

THE HOUSE
OF THE
HIDDEN POET

HORNPIPE SERIES

NUMBER 3

"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

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THE HOUSE OF THE HIDDEN POET : Hornpipe Series Number Three.
Written 28 March 1983. Edited and published at the Sign of the
Idle Gestetner by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, Cali-
fornia 94701, for the two-hundredth mailing of the Fantasy Ama-
teur Press association, August 1987. "Gafia Press" insigne on
the back cover is by Dean A. Grennell.

FORTY YEARS OF FAN PUBLISHING : THE GAFIA PRESS.

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THE HOUSE OF THE HIDDEN POET

*"...the world that lay
Before me in my endless way."*

-- WORDSWORTH

I LIKE TO WALK in Berkeley at night. My wife and I often walked out under the stars, and many and mysterious were our adventures as we strolled the dark ways of the world side by side. But last night, walking alone in the streets of the town, I met such strange apparitions that this morning I'm not sure whether I saw them and heard them at all. Perhaps they were only shadows from Plato's cave, and the imagined echoes of their voices. Or perhaps they were truer than the world I see around me in the sunshine.

It's at night when you see the real Berkeley. I don't know what sort of pot parties and sex orgies were going on in the dark houses I passed. I don't know what television programs were flickering in the livingrooms and bedrooms beyond my view. But I saw many other things that truly were of Berkeley.

As the night darkened the Berkeley hills swam on the eastern horizon like some vast mirage, unreal and pale in the evening mist, gradually blending with the sky and giving an effect of airiness that made the landscape seem to float cloudlike over the city. In the low west, peeping in and out of the swift incoming streamers of fog, I glimpsed the thinnest slice of a new moon, serenely silver, and the evening star, a little southward and a

little lower, as they sank together toward the far Pacific. I looked long and sadly at the hills and the sky, but as always my attention was mostly on the street itself.

A few pedestrians passed along the street, looming out of the shadows and passing into them. Street lamps began to glimmer in the dark. There were windows spilling light. On Telegraph avenue the white and red lights of the traffic rushed past. Ours is a small city, and Telegraph is not a busy street if you want to compare it with the busiest streets of New York or Chicago, but it pleased me with its everlasting, undulating roar. And I reflected that since "way leads on to way," this street was connected with other streets, to a highway and other highways, in an intricate woven pattern that linked us with realms where the sun had set long ago, or would not set for a long time. I was seeing travelers on their way to Puntas Arenas, Port Burwell, and Point Barrow at the far corners of the continent. They may have been going even farther out into the universe for all I knew.

Some people, like me, were satisfied with Berkeley, at least for the moment. In a lighted window near the street I saw a pretty girl sweeping a bow over a treble viol, her skirt hiked up and the instrument gripped between her slender legs. In another window a woman, with deft and busy fingers, was working at a hand loom. And in a room where the walls were lined with well-crammed bookshelves, a bearded young man was slouched in front of a typewriter. From the open books littering his desk and the pained and intent look on his face I supposed that he was writing a doctoral dissertation.

When the traffic sounds lulled for a moment I heard crickets chirping in a nearby garden. I paused and peered through the high wrought-iron fence that enclosed the place. In the gloom white roses glowed in great masses, and red roses were darker than the night. Beyond them stood a tall old-fashioned house, the front of it half-hidden by a pergola heavy with a bougainvillea. The purple blossoms framed the glimpse of a window in the house where the drapes were only half-pulled. Lamplight gleamed out into the garden, and inside I could see someone sitting at a small desk directly in front of the window. I could

see only a pair of bare, slender arms, and I could not tell whether the person was man or woman. In his or her hand the person held a pen that was flashing rapidly and industriously across a sheet of paper.

I watched for a minute or two, feeling discomforted, and as remote from the scene as a cat skulking down an alley. At last I sauntered on. Just then I became aware that travelers in their automobiles were not the only sojourners in the street. Behind me I heard a strange clatter and squeal that caused me to turn about in puzzlement.

