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Redd Boggs'

SPIROCHENE

AN ONSLAUGHT OF ROBINS

"Ah! well I mind the calendar,
Faithful through a thousand years,
Of the painted race of flowers,
Exact to day, exact to hours,
Counted on the spacious dial
Yon broidered zodiac girds.
I know the trusty almanac
Of the punctual coming-back
On their due days, of the birds."

-- Emerson

I am sitting by the study window with a manuscript in my lap. I am slashing it mercilessly with a Fisher extra-fine red ballpoint, leaving X's and arrows and scrawled interpolations all the way down the page. I wish I were outside. The morning mail brought a letter from a friend in the east, who reports that she is "sunk in deepest snow and low temperatures," but early February, after all, is full springtime in the Bay Area. All of nature proclaims the advent. All over the East Bay the acacias and the redbuds are in blossom. It's a beautiful sunny morning out-of-doors.

Things could be worse for me. At least I'm home, and looking out of my own window, not working in a factory, staring through a grimy windowpane. And just outside my window is the patio, not a yardful of trucks and machinery. I can see a scrap of blue sky and trees waving gently in a mild breeze. Just beyond the window-glass Gretchen's potted geraniums are blooming red and pink and being investigated by a fumbling, tawny honeybee.

I have no excuse for going outside. The editing of this manuscript has to be done. It's a doctoral dissertation about the political upheaval of the Taiping Rebellion: wretchedly written and very dull, but perhaps not the worst or the dullest dissertation ever inflicted upon academia. It has to be edited so that the writer, my client, can turn it in to his advisor and accept a faculty appointment in Indiana or Nebraska or some other godforsaken place. He will be a PhD and an associate professor next autumn, thanks partly to me, even if he can't write straight English.

Just as I'm wielding my red pen most cruelly, carving my way through the densest jungle of words yet encountered, I am bestirred by a chorus of strange wild clucks out in the sunny patio. With relief at the unexpected diversion I rise and rush to the door, and am joined by Gretchen, who still clutches the book she was studying when she heard the sudden commotion.

We stand in the doorway, staring at a great flock of robins sailing down from the sky, filling the patio, perching on the top of the fence, the lanai roof in the corner, the clothesline, the TV antenna, the telephone wires and the nearby trees. The early mornings now are full of birdsong, a sound so melodious and rustic I could

imagine myself Thoreau at Walden pond. But these robins don't warble their familiar tune, but only cluck and cackle shrilly like poor domestic fowls. I count at least 60 of them, and more are on distant housetops and in the trees half-hidden by the green boughs. There must be hundreds of them in the neighborhood.

Only a few of them are following the usual robin custom of hopping and listening and pecking earnestly, then hopping and listening again. Most of them are resting, not moving much except once in a while to preen their feathers impatiently. They must be weary after a long migration from somewhere farther south.

Then one of the birds espies the cotoneaster bush in the corner of the patio, bending under its winter burgeon of bright red berries. He fairly leaps at the bush with flashing beak and claw. Presently a dozen robins are ravaging the small shrub, their piercing cries attracting other birds. A whole fluttering, squawking lot of them assail the bush, grabbing the berries and swallowing them whole, blinking and palpitating as they do. Gretchen, who loves the bush colorfully laden with berries, can hardly be restrained from rushing forth to save the bush from the fierce intruders. She points out afterward that the berries are, or may be, poisonous. The robins don't seem to mind. Most of the berries are devoured when the flock begins to go on its way. Without apparent signal or ceremony the robins take wing, a great circling ruddy cloud that disappears over the rooftops.

Gretchen and I return reluctantly to our tasks. I think of how astonished the cold north will be, six weeks from now, at the robins' early arrival.

MISS HOPKINS AND THE POET OF THE DAWN

The other day I received news of my old school: the University of Minnesota. I hear little of it these days because the football team no longer wins Big Ten and national championships, and I was glad to acquire a copy of CLA Today, a publication of the College of Liberal Arts. The CLA seems to be the modern equivalent of the College of Science, Literature, and the Arts (SLA), which I attended in the dear dead days of my youth. I thumbed through the publication curiously, and was confronted by numerous photos of well-bred, well-fed, and well-dressed people -- faculty members, and students, and even the local Brahmins, the latter busily endowing "chairs" of the University with a liberal hand. I felt a little uncomfortable just looking at such people. I don't think they would approve of me: "one of the roughs." Perhaps the University of Minnesota aspires to be the Harvard of the wheatfields, the Berkeley of the boonies.

In all the pictures and the newsstories not a single black or Hispanic lurks anywhere around, aside from (perhaps) a helmeted football player indistinctly seen in the background of one photo. Even the most interesting person profiled in CLA Today, Ms Tracy Chestnut, a University track star, is now attending Oxford University. How could you be more upper class than that? The "population" of the CLA is

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said to have been 16,829 this past autumn, but they don't report how many minority students there were, and how many were women.

On the other hand, they boast that CIA is the first land-grant college in the country to adopt "an American cultural pluralism requirement," a mouth-filling phrase that means that all students must take two courses dealing with minorities. That's a small advance, I suppose. Also it seems that one associate dean is a woman and at least two schools or departments in the CIA, namely journalism and theater arts, are headed by women. There's no word on how many faculty members are women. I hope there are more than there were when I was an undergraduate. The only female faculty members in my day -- in the English department, at any rate -- were three little old ladies whose tenure must have begun back in the days of world war 1. They hung on into the 1950s, but they must be gone and forgotten by now.

