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Redd Boggs'
SPROONINGS

SIC ITUR AD ASTRA

"And what is your birth sign?" said my new lady acquaintance. She smiled at me encouragingly over her crystalline quaff of Volpolicella that rounded off a hearty Italian dinner. "I'm sure you're a Sagittarian. You're so imaginative and amusing!"

"Why -- !!" I said. It was the freest impulse of my tongue to explain to her that people regularly tell me what my astrological sign is, once having learned my birthdate, but being blessed with a well-machined forgettery I am able to dismiss the information from my mind with only the slightest effort. I haven't the vaguest notion whether I'm a Capricorn, a Pisces, or a Pollux.

"Dear lady," I said silently, rehearsing my reply in the invaginated recesses of my mind, "I've scorned such nonsense since I was a child. The very first letter I ever wrote to a newspaper when I was quite young was to protest the start of an astrological prophecy column in the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune. My letter had no effect, of course, but the column lasted only five months or so. The man who wrote the column, luckily, was a fool who rushed in where smarter mystics mince with evasive claptrap. He predicted in his very first column that the United States would go to war in August 1941. A serious mistake in the way of sticking his neck out, to be sure, but he compounded it a few months later by foreseeing no war beginning in December 1941 but only the advent of dreary little catastrophes like an earthquake in Peru and a tidal wave in Perth."

She looked at me eloquently, waiting for me to speak. Surely her grey eyes were a miracle: they were as lustrous as "the morning star amid the weary stars of night." Her face altogether was an ambiguous masterpiece, as serene as mother's milk, yet as piquant as a jalapeno. The quality of intelligence and good will dwelling under her well-groomed abundance of auburn hair was so manifest that my prefatory "Why -- !!" stuck in my throat like a chocolate drop. I coughed delicately and resumed. "By all means, you're right, my dear: a Sagittarius. I'm charming. Devil-may-care. Clever. Sex-obsessed...."

THE MISSING METAPHOR

One morning recently as I was about to prepare myself a cup of instant coffee, I dumped a liberal heap of sugar from the sugar shaker into the cup and happened to notice a black speck among the white crystals -- a black speck that moved.

I should explain that unlike most coffee-lovers I know I always drink instant coffee because -- so Gretchen always insisted -- I have perverse tastes and actually prefer instant coffee to ground coffee.

"You're perfectly welcome to share my coffee," she would say. I prepared regular coffee for her every morning in a Cory coffee-maker which is a commercial mimic of laboratory glassware. The water in the lower flask of the device, when hot enough -- you start with cold water -- bubbles up the glass tube and fills the upper bowl, which is already heaped with four measures of ground coffee. When the heat is removed and the mixture cools it slowly seeps into the lower bowl again, resulting in a potful of strong and richly hued coffee. It also filled the house with the aroma of fresh coffee, which I always found pleasant and familiar, one of the delights of the morning. But this was her coffee.

I should also explain that instead of stirring sugar into a cup of instant coffee once it's made, I always shake a liberal quantity of sugar into the cup first, along with a heaping teaspoon of coffee granules, then fill the cup with boiling water. It is easier and more efficient to dissolve both sugar and coffee in one brisk agitation of the spoon. This practice enabled me the other morning to discern, although sleepily, the little black speck that moved among the white stuff.

As I paused, teakettle of hot water in my hand, the speck struggled up, righted itself, and started off in a purposeful way, crawling out of the heap of sugar and up the inside of the cup. Peering closely I saw that the speck was an ant that must have wedged herself into the sugar shaker through the flapper opening, crawled down into the sugar, and then been unable to extricate herself till tumbled into my coffee cup.

It was just a solitary ant. I made sure of it by dumping all the sugar from the cup and the shaker into a bowl and sifting it back and forth through a fine-meshed strainer. Imagine the enterprising ant, entombed alone in a vast treasurehouse of sweet -- riches beyond dreams, if the denizens of an anthill ever dream. Perhaps they do not, for ants are the most purposeful and singleminded creatures on earth. And this lone ant had been unable to free herself and hurry home to spread the news of the bonanza. If she had gotten out this ant would have led hundreds of her fellows to the fabulous hoard, and instead of finding one ant I would have found a busy multitude, carrying away the sugar grain by grain. Ants are not at all selfish. All discoveries belong to the nest as a whole.

As I reheated a teakettle of water and prepared myself another cup of coffee from carefully sifted sugar and another teaspoon of Hills Bros I perceived that this little incident was a metaphor of some sort. I know that there is something essential about the nonessential, something important about the unimportant, but I pondered a long while about the lone ant lost in the sugar shaker without reaching a conclusion. Try as I might, I couldn't think what it means.

