

BEFORE ÆSRED

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

WITH the coming of autumn, and with our return homeward (to that city which when indicated as Richmond-in-Virginia has successfully irritated so very many persons whose opprobrium seemed desirable), then once again I divert myself in the little black and silver room wherein, between breakfast- and supper-time, I play face to face with venerable and subtle Æsred—who is of course Our Lady of Compromise and of Conformity and the inveterate mistress of all middle ways.

This arrangement involves no supernal dealings. The all-ruling goddess does not honor me unworthy with any personal intimacy such as, in the Homeric phrase, fair-tressed Demeter very disastrously accorded to Iasion in the thrice-ploughed fallow field. I mean only that throughout the season when I am typing in the little black and silver room Æsred is to be seen always, but merely, in the bleak form of that heroic-size bust which Edmond Amateis hewed in her likeness from a block of Greek marble that was imported to Rome during the first century of our era, to be used in the construction of Nero's Golden House—and which some nineteen centuries later was unearthed by a building contractor while digging the foundations of a modern building on Mons Esquilinus, and so came by-and-by, through the accomplished hands of Mr. Amateis, into my keeping.

It is pleasing, I find, that a bit of Nero's property should now be my property. The fact appears to establish a direct link, howsoever tenuous, between young ruddy Nero and that gray person who is just now tapping out this paragraph upon my typewriter. It is pleasing to reflect that Æsred

also, when embryonic in marble, was once subservient, as in those days for the only time in history the entire civilized world was subservient, throughout the turbulent length of thirteen years, to the rule of an artist, and of a red-headed artist at that. Yet I do not believe Æsred thinks about this contributory evidence as to the unluckiness of thirteen now that she stands opposite my desk and looks at me with inexact attention, incuriously, with vague eyes. The block of marble has become the head and throat of a pale giantess who has doubtless her own thoughts: but I question if they often hark back, in the morose indignation with which very practical persons regard any sort of ecstasy, to the Golden House and to the over-fervent doings there in that remote time when Æsred was at the disposal of a featherbrained poet who could not be counted on to do that which his neighbors expected. It was a quite unsettling experience; but Æsred has more important matters to consider nowadays: and among these important matters, one infers, I am not included.

Me now, in place of Nero, is the plump and slightly sullen goddess compelled to observe without sympathy. She and I have the little room to ourselves, and at no moment am I wholly released from the knowledge that she is watching my antics. Her disapproval of them is unflavored with any bitterness because her contempt for me is complete. It is her divine opinion this morning that I smoke too many cigarettes for the good of my after all quite negligible health; and that I fidget and writhe about in my swivel chair (of which, I feel, she resents the recurrent creaking) to an extent past the normal endurance of the human buttock; and that I far too often neglect my trivial trade in order to look, through a rain-flecked window pane, at nothing more grave and weighty than are the ruined reds of those drenched October oak-trees and, rising beyond them, the gray tower of the Hotel William Byrd.

Of this multiform disapproval I am continually conscious.

As I bend over the desk about my writing I am crouched before Æsred in something like an attitude of supplication: whensoever I look up from the typewriter keys, and over the top of my reading glasses so that I may quite clearly see my chaperon, I fidget yet a little more under her calm but uncordial gaze. Æsred still remembers that foiled poet, Nero Claudius Cæsar, I infer: she has not forgotten that of which a writer is capable when no restraints in the way of time-serving or of expediency impede his desires.

But, even so, Æsred has far more important matters to consider nowadays. She does not deeply bother about me, either one way or another: she allows the clarity of my insignificance to rank as a palliative to the offensiveness of my folly.

