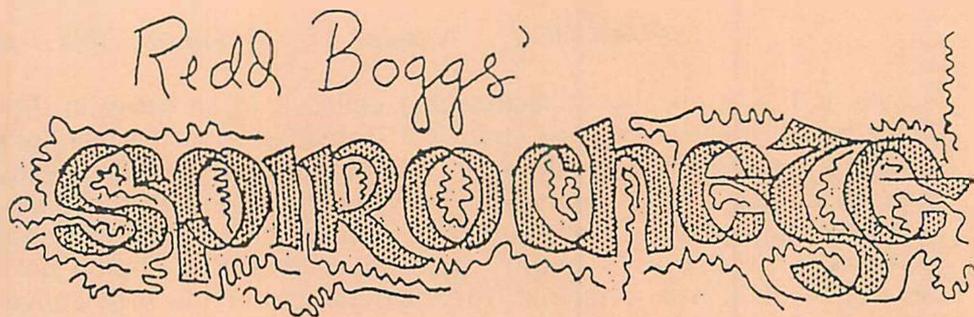


Number **71**
February 1995



THE LONG PATH

It was on the Common that we were walking. The *mall*, or boulevard of our Common, you know, has various branches leading from it in different directions. One of these runs down from opposite Joy Street southward across the whole length of the Common to Boylston Street. We called it the long path, and were very fond of it.

I felt very weak indeed (though of a tolerably robust habit) as we came opposite the head of this path on that morning. I think I tried to speak twice without making myself distinctly audible. At last I got out the question. -- Will you take the long path with me? -- Certainly, -- said the schoolmistress, -- with much pleasure. -- Think, -- I said, -- before you answer; if you take the long path with me now, I shall interpret it that we are to part no more! -- The schoolmistress stepped back with a sudden movement, as if an arrow had struck her.

One of the long granite blocks used for seats was hard by, -- the one you may still see close by the Ginkgo-tree. -- Pray, sit down, -- I said. -- No, no, she answered, softly, -- I will walk the *long path* with you!

The old gentleman who sits opposite met us walking, arm in arm, about the middle of the long path, and said, very charmingly, -- "Good morning, my dears!"

The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table, by Oliver Wendell Holmes

Most marriage proposals are romantic, I suppose, but few are so delightfully sentimental as the Autocrat's. In my case, the proposal was not very sentimental, and was even more round-about than his "Will you take the long path with me?" The great event took place, not in a woody setting (as I suppose the Boston Common must have been in those days), but in the kitchen of our apartment in South Campus of Berkeley. It was the evening before Guy Fawkes day in November 1965, and I was washing dishes when Gretchen arrived home from a History department Colloquium at Alumni House on the University of California campus. I can't envision the Autocrat, in whatever persona he assumed for his book, drudging away at the dishes, not just because he was one of those damn Boston Brahmins (neatly pilloried by Mark Twain at the famous Whittier Birthday dinner), but simply because he was a nineteenth-century male. In our day, however, Gretchen and I tried to share equally the tasks of keeping the household going.

With my hands in sudsy water I listened as Gretchen described the Colloquium, which had presented Professor David Herlihy of the University of Wisconsin speaking on "Population Decline in the Fourteenth Century: The Search for Explanations." She said that Ellie Nower, one of her fellow graduate students, had mentioned the 40-year-old bachelors of Ireland, whom (she said) they take for granted will never marry. "What do you think of that?" Gretchen said. She came to me and put her arms around my neck. I dried my hands and hugged her. She was just tall enough for her head to fit in the hollow of my shoulder. I said forlornly, "I guess I'm in the same boat. I'm not married, and it doesn't look like I ever will be."

She said, "Does it mean so much to you to be married to me?" and I answered "Yes." She said later that some strange light in my eyes persuaded her, although she had told me many times in the 14+ months we had lived together that she never wanted to marry, and she replied, very gently, "All right, then. I'll marry you. Pick the day, and I'll do it." And just as informally as that -- like the Autocrat and the schoolmistress -- we were engaged. Afterward she often complained that I had never before tried to persuade her to marry me, and never really proposed to her, either then or before. Perhaps the schoolmistress was similarly annoyed with the Autocrat.

Our original plan was to marry at her mother's house in Albuquerque in the "warm little hollow between Christmas and New Year," as Christopher Morley (quoting Professor Oscar

Firkins of the University of Minnesota) called it in an essay in *The Ironing Board*, but we finally didn't go to New Mexico that year, but instead, during the holiday season, attended the American Historical association convention in San Francisco. We didn't want to get hitched by a justice of the peace, and finally decided on a wedding service at the Unitarian church in Oakland as the best alternative between a civil and a religious ceremony. We made the proper arrangements well in advance, and arrived according to schedule at the church on the chilly, rainy evening of 30 December 1965 after attending the final session of the AHA convention that afternoon.