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MARK TWAIN: ALIVE AND WELL

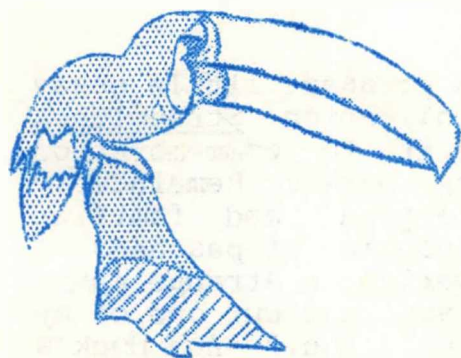
A writer I like, Christopher Morley, wrote a pleasant little essay about Mark Twain which is to be found in his collection Streamlines (1936), but I take some exception to it. He wrote it in commemoration of the Mark Twain centennial in 1935, and "Hunting Mark's Reminders" says some true things and pays proper homage to the great and familiar passages of Huckleberry Finn. He even quotes a couple of passages I never saw quoted before: Huck's fright at discovering a strange camp-fire, which Huck says "made me feel like a person had cut one of my breaths in two and I only got half, and the short half too." And Huck's wonderful description: "There was freckled places on the ground where the light sifted down through the leaves, and the freckled places swapped about a little, showing there was a little breeze up there." Very good -- but as Lord Dunsany said, "Mark Twain does not need appreciation any more than the Sphinx needs to be photographed with a little bunch of tourists on its paws," and it's easy to quote remarkable passages from Mark Twain's writings. Dip in almost anywhere, and you'll find something worth quoting. It's like finding bucketsful of water in the Pacific ocean.

Morley irritates me mightily now and then. For an admirer of Mark Twain he finds a great many things he dislikes in his works. He thinks Mark's "famous comic passage" about the "solitary oesophagus" is "not a very good joke." He tells us that Mark's humor "was freakish and often crude," and goes on to say that "his speeches, as they exist in print, [were] the merest occasional guff, his philosophic and religious notions ...are childishly banal; the long-announced notebooks and secret writings do not seem to contain any very startling revelations...."

All this is calculated to wiggle anybody's eyebrows a little. I have long admired the "solitary esophagus" passage, and it served as an inspiration for a little joke in Scintillas from World's End which no one has ever mentioned. As for Mark's speeches, I wonder if Morley ever read "The Whittier Birthday Speech," or the even more famous one, "The Babies"? I like, if I don't always feel affinity with, the Twain philosophical works. I just reread a relatively obscure Mark Twain book, Christian Science, which I acquired second-hand at Moe's long ago. My copy once belonged to Lt. Col. Doric W. J. Ball of the Presidio.

But what really rankled me more than anything else in the essay is a parenthetical remark following a reference to Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. He adds, "(the other books are fast fading out)." Morley was writing, as I said, almost 50 years ago, and we have the wonderful advantage of hindsight. But even in 1935 it should have been obvious that many other Mark Twain masterpieces would continue to be read in the foreseeable future.

Surely The Innocents Abroad, Roughing It, Life on the Mississippi, and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court are indisputably classics that are still read. All of them are currently available in trade paperbacks. Life on the Mississippi, one hundred years old this year, contains some of Mark's greatest writing, particularly Chapter 6 and of course the detached chapter from Huckleberry Finn which Mark "threw in" to illustrate "keelboat talk and manners." Since 1935 Pudd'nhead Wilson has been rediscovered as "the masterly work of a great writer," and the



THIS is Gretchen's representation of the stuffed toucan that watched over our home, Apartment #8, 270 South Bonnie Brae, Los Angeles, in the autumn of 1964. I have reproduced it once more from her original drawing, first published in Spirochete #1, 19 November 1964, as a good omen as Spirochete starts a new year in FAPA.

Autobiography has been acclaimed as a classic of American letters. I like them all, and reread them every few years. I also admire other things, including examples of Mark's "freakish and often crude humor," for so I suppose Morley would classify "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," "Baker's Blue-jay Yarn" and "The Awful German Language" (both from A Tramp Abroad), "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," and numerous others. And how to categorize "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses"? If it is merely literary criticism it is of a higher order than anything else of the genre, before or since.

But if Christopher Morley were alive today, I suspect that far from feeling chagrin that his parenthetical remark was so far off target he would light his pipe and happily settle down in his armchair with one of Mark Twain's books that are still as lively as a stream full of brook trout.

AM I JUSTIFIED IN ASKING?

Many of the first fanzines I ever saw, more than 40 years ago, had justified right-hand margins. This was one of the manifestations of prozine imitation that still lingered on then, remnants of the era of such fanzine titles as Outré and Space Tales and of the publication of hundreds of fan fiction stories. By the time I issued my first fanzine in 1947 -- World War 2 had intervened between my discovery of fanzines and my debut as a fan editor -- even edges had become almost as passé as "Bob and Koso." Nevertheless, this seemed to me one aspect of the old tradition that was worth preserving, and from the start I carefully justified the margins of nearly all my fan publications. Few other fanzines over the same span of time have ever bothered with this extra touch. According to Fancylopedia II, a typed page "just doesn't look like letterpress" and therefore even edges are "Vulgar Ostentation."

Recently the advent of word-processors and other magical gadgets in fandom has allowed other fans to even-edge their fanzines -- and even their letters! -- with a precision and ease I can never match. For of course I use the old method of making a dummy in advance: "It's a lot of work," Cy II says, "and adds little to the appearance of a magazine." This development makes me wonder whether I should continue to even-edge the Gafia press publications. I don't suppose anybody cares very much, one way or the other. Whatever feedback I've gotten over the years on the matter has been negative, such as somebody's complaint about "the ugly gaps" in the lines of my fanzines. But I am curious to know what you think: Shall I continue to justify margins, as I've done for nearly 37 years, or shall I give it up as a bad job? Let me know!

When it comes to pickles, I'm a diletante.