Of that place which Æsred holds in the mythology of Poictesme much has been said elsewhere. She appears sometimes as a very aged person with her head wrapped in a kitchen towel: in this avatar she was known to Jurgen as Sereda, the controller of Wednesdays and of whatsoever is blue in this world, and as an untiring bleacher who takes the color and the fine vigor out of all things. But in a different aspect the goddess became visible as the bust shows her; she was thus encountered at her snug home upon Mispic Moor, by Madoc and by Gerald Musgrave and by yet other persons, as a woman in the full prime of life, wearing that queer crown from which were copied later the four suits in a pack of playing cards: and she was known then as Æsred, or as Maya of the Fair Breasts. In this more comely manifestation she figures as the beneficent witch who transforms men into domestic animals, and who withholds them lovingly from the dangers of thought and of too high endeavor. She is thus represented in the bust before me—not as Sereda but as Æsred.

It is probable (says Bülg) that Æsred was in the beginning an Earth goddess, allied to Demeter and Erda and Isis. All these were viewed, the learned will remember, as Earth

the All-Mother, who bears and nourishes mankind. In the later cult of Æsred this conception of Earth is refined upon with a shift of emphasis, and Earth becomes rather the All-Wife. Man, in brief, is wedded to Earth inseparably, and the ever-present union of spirit and matter is prefigured as a marriage terminable by death alone.

Bülge expands handsomely upon this truism; and he has made of Æsred, before his rhetoric has done with her, a figure far more vast. She becomes under his ardent handling a symbol of all earth's civilization, which for its continuance depends upon those mutual agreements and those compromises through which every individual householder, no matter what nor how esoteric may be the field of his daily labor, yet has this much in common with all his fellow citizens, that the employment of each is fixed and fore-announced. I mean, for example, that under the amenities of civilized life the plumber is not free to set up as a dentist to-morrow morning, nor may any bishop become, just upon the spur of the moment, a judge in the circuit court. Instead, each one of the four will by ordinary continue to do that which is expected of him; and in this way he will remain a more or less useful, because a predictable, part of human society.

In the mythology of Poictesme there was, save only Koshchei the Deathless, none more mighty than Æsred, Our Lady of Compromise. And her reign endures, for all that so many of the pagan immortals had a poor time of it when Christianity triumphed. Heine and Pater and Swinburne and Arthur Machen and Lord Dunsany and Saki, and I may not tell how many other writers, have recorded their charming and cruel tales of how these bankrupt gods, "when bereft alike of shelter and ambrosia," continued to go furtively about earth upon treacherous errands; preserving always a subtle and malign grace and some fragment of ruined power; using unhallowed means to incite, where honor was denied to their fallen godhead, a fevered carnality; and requiting

any human compliance thereto with fatal caresses. Whatsoever of their other traits had become enervated and beclouded, yet the favors of these once celestial beings remained deadly; so that long after Golgotha their smiling continued to work human ruin just as inevitably as when fair-tressed Demeter smiled upon Iasion in the thrice-ploughed fallow field, and lightnings consumed the mortal man in the instant that his life enrapturedly went out of him, into the womb of a goddess.

—All which is quite the approved style wherein to handle this theme, and employs with discretion the dear old decadent phrasing, I observe complacently. I dismiss with frank fondness the impassioned mincings of the true æsthete, and I continue my reflections in cadences a bit less preciously foreplanned.

I reflect that Æsred, the eternal conformist, the untiring contriver of compromise, and the lady who makes the best of things as they immediately are, if she lost a follower or two in the first flush of Christianity, regained them all at the moment Christianity became respectable and worthy of her patronage. The power of Our Lady of Conformity endures to-day—I remember, as I look up at the indomitable, gross features of Æsred—more strong than it has ever been. She teaches still—as clearly at Richmond-in-Virginia as upon Mispic Moor—that all extremes are unwise. She allures us for our own good to do that which is expected. She fosters that strange common-sense which is feminine; and whether by hook or crook she still persuades male creatures to obey the dictates of this common-sense.