In dripping raincoats we tromped into the church and I asked a man dressed as a scout-master conducting, as it turned out, a meeting of Troop 25, where to find Mr Crompton, the pastor. "I'm the pastor," he told me with a grin, and promptly donned a minister's robe over his khaki uniform to signify the fact. He sent us into the church parlor where we straightened our damp and rumpled clothing and warmed ourselves in front of a blazing fireplace. That's where we were married: in the church parlor, cozy and comfortable, but hardly a grand setting. I had always pictured in my mind the majestic, ruined cathedral where Allan and Beatrice were married in "The Afterglow," the third novel of George Allan England's "Darkness and Dawn" trilogy. Perhaps you remember Frank R. Paul's full-page depiction of the scene in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, December 1941. When I read the story and saw that illustration I thought that this was the sort of wedding I'd like to have, but as it turned out, we didn't even have music, as they did, from a wind-up phonograph ("...the majesty and beauty" of Mendelssohn's Wedding March "climbing the high vaults of the cathedral, waking the echoes of the vacant spaces"), but it was a pleasant occasion nevertheless. Afterward my best man and Pastor Crompton compared Swiss army knives.

Unfortunately this was before it became commonplace for couples to write their own ceremony, and the service was the pastor's own choice. We stood side by side in front of the big fireplace as he talked of the virtues of being separate in togetherness, as the strings of a lute are separate though they sound the same melody. Gretchen said afterward that she was so choked up that she could hardly say "I do," and I felt pretty emotional myself. I hardly listened to the words Mr Crompton used as a preamble to the familiar solemnization from *The Book of Common Prayer*: "To have and to hold from this day forward," and the rest of it.

Afterward we went to Spenger's for a late dinner. Emerging from the restaurant, we found that the sky had cleared, the stars were blazing, and a waxing moon hung in the sky, full of good portents. When we arrived home, and were alone at last, Gretchen grumped, "Jeezus! Did you notice who that ass of a minister was quoting in the wedding service? Kahlil Gibran! Didn't you recognize it? Haven't you read *The Prophet*?"

"I don't read trashy books," I growled, very offended.

"That was said," Gretchen intoned to the world at large, "by a man who has been reading science fiction since he was three years old! Well, you're right, *The Prophet* is a trashy book, and it was embarrassing to have it quoted at our wedding. The minister ought to have had the decency to quote, if he had to quote, from the King James Version, for heaven's sake."

SPIROCHETE : Number 71 : February 1995. Edited and published at the Sign of the Idle Gestetner by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701, for the two-hundred-thirtieth mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press association. "But oh, San Francisco! It is and has everything... You wouldn't think that such a place as San Francisco could exist. The wonderful sunlight there, the hills, the great bridges, the Pacific at your shoes. Beautiful Chinatown. Every race in the world. The sardine fleets sailing out. The little cable-cars whizzing down the city hills. The lobsters, clams, & crabs.... Every kind of seafood there is. And all the people are open and friendly.... And the city is built on hills; it dances in the sun for nine months of the year; & the Pacific Ocean never runs dry." -- Dylan Thomas, letter to Caitlin (1950). The Spirochete heading is by Gretchen Schwenn. THE GAFIA PRESS.

She often griped about the matter in the years to come. Long afterward, reading abed one evening before going to sleep, she impulsively reached over and clutched my hand very tightly. "Don't leave me," she said. I had been sitting in a chair beside her, also reading. "I'm just going to fetch a Coke," I told her as I got up. "I don't mean now," she said, "I mean *always*." I wasn't patient enough just then to assemble her little puzzle. Now -- always -- I wasn't going to leave her for more than a few moments. I extricated my hand from her grasp and went out into the kitchen. When I returned she showed me the book she was reading. It was *The Prophet*, which I didn't know we had in our library, and that solved the puzzle for me.

"We've got to stay close together always," she said, "for revenge on that saphead Kahlil Gibran, on the minister who married us. Do you remember the passage from the book that he read at the wedding service?" She found the page in the book and read it to me: "...Love one another, but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread but eat not from one loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone. Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music."

"It would be inconvenient to serve two loaves of bread every meal," I said, picking up my book, "but otherwise, it's sage advice, even if it was written by a blithering idiot." "For everybody except us," Gretchen said. "We have flourished by ignoring those words completely. Togetherness is out of fashion, I suppose, but braver words than Gibran's could be written in its praise. By great good luck we are able to spend most of our time together, not far away from one another in day-long occupations. We spend our hours, waking and sleeping, in each other's company. Were ever two people more compatible? Every day together, and never bored. Stay with me, dear heart. I can't bear it when you're out of sight, even when you're getting your damn Coke. We have disavowed Kahlil Gibran. We're indivisible. We take no journey without the other. Let's keep it that way."

We walked together, arm in arm, on the long path, for many years after, but even a long path comes to an end at last, and it has been very lonesome for me ever since.

JUST DUCKY

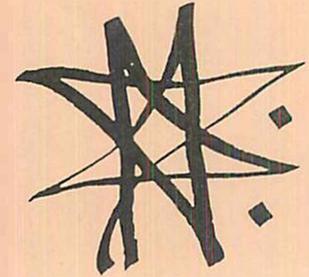
In the December 1994 issue of *CLA Today*, a publication of my alma mater, the University of Minnesota, I read an account of the "remarkable ability to confront obstacles and changing circumstances" exhibited by a number of "distinguished alumni." One of the examples was this: "...when corporate CEO Marilyn Tickle Bryant of Adjustable Joist Co. found that a plant foreman kept a 'girlie' calendar in his shop, she confronted a tense situation with humor. By replacing the offending calendar with one that featured innocuous photos of ducks, Bryant gently opened a forum for discussion of respect and equality in the workplace..."

