

56

MAY 1991

Redd Boggs'

SPIROCHETE

"MAKEN MELODYE"

The first music that ever truly charmed me, when I was seven or eight years old, was perhaps John Philip Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever," which I heard blaring out of that wonderful piece of furniture in the livingroom, the radio. That's embarrassing to recall. Why couldn't it have been "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" or "Voices of Spring"? But strange to relate, I was not stirred by the military gait of Sousa's march or by its patriotic fervor, but by the part where the slender flute stands out against the crash of brass and drums and twitters prettily like a bird.

NASTY BASTARD

I am known world-wide (excepting only such alien places as Swaziland, the Maldives, and Tennessee, where I have never been) as an amiable fellow. A hasty survey of the intelligentsia recently conducted on the west coast concerning my sweet disposition elicited the following opinions:

"Redd even has a soft place in his head for the post office, auto mechanics, and George Bush." -- Robert Lichtman.

"His temper is so sweet that you could make candy with it; peanut brittle, I believe." -- Charles Burbee.

"The only cross word I ever heard him say was '27 Down: Sweetener, five letters.'" -- Marion Z. Bradley.

"If a mad dog bit him, the dog would be transformed into a pussycat." -- Seth Goldberg.

"He didn't lose his saintly poise even when I imparted the news that the Easter bunny doesn't lay eggs." -- Deena Andrews.

"I've known Redd for more than forty years, and the only thing that ruffles his temper is palominos." -- Jim Harmon.

"He and Hitler managed to co-exist in Europe during World War 2." -- Dave Rike.

"Redd's frightening -- the Harlan Ellison of amiability." -- Art Widner.

"I did hear him say a disrespectful word about gravity." -- Bill Blackbeard.

"He wouldn't get angry even if you pulled a gun and shot at him seven times; that is, if you were a pretty girl -- and missed." -- Betty Vinmar.

No pretty woman has ever shot at me, so far as I remember, but on a recent morning a woman put me at risk in another way. A car driven by a young woman raced past in front of me as I walked across the street at Allston and Harold way in Berkeley. It came so close that it peeled off a couple of layers of skin from my nose, and I jumped back, frightened and angry. My whole life didn't flash before my eyes, but at least I got a quick preview showing. I was legally in the crosswalk on a clear and sunny morning, and there was no excuse for such carelessness.

The car, which whizzed by without slowing down, had a government license plate, I noted. Probably the woman was hurrying somewhere to investigate a case of welfare

fraud to the amount of \$8.13 involving a black woman with six kids and no husband. Reason enough for roaring headlong across intersections, perhaps. But her recklessness availed her nothing, for she had to slam to a stop for a red light at Shattuck avenue, a block away, and I was tempted to hurry down the street and have a few words with her.

I decided not to, but if I had, I devoutly hope that my few words would have been firm but courteous, perfectly considerate, and moderate in tone. I intended to chide her for endangering the life of a pedestrian, pointing out that she came very close to running me down, thereby losing her drivers license, perhaps, and even her job. It staggers me when a woman fucks up because, by god, I expect better things from a woman than that. But because she was a woman, I would have reverted to my ancient politeness, quite the equal to that of honorable Korita-san. It is not easy to be a woman (as opposed to being female) and I have no wish to add to woman's burden.

Still, I am not always quite so polite and considerate -- despite the sworn testimony mentioned above -- although I try to be. Once in a while something so outrageous happens that even my temper gets a bit ruffled, as one's hair is lightly tousled by a languorous summer breeze.

A week or two before that incident on the street I had attempted to enter the turnstile of the BART system with a ticket that seemed to show \$1.40 left on it. At least that was the last figure in the column of amounts remaining, which was printed along the lefthand margin of the ticket. The turnstile wouldn't open and let me in. "What's wrong with this ticket?" I asked a uniformed BART employee who happened to be standing right there. She glanced at it and handed it back to me. "The totals are printed out of order for some reason," she said snottily. "There's only 20¢ left on your ticket. You need a minimum of 80¢ to get through the gate." She seemed to be happy about this. She had the smile of a traffic court judge levying a fine for jaywalking on a blind man with a wooden leg.

"Your stupid damn machines," I said, and tore up the ticket and threw it on the floor. She stared in horror at the scraps of the ticket fluttering to her feet. "I'll have you cited for littering!" she threatened, once she managed to comprehend the enormity of the outrage. "Make my day!" I said, in the famous words of Sydney Greenstreet or whoever it was. We exchanged glares, but she made no move to detain me. I was glad of that, for what's the sequel to "Make my day"?

SPIROCHETE : Number 56 : May 1991. Edited and published at the Sign of the Idle Gestetner by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701, for the two-hundred-fifteenth mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press association. "Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power." -- Bertrand Russell. Heading by Gretchen Schwenn, done for the first issue, 19 November 1964. THE GAFIA PRESS.