Very great is this Æsred who teaches all to conform the one with another. She embodies that mediocrity which is sublime, if it indeed be not omnipotent. She is served by the most powerful, even as Tamburlaine was served by kings. The high remain exalted only at her sufferance: all that upon which she looks coldly must perish. Bank presidents run eagerly before her, as the heralds of Æsred: school-

masters are her janissaries: the law is the bearer of her bow-string: and legislative assemblies dance corybantically in her train. She is attended also by the police, and the clergy of all accepted faiths march at her side crying out, Conform!

Great and exceedingly great is this Æsred who has summoned our blest kind from the jungle and from that independence which the beasts preserve brutally. One tribe of apes, and one tribe alone, she has tutored to do at all times that which seemed expected. With one magic, and a very little magic, she has builded up interminable proud cities, street upon serried street; has sent armies blaring about the world's flanks, and has caused airplanes to tumble from the clouds; has fashioned cuff-buttons and cathedrals and contraceptives, showing us the new comfort to be got of each; has made of the heaven-born lightnings our lackeys who needs scamper without any dignity along small wires, and traffick humbly among sewers, to discharge our common affairs; has fetched us tea from China, and coffee from out of Arabia, and poison from the bootlegger; has likewise made our lips familiar with hypocrisy and vainglory; and has rooted very deep a large dread of our fellows' disfavor in every human heart. She has, in brief, civilized us: the enlightened nations march at the side of Æsred crying out, Conform!

For all they among mankind who, in a manner of speaking, are rational, all these perceive that Æsred has wisdom. She alone knows that which it is good for man to believe. Her wisdom may be rule of thumb; yet it serves handsomely. She has but one commandment for her courtiers, Do that which seems expected: upon her servitors she has put but one refrainment, Thou shalt not offend against the notions of thy neighbor. There are in her code no complexities. Yet this lean code may well serve to purchase a quiet living in the perilous while between a man's birth and his death. It serves very often to purchase shining station and a complacent address: it conducts many toward a figuring out of large sur-

taxes on or before the fifteenth of every March: it has led to the White House: and it has secured for sundry of its devotees the final tribute which any man may hope for upon earth, of having a picture of his funeral in the rotogravure sections. Such blessings may the faithful obtain because the wisdom of Æsred is a pragmatic wisdom; it is not toplofty; it remains always, as one might say, epigeal: and she prompts adherence to "that which is accustomed, that which holds in familiar usage," not as an entirely satisfactory program for human living, but as by long odds the best working program which the busied generations, through trial and error, have yet devised. All who are wise march at the side of Æsred crying out, Conform!

She has her æsthetics, too, and her valiant servitors no less than her strident defamers in every field of literature. It is customary, I know, to deride those books "with a good moral tone," and with a tone which is steadily optimistic, such as the devotees of mediocrity are supposed to provide for one another's edification. But true mediocrity works now and then in other media more stably. It was Æsred, I think, who blazed the not uncelebrated *meden agan* which was the pathway of all Greek art during the period of that art's mature vigor. It was Æsred who inspired the most wise and the most durable of human poets, Horace. She contributed at least the books of the Proverbs and of Psalms to the Bible, and she dictated to Shakespeare all his more popular quotations. And it was Æsred who stood always at the elbow of Molière when he was writing his comedies.

That is a thought which prompts me to look with quite real respect toward Our Lady of Conformity; and I become well satisfied to write under a patronship so august. "*La parfaite raison, madame,*" I remark ingratiatingly, "*fuit toute extrémité; et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété.*"

Yet against Æsred generation after generation of young romanticists have gone into shrill-voiced revolt. With indignation and with manifestoes and with the very loftiest

motives they have marched up against Æsred under a barrage of fulminating books and explosive small magazines. They have exposed that which they sweepingly called "the truth" about marriage and high finance and politics and church members and all the other adjuncts of respectability. Yet by-and-by these scribbling zealots pass, tacit now and outworn: and the spate of their verbiage has availed nothing. Æsred endures. She notes perhaps that a new lot of those young people are to-day in uproar against her. That does not matter to wise Æsred, who perceives that books are only books; who knows that for mankind all truth is unknowable; and who answers serenely, alike to the shouting of these rebels and to the invocation of her courtiers, Do that which seems expected, and do not offend against the notions of thy neighbor.

