

Honesty

IT WAS many years ago now, but the reactions to my uncle's gradual emergence as the man he was have stayed with me over the years. And I trust they will stay with me for ever. The essence of what I then came to understand about men and women, friends and family, has guided my thinking ever since.

My uncle – he was my mother's youngest brother – was always a favourite of mine. He was twelve years younger than she and ten years older than I, but when I first grew to know him as an other, at five, he seemed more like the brother I did not have but had long wanted. I had three sisters, all older than me, but no brother. I had, of course, known him since I was very young but it was when I was five that I became aware of him as more than just someone around our house.

He was more than my uncle. He was a friend and in my young eyes a hero. He was what I then wanted to be and to become. As we grew older we lost sight of one another for several years. As a young man he was off, making a life for himself, and I was still a young boy. But after several years he returned and was taken into the business his father, my grandfather, ran.

I can now understand far more of what went on. I am no longer a young man, though certainly not yet old. But I have married and have sons and daughters of my own and I am aware of the quiet griefs that our children can cause us. They do not mean to and we must make allowance for their thoughtlessness and occasional idiocy. I cannot record how other men and women – other fathers and mothers – become enlightened, but it was my love for my children which, in a sense, opened my eyes.

I first heard talk, slips of conversation between what I then still called 'grown-ups'. I half-understood what they were saying but I did gather that it was not complimentary. It concerned my uncle. Where his young peers and friends were pairing off into this or that partnership and alliance, treading the familial path expected of them, he had yet to make his play. One conversation I overheard concerned his friendship with a fellow student, described as 'close' but, in description, not one to be admired. This was not, those speaking implied, what was required of my uncle, and I sensed he was low in their estimation. The matter came to a head a year or two later when he and a friend set up a household together. It was then the knives came out and I learned quite how vicious seemingly pleasant folk can be.

But my uncle was my uncle and I cherished him and the times we had spent together. I faced a choice: convenience or honesty. I chose honesty.