I suppose Ms Bryant, like Nelson Rockefeller in E. B. White's poem "I Paint What I See," pointed out to the plant foreman, "And after all / It's *my* wall," to which I hope he muttered, in the words attributed to Diego Rivera, "We'll see if it is." At any rate, I am sure the plant employees laughed and laughed all year long at the "duck" calendar and the absolutely hilarious way it happened to get tacked to the wall. "Ho ho ho! Lookit them fuggin ducks!"

The incident reminds me of the 1964 calendar I acquired at a nearby liquor store when I lived in Los Angeles: a calendar with photos glorifying the qualities of womankind "prized by the superficial man," as Jerry Seinfeld describes it. The calendar was hanging on my apartment wall when Gretchen arrived in August of that year. She didn't make me take it down, but "confronted a tense situation with humor" by taping a photo of Fidel on the wall beside it. When I first acquired the calendar I showed it to Jim Harmon and, apparently having similar tastes to mine, he hurried over to the same liquor store to obtain a similar adornment for his wall. He returned wearing a mournful countenance. "I guess they were out of the girlie calendars," he said, wiping away a tear. "Here's what they gave me." I looked at it: a beautiful calendar featuring pictures of cute little ducky ducks. Ms Bryant should have been there.

STAR QUALITY

No bank in the whole damn USA, Gretchen often grumbled, would allow her to sign her checks with her personal rubric, her eight-pointed star. They would let her add it at the end of her authorized signature but would never let it stand alone on the line at the bottom. Banks in Mexico, she pointed out, were more lenient. They were accustomed to checks signed with an X or other mark instead of a signature because that's a country with many illiterates. The USA is supposed to have a high assay of illiteracy, too, but not high enough to allow "his mark" to be a common acceptance at the bank. She always signed letters, fanzines, illustrations, and manifestos with her rubric, but grudgingly signed her name at the bank.



Of course her signature was distinctive in itself, written boldly and blackly in her characteristic calligraphy that always impressed bank tellers. "Oh, YOU'RE the lady with the beautiful handwriting," they would say. "I've often seen your checks and admired them!" I told her that it was a bad idea to have such distinctive handwriting. If she ever held up a bank and presented a note, "GIVE ME ALL YOUR CASH," to the teller, that person would gush, "Oh, YOU'RE the lady with the beautiful handwriting!" It would be worse than leaving your fingerprints behind or your wallet on the counter.

She crafted her rubric with a single swift flowing pen-stroke. Continuous practice over many years made it easy for her to do. I don't know how long she had made her rubric like that. Some of her books that survive from her teen years are embellished with the rubric on the ifc, but those are a more primitive form of her mark, often carefully drawn with a straight-edge. In her Apa L fanzine, *Horsetail*, for 26 November 1964, Gretchen said her rubric "is a very ancient sign in Europe, and apparently has been used by my family for many centuries. In the use of it by others of my relatives, it resembles the mediaeval and renaissance rubrics, used to designate a specific family, and the dots are a countersign to indicate which individual of the family is writing it. I have an uncle who uses the rubric with a dot in the center." She promised to continue her disquisition later, but unfortunately never did. I often suspected (but I kept silent about it, you can be sure) that this was an amiable fantasy she made up to validate her use of the rubric after her discovery of it, perhaps, in a book of old emblems and family crests. Whatever the truth may be, she had made it her personal rubric over decades of daily use.

"Maybe the bank won't let you sign checks with your rubric because it would be so easy to forge," I ventured one day when she was griping about the matter. "Don't be stupid," she growled. "Nobody can imitate my rubric without a lot of trouble." I looked at her rubric again, and said, "It shouldn't be too hard to imitate," and seizing pen, I hastily scribbled an excellent equivalent of it. She looked at it in amazement, trying to find some fatal flaw in either the rapid whisk of my pen or the resulting image. "Beginner's luck!" she finally snorted. And she was right. I was never able to duplicate my first fine careless gesture. But my point was made. If I could do it impromptu, a clever forger could do a more creditable job with a little practice. But not so swiftly and surely, in such a graceful motion, as she could, I am sure.

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

DEAN A. GRENNELL, P. O. Box 870, Dana Point, California 92629

Thanks for the November *Spirochete*. Personally, I can remember *Sky Hook* and that the first issue I ever saw had a typo: "boubon" for "bourbon." Like your father, mine carried an inexpensive pocket watch, and he was fond of adding "Second-Hand Inger-soil Time." For the past many years I've worn a Seiko digital job and have come to love it dearly. It gains about 8 seconds per month and is easy to jog back after a call to Ma Bell. It needs a new battery about every three years and that costs about \$15 at the local Wards store. I still have three pairs of Levi's Sta-Prest that sport watch pockets. I find them handy for keeping track of small items.

Don't fear God; fear the people who believe in such things.