So I esteem it wholesome to write as a postulant before Æsred, whose gaze at every instant keeps me in mind of ideals which I must respect without of necessity sharing. I at least have not ever wittingly offended Æsred. Throughout the last some and twenty years, in the while that my more temerarious fellows have with untiring typewriters assailed and derided her notions, I have written on sedately in praise of monogamy in "Jurgen," and of keeping up appearances in "Figures of Earth," and of chastity in "Something About Eve," and of moderation in "The High Place," and of womanhood in "Domnei," and of religion in "The Silver Stallion": and indeed throughout the long building of the Biography I have at every instant upheld, in my own un-presuming way, all that Æsred endorses as the more comfortable fetishes for a man to believe in.

And besides, as I grow older, I find I am more than usual calm (without exactly completing Pet Marjorie's phrase) as to all questions of large social import. I burn with generous indignation over this world's pig-headedness and injustice at no time whatever. I find, contrariwise, the practice of a sedate pessimism to be a firm savior of contentment,

and the constant purveyor of some pleasure-giving surprise when, as happens daily, this or the other affair turns out perceptibly less ill than I had looked for. I do not expect anyone to be intelligent or large-hearted: and my fellows therefore delight me by revealing unsuspected virtues or else justify my clear-sightedness, in an even more gratifying fashion. So do I remain well content to recognize that a not unwholesome sort of dullness and a hand-to-mouth compromising with reality do in the long run rule the material world and upon the whole pilot it acceptably. So am I moved to no carping against Æsred, who—once more, upon the whole—has dealt with me not unkindly.

I regard this world of hers which I inhabit under her sufferance, and that which I see demands no enthusiastic approval: but it does not vitally interest me, who have, after all, my writing to play with. It very certainly does not enrage me to the right pitch of the radical weeklies, for I perceive that under Æsred's no doubt dunderheaded ruling the lot of a creative writer is favored. His vocation may well be trivial: yet is he paid for the performing of it, with a great largesse. For, lo! the weakling sits alone and makes quite small marks upon paper, and these marks become magical, bedrugging him. It matters no bean's worth if he be a heavy dunce, or a light simpleton, about the composing of mere balderdash and drivel: the magic he has evoked takes a friendly care of that, and its art preserves him in his own belief as a strong thaumaturgist about the working of ever-living prodigies. The *æs perennius* perhaps deficient from his completed book is thus not ever lacking from an author's self-conceit in the time when he is writing it.

What indeed has he in that hour to be modest about? All wisdom attends him docilely, and through his spacious mind frisk the most killing witticisms. Beauty repairs to him, come smilingly from out of her sovran shrine, with such an agile hastiness that all her customary veils have been forgotten. Truth woos him in the same frank nakedness; ur-

banity guides his progress with never any misstep; immortality beckons; and quite perfect phrases pop out of nowhere into his complacent attention. He is uplift a great way beyond mankind: he regards that lesser race with affability, with divine derision, and with a complete understanding, in the while that he embalms, forever, his pick of them in the miraculous spicery of his picked words. He becomes, in brief, a god about the making of his own world after his own sheer whim, and about the colonizing of this world with many thrice-lucky inhabitants who enjoy the supreme honor of having been created in his likeness.

I mean, of course, that is how it seems to the drugged scalawag in the time when he is writing. Sometimes his book is really not quite so good as all that comes to. My point, though, is that in *Æsred's* world he is permitted to taste these high and abnormal joys, and to induce these sublime trances, under the shallow pretext of working for his living. My point is that he now and then does actually earn his material support by his indulgence in just these ecstasies. My point is that in a world wherein all other drug addicts are frowned on, are pestered with wise advice and physicians, and are locked up in asylums, the creative writer is left unmolested.

