



## HONESTY (1923)

By Katherine Mansfield

There was an expression Rupert Henderson was very fond of using. “If you want my *honest* opinion . . .” He had an honest opinion on every subject under the sun, and nothing short of a passion for delivering it. But Archie Cullen’s pet phrase was “I cannot *honestly* say . . .” Which meant that he had not really made up his mind. He had not really made up his mind on any subject whatsoever. Why? Because he could not. He was unlike other men. He was minus something—or was it plus? No matter. He was not in the least proud of the fact. It depressed him—one might go so far as to say—terribly at times.

Rupert and Archie lived together. That is to say, Archie lived in Rupert’s rooms. Oh, he paid his share, his half in everything; the arrangement was a purely, strictly business arrangement. But perhaps it was because Rupert had invited Archie that Archie remained always—his guest. They each had a bedroom, there was a common sitting-room, and a largeish bathroom which Rupert used as a dressing-room as well. The first morning after his arrival Archie had left his sponge in the bath-room, and a moment after there was a knock at his door and Rupert said, kindly but firmly, “Your sponge, I fancy.” The first evening Archie had brought his tobacco jar into the sitting room and placed it on a corner of the mantelpiece. Rupert was reading the newspaper. It was a round china jar, the surface painted and roughened to represent a sea-urchin. On the lid was a spray of china seaweed with two berries for a knob. Archie was excessively fond of it. But after dinner, when Rupert took out his pipe and pouch, he suddenly fixed his eyes on this object, blew through his moustaches, gasped, and said in a wondering, astonished voice, “I say! Is that yours or Mrs. Head’s?” Mrs. Head was their landlady.

“It’s mine,” said Archie, and he blushed and smiled just a trifle timidly.

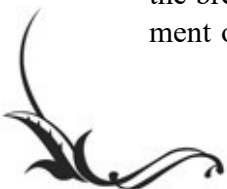
“I *say!*” said Rupert again—this time very meaningfully.

“Would you rather I . . .” said Archie, and he moved in his chair to get up.

“No, no! Certainly not! On no account!” answered Rupert, and he actually raised his hand. “But perhaps”—and here he smiled at Archie and gazed about him—“perhaps we might find some spot for it that was a trifle less conspicuous.”

The spot was not decided on, however, and Archie nipped his sole personal possession into his bedroom as soon as Rupert was out of the way.

But it was chiefly at meals that the attitude of host and guest was most marked. For instance, on each separate occasion, even before they sat down Rupert said, “Would you mind cutting the bread, Archie?” Had he not made such a point of it, it is possible that Archie in a moment of abstractedness might have grasped the bread knife. . . . An unpleasant thought!



Again, Archie was never allowed to serve. Even at breakfast, the hot dishes and the tea, both were dispensed by Rupert. True, he had half apologized about the tea; he seemed to feel the necessity of some slight explanation, there.

“I’m rather a fad about my tea,” said he. “Some people, females especially, pour in the milk first. Fatal habit, for more reasons than one. In my opinion, the cup should be filled just so and the tea then coloured. Sugar, Archie?”

“Oh, please,” said Archie, almost bowing over the table. Rupert was so very impressive.

“But I suppose,” said his friend, “you don’t notice any of these little things.”

And Archie answered vaguely, stirring, “No, I don’t suppose I do.”

Rupert sat down and unfolded his napkin.

“It would be very inconsistent with your character and disposition,” said he genially, “if you did! Kidneys and bacon? Scrambled eggs? Either? Both? Which?”

Poor Archie hated scrambled eggs, but, alas! he was practically certain that scrambled eggs were expected of him too. This ‘psychological awareness,’ as Rupert called it, which existed between them, might after a time make things a trifle difficult. He felt a little abject as he murmured, “Eggs, please.” And he saw by Rupert’s expression that he had chosen right. Rupert helped him to eggs largely.

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Psychological awareness . . . perhaps it was that which explained their intimacy. One might have been tempted to say it was a case of mutual fascination. But whereas Archie’s reply to the suggestion would have been a slow “Possibly!” Rupert would have flouted it at once.

“Fascination! The word’s preposterous in this connection. What on earth would there be in Cullen to fascinate me even if I was in the habit of being fascinated by my fellow-creatures; which I certainly am not. No, I’ll own I am deeply interested. I confess my belief is, I understand him better than anybody else. And if you want my honest opinion, I am certain that my—my—h’m—influence over—sympathy for—him—call it what you like, is all to the good. There is a psychological awareness. . . . Moreover, as a companion, instinctively I find him extremely agreeable. He stimulates some part of my mind which is less active without him. But fascination—wide of the mark, my dear—wide!”

But supposing one remained unconvinced? Supposing one still played with the idea. Wasn’t it possible to see Rupert and Archie as the python and the rabbit keeping house together? Rupert that handsome, well-fed python with his moustaches, his glare, his habit of uncoiling before the fire and swaying against the mantelpiece, pipe and pouch in hand. And Archie, soft, hunched, timid, sitting in the lesser armchair, there and not there, flicking back into the darkness at a word but emerging again at a look—with sudden wholly unexpected starts of playfulness (instantly suppressed by the python). Of course, there was no question of anything so crude and dreadful as the rabbit being eaten by his housemate. Nevertheless, it was a strange fact,—after a typical evening the one looked immensely swelled, benign and refreshed and the other, pale, small and exhausted . . . And more often than not, Rupert’s final comment was—ominous this—as he doused his whisky with soda:

“This has been very absorbing, Archie.” And Archie gasped out, “Oh, *very!*”



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Archie Cullen was a journalist and the son of a journalist. He had no private money, no influential connections, scarcely any friends. His father had been one of those weak, disappointed, unsuccessful men who see in their sons a weapon for themselves. He would get his own back on life through Archie. Archie would show them the stuff he—his father was made of. Just you wait till my son comes along! This, though highly consoling to Mr. Cullen *père*, was terribly poor fun for Archie. At two and a half his infant nose was put to the grindstone and even on Sundays it was not taken off. Then his father took him out walking and improved the occasion by making him spell the shop signs, count the yachts racing in the harbour, divide them by four and multiply the result by three.

But the experiment was an amazing success. Archie turned away from the distractions of life, shut his ears, folded his feet, sat over the table with his book and when the holidays came he didn't like them; they made him uneasy; so he went on reading for himself. He was a model boy. On prize-giving days his father accompanied him to school, carried the great wad of stiff books home for him and, flinging them on the dining-room table, he surveyed them with an exultant smile. My prizes! The little sacrifice stared at them, too, through his spectacles, as other little boys stared at puddings. He ought, of course, at this juncture to have been rescued by a doting mother who, though cowed herself, rose on the . . .