A black coach drawn by four grey horses came along, rolling on heavy iron wheels. The contraption was made of wood and had swelled sides and a flat top. It seemed unnaturally dark and carried a hint of age and desolation. The driver sat high up in front with reins in his hand. As the coach stopped alongside me he shouted down to me in a hoarse but friendly voice. His accent was of the backwoods, but there was something more. I felt a sense of discontinuity when I heard his voice, and even more strongly when I gazed at his face, hidden by a huge beard that didn't look like it was ever trimmed by Supercuts or Haircrafters or any such fashionable shop.

I hardly understood what he said in his barbarous accent, but I realized that he was asking me if I wanted a ride. At the same time an unseen hand unfastened the coach door from inside, and it swung ajar invitingly. Long ago in my life I might have been tempted: the wonderful old coach, the prancing, matched grey horses hitched to it.... But now I shook my head. "No, I'm out for an evening walk," I said.

"Shanks mare," the driver said genially in his ancient voice. "Very well! Walking, they say, is good for the health. You won't change your mind, sir?" He raised his whip, glancing at me inquiringly, as I stood undecided. I wasn't sure, when it came to that, whether I might not change my mind after all, but the man was impatient. His beard opened in a vast smile, his whip cracked smartly over the rumps of his four steeds, and the coach went clattering and screeching away along the pavement.

Under the street lamps I saw the coach disappear into the evening mist far down the street.

I walked slowly on, hands in pockets, pondering the strange encounter. I felt a sudden sense of loss and deprivation. But only a few blocks farther on I came upon an even stranger, more mysterious contraption, also passing along the city street but in the other direction. The silvery metal machine was small, and built in an open, airy way that made it look more spacious than it was. The illusion was helped by the fact that the conveyance moved easily and lightly without wheels, floating at knee-height above the pavement. Even in Berkeley, where you see strange sights everywhere, this was a spectacle worthy of note.

The operator of this machine was even odder than the coachman I had met before, as slender and blond as the other was large and dark. His voice, though more melodious, was just as hard to understand as the other voice. I had never before heard such an utterance except in the warble of birds. He seemed to be talking from a thousand miles or a thousand years away. Only vaguely did I comprehend that he too was offering me a ride, a place beside him in the wonderful car. Once again I realized that long ago I would have been overjoyed to climb into this machine and flash magically across the horizon. But now I shook my head. Again I explained that I was out for an evening stroll.

"Discomfortable!" the man remarked in the careful tones of a person who is trying to make himself understood in an alien and difficult language. "No," I said, "I enjoy walking." The man smiled half-comprehendingly, and indicated the seat beside him with the soothing gestures that one uses to calm a child or a dog. "Live a dream!" he said.

I wasn't afraid of his mysterious machine. I merely wanted to stroll down the street quietly and alone. Like the coachman the operator paused a few moments, waiting for me to accept his invitation. When I did not, he touched an impellor knob on the small neat control panel in front of him, and the car twinkled away. It shimmered with an unearthly force and energy as it passed into the shadows.

For a moment I stood on the street corner, wondering what I had done. Had I given up a chance to enjoy miracles that other mortals only dream of experiencing? Had I so casually foresworn beauty and romance and adventure? Had I given up a fancy in exchange for the drab and the ordinary? The night seemed unusually dark and immense.

I returned home the way I had come. At the house with the purple bougainvillea I stopped again and peered through the fence. The person in the window -- who was, I knew, no vision of the night but a very ordinary human being -- was still at work with the pen, scribbling steadily upon the hidden page.

On impulse I turned and tried the gate. It was locked. I shook it angrily but it was strong and barely rattled in my grasp. Even in the dark I could read a small discreet sign fastened to the ironwork that said "No admittance." In all the night the one place I sought to enter was closed to me. Outside the garden with its walls and gate the world rushed on.

I looked again at the traffic hurrying by on the street, all the unknown people bound on their secret missions, each in his own separate twilight or darkness. Somewhere the black coach and the silvery car sped away from the here and now to strange places I could not even imagine. But they were no more remarkable than the scene that confronted me. A visitor from Arcturus would think that this street was as fantastic as anything else in the universe. For myself, I decided that there is magic in certainties and realities too. Even in the enclosed garden, which I glimpsed over my shoulder one last time, there was no greater poetry than that which is accessible. I walked home with the wonders of the world all around me.

-- Redd Boggs

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