That his tribe, of all tribes, should attack *Æsred*, who permits and who even condescendingly fosters this unparalleled favoritism, appears to me a distasteful flowering of ingratitude: and toward it I at least shall contribute no petal. I prefer with polite self-effacement to speak no evil whatever against a scheme by which I profit thus directly. I am conscious of no tiniest hankering to expose or to denounce, nor in fact to alter, any of *Æsred's* arrangements. To the pursuers of my especial trade and dementation I find these arrangements over generous. Then too I remember Nero Claudius Cæsar and what a hash that young literary artist made of this world when he attempted to control it: and I decide that by and large the cohorts of *Æsred* manage matters, if not perfectly, at any rate with comparative competence.

Meanwhile, I decide also, I have squandered a deal too much thought upon serious affairs, and it is time an industrious author should get back to his nonsense. So I look toward the bust of Æsred, not over the top of my reading glasses but through them; and I can thus see her, very far out of focus, only as a vague form which appears pale and implacable and wholly lovely. I imagine that this woman is not Æsred who allures us into the gregarious, kindly rule of conformity. I think that the woman whom I faintly see is that Lady Beauty whom Rossetti also glimpsed with myopic eyes and then hymned as a goddess who compels, "by sea or sky or woman, to one law her allotted bondman"—and whom yet other poets have seen just thus remotely at one time or another time, and whom thereafter they have served perforce under many names. Keats rhymed of her as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*; as *Lilith* she was necessarily deleted by Moses from a romance meant for family reading; and to Thomas of *Ercildoune* she came as the *Queen of Faëry*. But in her name alone is she variable. As *Tannhäuser* found her in the *Hörselberg*, and as *Homer* found her at doomed *Troy*, even so, without any gray declension or any smirching by common-sense, does the *Witch-Woman* endure today, and she yet haunts the lonely thinking of every true poet with an unabated compulsion.

In the *Poictesme* which begot Æsred, she was called *Ettarre*; and men said of *Ettarre* that her arts are otherwise than are the comfortable arts of Æsred. *Ettarre*, they avowed, does not incite us to comfort: but she bestows an ecstasy of such sort as (let it once transgress from the tinselled cloister of art into affairs of more solid worth) wise Æsred views with morose indignation. Nevertheless does *Ettarre* evoke an outmoded ecstasy. *Ettarre* remains, in spite of all that Æsred may do to withhold mankind from the dangers of thought and of too high endeavor, *Ettarre* yet remains the immortal *Witch-Woman* who calls to the young in heart, half-idly, with an unimaginable sweetness, such as compels her allotted bondman to depart from the

asphalt ways of conformity even nowadays, and to go as an outcast into Antan or whithersoever else she may direct, so dear is her favor.

So very dear is her favor, I reflect, that it drew Alfgar to his death in the Garden between Dawn and Sunrise; it betrayed Black Odo even at the pearly gates of Heaven; it left Madoc a moonstruck vagabond; it has imprisoned me in a small black and silver room between a typewriter and an unabridged dictionary; and of the lives of yet other persons it has made a foiled and forever lonely adventuring sustained with a high heart. For Ettarre teaches that the ways of conformity are wise but ignoble; that the respect of the dullwitted and of the cowed is an honor somewhat incriminating; and that her secret knowledge, if only we could master it, may yet lead some of us, among dim byways, toward that unique land in which one may live, perhaps, with more competence. Even in the ambiguity of that half-promise she lies, no doubt; but she remains wholly lovely. She is the lady in domnei of all true romantics, whether they be young or old.

I find it therefore a considerable comfort that my reading glasses should require but an instant to convert *Æsred* into *Ettarre*; and it is before the unreal vision begotten by the frailty of my failing eyes, and not before any adroitly carven stone, that I now bend in the attitude of a postulant. I then insert yet another sheet of paper into my typewriter, and I begin upon a new paragraph of that especial sort of nonsense which happens to divert me more affably than does *Æsred's* wisdom.