They were almost as alike as three sisters. We called them, very unkindly, the old biddies of the department. They were all greyheaded, withered, gentle souls, slightly decrepit due to age and the rigors of the academic life. I was really quite fond of them, but I am afraid that however intelligent and well-meaning they were, they had run out of energy, interest, and scholarly enterprise at least 20 years earlier. I remember little about one of them, except for a lingering sense of sad regret at having wasted my time in her class. I believe she was the only married woman of the three. The other two were maidenly ladies who in those days were addressed as "Miss."

Of the second woman professor I remember chiefly that through some conflict I was scheduled to take two finals at the same time, one being for her class. Upon application to her I was allowed to take the final in her class that afternoon by going to her home, which was just off campus. I confess that I was curious to see where she lived, and was not at all surprised to discover that it was in a large, old-fashioned house with ivy climbing the walls and rosebushes in the front yard. Inside, however, it was not at all as I imagined it. The place was a junk heap, crammed with boxes and littered with papers. Instead of smelling of lavender it smelled of neglect and decay and of dog. The dog in residence was large and clumsy and didn't like me very much. The professor found me a place to sit -- not an easy task in such a cluttered house -- on a sun porch. I balanced my bluebook across my knee atop a literary journal dated two decades earlier and tried to scribble my answers while being pestered by the dog that came around from time to time and made disapproving growls. He didn't trust me in the same house with his mistress.

The third professor was by far the most interesting of the three. I couldn't remember her name at first, but while writing this memoir it popped out of my subconscious none the worse for being stored there unbidden for 35 years. Let's forget it again, however. Not to be unkind to her memory, for she was a very nice lady, if a little pixilated, I will call her Miss Millicent Hopkins, which is a name almost as pretty as her real name. She was small and pert, and in her younger years must have been very attractive. I always pictured Miss Billie Burke playing the part in the movie version of my life. I wondered why Miss Hopkins never married. Some of the class who speculated on the matter theorized that her fiance had been killed in world war 1, leaving her with a broken heart. The truth was probably less romantic. I took two courses from her, the second because I couldn't get out of it, the first because I didn't know any better.

The first course was a class on metaphor and simile in literature. During the first class session she announced that our grade would depend primarily upon a paper we would write, or rather compile, concerning one of the recurrent figures of speech in literature. I was assigned to write about the horse as a literary symbol. That sounded rather formidable, if not as difficult as some other subjects allotted to

other class members, on such abstruse subjects as "the hereafter" and "summer and winter." I began to worry about the amount of time it might take me to go through dozens of books to find references to the horse as metaphor and simile, but I need not have fretted. The next class session Miss Hopkins staggered into the room lugging a double armload of books which she distributed to the class. Anthologies and old textbooks they were, mostly, each collecting bits and pieces of great literature: poems, plays, short stories, excerpts from novels, everything from Shakespeare to Salinger. I opened the one passed along to me and found the text heavily underlined and bracketed, with numerous marginal notes scribbled in an antique hand, obviously that of Miss Hopkins. All these marks called attention to mentions in the text of the subjects to which we had been assigned. Here and there I found the word "horse" mentioned, and this cheered me considerably. All our research had been done already. All we had to do was skim through these books, and others she brought later, and copy down the references she had cleverly discovered for us. Our term papers consisted of compiling a list of these mentions, with copious quotations.

A Mickey Mouse course is serendipitous now and then, but even so I was not very eager to take further classes taught by her. I had no choice, however, for she gave a required course that I had been unwary enough to skip when it was offered at other times by other instructors. It was a course on Chaucer. As taught by Miss Hopkins it was not, strictly speaking, a study of Chaucer's poetry at all. The course was devoted largely to making a Chaucer notebook containing summaries of each of The Canterbury Tales, all 23 or 24 of them, including those that aren't really tales at all. This was probably of some use in those days before paperbound "study guides" such as Cliff's Notes became commonplace. But the summaries were not ours and not based on our own study of the Tales. Miss Hopkins spent much of the class period each day dictating to us her own synopses of the Tales which we were then to convert into neat handwriting or typewriting and enclose in a notebook. This was before the day of the Xerox, but I wondered why she didn't prepare mimeographed or Dittoed sheets of the material and bestow it upon upon us in one big handful.

Unfortunately I chucked my notebook into the trash barrel as soon as the course was over. I wish I had kept it, because I remember that Miss Hopkins' summaries of the tales of "synne and harlotries" -- the Miller's Tale, the Summoner's Tale, and the others -- were marvels of Bowdlerism and euphemism. She rather skimmed in explicating such lines as "This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart/ As greet as it had been a thonder-dent" and the Wife of Bath's boast about having "the best quoniam myghte be." I chuckled a good deal as I typed Miss Hopkins' girlish cop-outs into a notebook and put them under covers made of colored mimeo paper, sort of like a fanzine.

Since I didn't have a class in the hour before Miss Hopkins' class I sometimes arrived early. The room was empty then, and I used the time to study for other courses. Her classes always had few students -- everybody in the know avoided taking them -- but they trickled in as the hour drew near. One of the students was a beautiful young coed. She was not only the prettiest girl in the class but perhaps the prettiest on campus. Take my word for it. One day she arrived early and sat down next to me. She opened her textbook and skimmed some of it with a frown on her face. She looked up many words in the glossary at the bottom of the page, then she found a term not mentioned there. She looked at me and asked a question. I wish she had saved it to ask Miss Hopkins during the class. It would have been fascinating to hear our prim and maidenly professor answer the girl's question. I had some trouble with it myself. As I looked into the girl's lovely and eloquent eyes she asked, "What's a eunuch?"

I'd love to meet an uninteresting woman. That would be interesting.
