the end of his rope. He went to see the lawyer again to see if there wasn't something he could do. Brady said a person could be declared legally dead if they hadn't been heard from for seven years.

Donald said, "Why didn't you say so? It must be fourteen since Dougie was home last."

"It has to be seven years from the date a search is initiated and it is only fifteen days since I placed an advertisement in the press for information concerning Mr. McLeod or his heirs."

"There won't be anything left of the place in seven years if it ain't fixed up."

"I can do nothing, additionally, at the present time. If the estate had included funds I might have been able to authorize the repairs, but it does not. The only agendum I can suggest is that you wait until the township repossesses the property for unpaid taxes. As the taxes are paid to date that will be several years in the future."

Donald went home. The situation there was increasingly strained. Having glimpsed a solution, the women were less inclined to get along than ever. Donald practically lived in the barn.

John went over one day to see him about buying a litter of weaner pigs. Donald had rebuilt all the box stalls and was repairing some broken cement in the pigpen. He thought he looked worn out. I hope they get something settled before winter. It'll be cold out there, then.

As it turned out the solution was right there all the time. It's a wonder Lawyer Brady didn't see it, but then I guess he doesn't know our part of the country very well, or he wouldn't have made the mistake in the deed in the first place.

Donald said he'd just pitched the last forkful of manure out of the box stall when it struck him. Just like somebody'd said it out loud. West. The deed said west! But the house was in the east corner of Jock's farm. Something wrong there.

He jumped in the car and beat it into Brady's. Never even cleaned his boots. Had to shuck them off outside the office door.

Brady read the deed, and sure enough, the house didn't exist, legally. The deed described it as being on the other side of the line fence, on Keith Fletcher's farm. The lot described in the deed is just a piece of open field. The problem was solved. Flora would get the little house. Angela would be head of the farmhouse, and Donald would have some peace. Maybe.

The lawyer filed the old deed away. If Dougie came home he might be entitled to the bit of alfalfa in the corner of the Fletcher farm although Brady said it didn't mean anything since there was no record of severance from the Fletcher farm. It would be up to Fletchers to settle that one. Brady drew up a new deed describing the house where it really was. Donald paid Jock a dollar to make the deal legal, called a bee to shingle the roof, and peace reigned in the Graham household.

But just after Flora moved into the little house, Dougie showed up at the door. He was wearing a white suit, black shirt, white tie, and two-tone patent leather shoes with pointed toes. Flora said he nearly scared her to death. He looked like a real hood. I don't suppose she ever saw a gangster but she was always reading those detective stories so she likely recognized the type.

"What are you doing in my house, you fat broad." He said he had seen the ad and called the lawyer. Brady had told him he was heir to his aunt's estate so he'd come to have a look at his house.

Flora told me later she was so mad at being called names she forgot to be scared and spoke right up. "It's not your house. It's mine. That's your inheritance on the other side of the fence."

She said she never heard such language in her life. She was pretty scared but she held her ground and told him, if he didn't believe her, to go and see Lawyer Brady.

I don't know why Brady didn't give him the lowdown when he was there the first time. Didn't want to get involved if he could help it, I guess.

Dougie jumped into his rusty old convertible--it didn't match with his fancy clothes, Flora said--and roared off down the road, spewing gravel all the way to the corner. She called Donald and Jock and Keith Fletcher and told them Dougie was back and she was scared of him. Donald went over to stay with her and Jock and Donald hightailed it in to the lawyer's office to back him up. Brady is pretty strong in the legal department but he isn't much on muscle and Dougie was big.

Anyway, Brady showed Dougie the legal papers and Jock said Dougie aired his vocabulary again.

Donald said, "I'll give you fifty dollars for that piece of alfalfa field if you'll go away and stay away. We don't want your kind around here."

"No way. I'll sue you for every penny you've got. That's my house and I intend to have it."

Brady cleared his throat in that attention-getting way he has. "Now listen, Mr. McLeod..."

Jock didn't think Dougie rated the mister, but that's the way Brady talks.

"...let me explain the situation..."

Brady would be a sure loser in a fistfight but when he starts spouting those big lawyer words he sort of hypnotizes you. Jock said the gist of it was, as far as he could make out, that if Dougie took it to court he might not get anything at all. Dougie quieted down then. Jock figured

he'd had dealings with the law before. After some more muttering, Dougie accepted the deal. Brady drew up the papers; Dougie took the money and left.

Donald said it was worth the fifty to get rid of him. Flora was mighty glad it was settled. She had visions of Dougie building a house across the fence in the alfalfa field and goodness knows what kind of people would be visiting him.

After that, things were quiet in Maudie's little house. Flora seemed very content, but at the old farmhouse Angela had Donald tearing the plaster out of the living room and putting up drywall. When he finished that, Angela got him to remove the partition between the dining room and kitchen and make what she called a family room. Flora said her parents would never recognize the place. It looked like Donald was going to have an interesting life.

Then she wanted a deck on the back of the house. Goodness knows when farmers would ever have time to relax on a deck except in January and February but Donald went ahead with it. Anything for peace, I guess. I bet they haven't used it more than a couple of times in all these years.

Now I hear she wants Ray to sell the livestock and plant cash crops so they can spend their winters in Florida. Well, like I said, Donald's had an interesting life and I guess if they go to Florida in the winter he'll get some rest. Unless Angela sets him to raking the beach, or something.

Flora was nervous for awhile for fear Dougie might come back but then I saw in the paper where he'd been killed robbing a variety store. When I told Flora, she said she should be sad that somebody had been killed, but she couldn't rightly feel any grief. I felt the same way.

They say it takes all kinds of people to make a world so I guess we have our own little world, right here, but I'm glad Dougie's no longer part of it.

