

# UNDER THE AZALEA

## HORNPIPE SERIES

"Lately when I retired to my home, determined as far as possible to bother about nothing except spending the little life I have left in rest and privacy, it seemed to me I could do my mind no greater favor than to let it entertain itself in idleness and stay and settle in itself, which I hoped it might do more easily now, having become heavier and more mature with time. But I find 'Ever idle hours breed wandering thoughts' -- that on the contrary, like a runaway horse, it gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose, that in order to contemplate their strangeness and foolishness at my pleasure, I have begun to put them in writing, hoping in time to make even my mind ashamed of them."

-- MONTAIGNE

NUMBER TWO

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"I have the serpent brought."

-- DONNE

IN THE GARDEN stands a large flowering shrub that visitors always exclaim about when they see it for the first time. It is a California azalea, a handsome bush all year around, nearly ten feet tall and wonderfully wide-spreading. Every spring constellations of fragrant white blossoms, pink-tinged, with yellow blotches, glimmer on every bough. From my window I can see it at night, tall and mysterious, with the serene spark of Polaris standing directly above. It is the chief treasure of a beautiful garden.

In the corner formed by the back fence and the cinderblock wall that divides this property from next door the big azalea casts a shadow across the garden most of the day. Around the tangle of its entwining boughs come odd and interesting inhabitants of the wild: squirrels and rabbits, mostly, and once a skunk that lived somewhere in the garden all summer long. They seem to have as much fun studying me as I do studying them.

One morning a robin questing for breakfast hopped confidently around the azalea under my very feet, startling us both. The momentary confrontation amused me, for it showed that even wild things are careless sometimes. I am more tolerant now of my own blunders. When I step off the curb into the path of a speeding car that has to stop with a sudden squeal of brakes I smile in an amiable fashion, wave at the driver, and go on my way without worrying about the matter. Like the friendly robin I live in a safe and civilized world where eternal vigilance is not required. There are power brakes, traffic signals, burglar alarms, smoke detectors, guard patrols, insecticides, vaccines, INS computers, the Surgeon General, cops and the United States Marines to keep me from harm.



A few months ago, however, I discovered a far more disquieting denizen of the garden. Carrying my morning cup of coffee, I stepped out to admire the Japanese musk rose that was blooming prettily then. As I rounded the azalea bush I heard a sudden scrabbling among the leaves and, looking down, beheld a strange creature about the size and general shape of a Christmas gobbler poised in front of me. But its size and shape were the only aspects of the creature that reminded me of anything pleasant and familiar.

The beast had appeared as suddenly as if Moses' rod were cast on the ground, and resembling Moses I nearly fled before the apparition. Like the beast in Exodus it seemed to be a serpent of some sort. Yet it was bipedal and swift in its movement. As I saw in a flashing moment it moved in a blur of twist and turn. It faced around in a quick darting motion, fast and light on its two powerful legs, and regarded me with the same surprise that I regarded it.

Its most alarming characteristic was that, unlike the turkey with its vestigial wings, the common if grotesque fowl which it resembled superficially, this creature had short forearms alongside its scaly body, ending in sharp bony fingers. In one of its skeletal hands it clutched a mouse, still struggling from its capture perhaps only a moment before. For the rest, the beast had a toothless, horny beak, like something out of a horrible nightmare, a reptilian neck, and a long thrashing tail.

I was more alarmed than it was. As I stared at it with, I am sure, popping eyes, I fell back a couple of paces and dropped my coffee cup. The beast stood its ground, and after a moment took an unhurried nibble of the poor mouse. I have a lot of trouble with mice invading the house in chilly weather. I keep a baited trap behind the refrigerator all winter long. But I cried out in anguish as the mouse was rended apart and swallowed in two or three bites, like a delectable tidbit. The creature inspected me with blank, unblinking eyes.

I backed away slowly, but there was no need to retreat, for the beast itself turned aside. I am certain that the movement was not hurried because of panic, for the creature was not at all frightened of me. But it was built to move fast, and had other

business to attend to. In a moment it scampered into the shrubbery and vanished. I did not draw an easy breath till I lunged inside the house and slammed the door. I leaned against the wall and listened to the comforting jingle of the wind-bells outside under the eaves.

I didn't dare to go forth into the garden all the rest of the day, and I do not venture there at night. I had to go out to water the flowers occasionally, but I did it in broad daylight, keeping a watchful eye on the shadows in the brushy corner. Sometimes I heard a suspicious rustling sound among the leafy boughs. I think there may be more than one of the strange animals lurking somewhere among the thick foliage. I phoned the police, and at their suggestion the biology department at UC Berkeley. Nobody took me seriously. "The Coelurosaurs," one University professor told me, "died out a while back, about 80 million years ago."

This morning the autumn rains began. I went out into the cold misty downpour to put away the garden hose, which I probably won't need for a while. Preoccupied with the task of coiling up the lengths of obstinate green plastic I didn't see the creature till I glanced around toward the azalea. The strange beast stood motionless in the rain, looking at me with its horny beak working. For a moment I felt like an intruder, a total stranger, in my own garden. Then a sudden panic, sharper than ever before, took possession of me. I remembered that the beast was carnivorous. I thought of the squirming, struggling mouse caught in those long clutching talons, butchered by that horrible tearing bill, and gobbled down in a few swift bites.

The beast raised its horny, beaky head, darting it back on its reptilian neck, and held my gaze for a moment. I looked into those flat, lidless, pitiless eyes, and in the gloom of the autumn morning saw reflected there all the far-off galaxies, supernovae, neutron stars, quasars, and black holes of the perilous universe.

-- Redd Boggs

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