When we first arrived in Berkeley I took the car to the Co-op gas station at University and Sacramento because of an advertised oil change/grease job "special" that was supposed to include vacuuming the interior of the car. They didn't get around to the vacuuming and didn't seem to think it was important. I finally drove away without it, after much waiting around, and I was irked enough not to return to that gas station for about a dozen years, although I was a Co-op member. Finally, one day, I drove into the station -- much to Gretchen's surprise. We needed gas, urgently. I shut off the motor and got out of the car. The station wasn't busy; we were the only customers. One of the Co-op's storied friendly employees looked across the lot at us and bellowed, "PULL UP TO THE FORWARD PUMP!" I waved at him amiably -- got back in, started the motor, and pulled up past the forward pump, and out of the station entirely. "What are you doing!" Gretchen said in alarm. "The car is running on fumes!" "Didn't you hear that big-mouth bastard yell at me?" I said. "Don't worry, if we stall on the street you can get out and push." As it was, I drove directly across the street (there were gas stations on three of the four corners of that intersection in those days) and purchased gas there. I never went back to the Co-op station, which went out of business shortly afterward -- just a coincidence, no doubt.

One time at the Telegraph avenue store of the Berkeley Co-op -- a venerable enterprise that no longer exists, by the way, except perhaps as a flimsy paper organization -- the clerk asked me to bag my groceries. I explained, with a show of surprise, that I wasn't an employee there, but a customer, and in fact a Co-op member (#40794). She was another of the famous friendly Co-op clerks. "We ask you to bag your groceries!" she said grimly, with the steely resolve of a hangman. "Oh, I'm sorry," I said pleasantly. "I don't bag my own groceries. I thought you were paid to do that." We exchanged glares, but she seemed in no mood to relent. Therefore I shrugged, turned, and walked out of the store, leaving the load of groceries heaped on the checkout counter. Gretchen was with me, and she tagged after me reluctantly, saying in an annoyed voice, "But we needed those groceries!" "We'll go to the Safeway," I growled. "I've a vague notion they'll be glad to bag our groceries for us."

Once we received a pay-up-or-else notice from Pacific Gas & Electric, requiring an overdue bill to be paid by a certain date under pain of having gas and electricity shut off, and even our matches confiscated lest we build a campfire in the back yard. To pay the bill Gretchen and I made the long trek from El Cerrito to the PG&E office in the dark tohu-bohu of downtown Richmond. (Talk about going up from Galilee unto the city of David to be taxed!) I put down the notice in front of a woman behind the counter, along with the money to pay the bill. She handed me a receipt, but as I turned to go I noticed that it was dated the next day. "What in hell is this?" I asked the woman. "Oh, after 3 p.m. our receipts are dated the next business day. Don't worry about it." "But I do worry about it," I said. "Your notice said to pay by today or else, and I get a receipt with tomorrow's date on it." "Well," she said, getting a little irritated, "I can't change that. Only my supervisor can do that." "Let me see your supervisor," I said. She looked around and said, "I believe Ms Smith is on her break...." "GET HER!" I rasped. The woman arose and went to the rear of the office, and a moment later another woman came hurrying out -- not the most amiable-looking woman I have ever seen, unless you think saber-toothed tigers looked kittenish. She grudgingly gave me another receipt, correctly dated.

"I never saw anything funnier," Gretchen said, outside the building, laughing so hard she could hardly stand up, "than Ms Smith popping out of that inner office as if a holdup was in progress. And you, you looked like Toshiro Mifune in 'Yojimbo'! You're a damn bastard, Redd Boggs. I'm proud of you!" "Well, I hated

to give them a hard time," I said, "but bureaucrats and officious public servants give me a pain."

"You're the stubbornest son of a bitch in the country," she said. "People think you're a sweet-tempered fellow and you're not. I wonder what people think of us. I'm supposed to be loud and nasty and you're supposed to be shy and retiring -- a mismated pair. Actually, we're perfectly matched: the irresistible force and the immovable object." I thought about that. "Which is which, between us?" I asked. "The force is with you," she said. And she always is.

THIS IS THE LIFE *

"Il n'est tresor que de vivre a son aise"

-- Francois Villon

Gretchen and I were talking yesterday about the pleasures of living on an unlimited income. She confesses a desire to savor the delights of this situation, although she knows it to be evil, for it is experienced by the elite of nearly every civilized country of the world in all ages to the detriment of the rest of us. She would enjoy, she says, the pleasure of never having to worry about food, shelter, clothing; to be able to say, for example, "I would like a complete new outfit; make several examples for my approval."

As honestly as I could I stated that while I too feel the allure of such a situation -- as who would not? -- I do not ardently wish for it, much less hope for it. I would be happier, I think, living on a much more modest scale, where I enjoyed a limited security, but not to the extent of never having to think about the necessities of life. My existence is sterile and unproductive enough; what would it be like if I did not even have to think of bread and roof.

I think it would be like living in a candybox in a showcase, shut away from the world by cardboard and paper and glass. If I did not have to go out for bread I would not go out at all. I would spend the rest of my life reading books that were brought to me from the bookshop or the library, nibbling chocolates proffered on a silver tray, and sleeping whenever I grew bored or eyesore, in a big silent bedroom having only a distant view of the ocean.

THE VISITOR

*Not the least
of the
pleasures
of the night*

*was to waken
at 3 a.m.
and hear*

*her gentle
snores*

I resent having to spend time and energy preparing food and washing dishes, but I don't want to hire a chef and a kitchen maid. Nor do I want to be conveyed through life by a uniformed chauffeur. I want to drive my own car, I want to pick my own dandelions, tie my own shoes, and doctor my own bellyaches, lest I be so cushioned away from the rough edges and rude shocks of the world that I lie, still alive, in a coffin of my own money and my desire for seclusion and unsurprise.

* Written at a date unknown, probably in the late 1960s. Rough draft rediscovered 1 March 1983. Never before published.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall," and he has a spray-can in his hands.