Redd Boggs'
SORCHES

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AN AFTERNOON IN SONOMA *

Early September. We drive gently along the winding, open roads around Freestone and Valley Ford. These are little towns in Sonoma county, under the California sun almost as quiet as Clunton and Clunbury. The air is fresh and invigorating, though the day was hot and smoggy in Berkeley an hour or two ago when we started out. The wind blows straight in from the sea which is not far off. This land is only partly protected from ocean influences by Bodega head, unlike the country a little farther south, which is inland from the great sandy wedge of Point Reyes National seashore. The Pacific ocean is very close, but one doesn't think much about it here, for the seawind has already picked up a fine smell of sunny meadowlands.

The afternoon is very silent, very rural. Nobody is about, except us driving slowly along, and the black-and-white milch cows drowsing in the fields behind the slatted fences. The countryside is no longer covered with the redwoods of an earlier era. There aren't a lot of trees of any sort. There are no spectacular tourist attractions hereabouts; there are no mountains, hardly any big hills. There aren't any golden beaches, and Tomales bay, behind us, a lake-like slash of water extending along the fault line, is one huge oyster bed.

There are many little brooks here, trickling down to seek the ocean. We cross them one by one this afternoon: Fay creek, Thurston creek, Salmon creek, Ebadias creek, Rough creek, and under a fold of land called Sheep ridge, Coleman Valley creek, which is nearing the sea but pretty nonchalant about it.

It is pleasant here, because it is spacious and lonely, and because these meandering miles remind me of the midwest of my boyhood. Back in Minnesota we didn't have the sort of windbreaks they have planted here against the winter gales, eucalyptus trees lined up neatly behind the barns and farmhouses. Back there, we had cottonwoods and box-elders, far less exotic than these tall, untidy, bark-sluffing giants. But Grant Wood would appreciate this little pocket of country; he would feel at home here.

He would like the town of Bodega which we happen upon after a while -- a crossroads village of American Gothic houses, boxlike frames made fantastic with porches and turrets and gingerbread. He would like the weathered building on the outskirts of town, which looks like it were built for a street of stores on a movie set, with a high false front

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that looks outlandish in an open field and around which the wind rushes with a hollow whisper.

We drive up one empty road till it intersects with another, and follow that one a ways. We are not getting anywhere, but we see a lot of little bridges, thickets, rail fences, pastures, and houses with blossoming geraniums in the dooryard. Had these roads existed 30 years ago, with their blacktop surface and their neatly dashed centerlines, they would have been considered major highways and had their quota of Burma Shave signs. But they are only country roads, almost bereft of traffic. They are not in a hurry; they are not heading anywhere in particular. They stroll here and there over the low hills. They saunter along with their hands in their pockets.

The fences alongside the roads are overgrown with brambly vines that grip the poles and fall in a graceful cascade over the top, like green water surging over a dike. There are torrents of red berries among the dusky, flowing leaves. The ditches in many places are choked with Queen Anne's Lace, nodding their intricately needlepointed heads in the wind.

To the east, a little later, in the valley around Sebastopol, we find the trees laden with a cheerful red harvest, the last apples of the season. But right here the briers and the weeds are bending under their own abundance to feed the crows and the sparrows. We stop the car along the road and walk in the grass of the meadow. The grass springs back after we pass by, depriving us of a track, a trail, back to the outer world. For a moment the human world has been lost to us. We stand still, and listen to the sound of silence.

After a while we can hear the crunch of teeth as sheep crop the long grass in the nearby fields.

THE REREADER SPEAKS (1)

Occasionally, over these 40 years and more, I have reread "Universe," but I have usually neglected "Common Sense." Like most sequels, it seemed like a letdown from the original right from the start. After all, it first appeared in the same issue (October 1941) of Astounding with "By His Bootstraps" and was half-obscured in the blaze of the masterpiece. "Common Sense" largely reiterates the concepts that were so startling in "Universe" five issues earlier (ASF, May 1941).

Even as the latter part of a "novel" (it says in the blurb) called Orphans of the Sky, "Common Sense" is an anticlimax. We can thrill only once to our discovery of the lost Ship plunging ever onward into the

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galaxy with its crew ignorant of all else but the great cylinder which is their universe (although Brian Aldiss once wrote a fine variation on the theme). The original story is a shock and a wonder comparable with Hugh Hoyland's first glimpse of the stars: "the intolerable ecstasy of beauty unalloyed." But according to H. Bruce Franklin, "Common Sense" is "a more minor tale of adventure" than "Universe," while Alexei Panshin regrets that the sequel was ever written because "its very existence diminishes 'Universe.'"

Actually, "Common Sense" is a very compelling story, perhaps even a real "classic" in its own right. I find it as good as the original, if not as full of wonder. There are many first-rate things in it: the sketchy but very effective characterizations of Bill Ertz and especially Commander Narby (I always regretted that the Mother of Blades appeared much too briefly); the tragic deaths of Bobo and Joe-Jim; and the elaborate song and dance Heinlein goes through to convince us that "good design, ten times that much luck, and a precious little knowledge" could allow a man as ignorant as Hugh Hoyland to pilot the auxiliary craft to a safe landing on an unknown moon. I don't always enjoy Heinlein's "lectures," but this is one of much charm and persuasiveness.

There are, to be sure, some dubious things in the story. Joe-Jim owns an illustrated edition of The Three Musketeers, which Bill Ertz has read, but none of them can quite figure out what horses are. Commander Narby admires the "exact lettering" of another book, printed on Earth, and supposes that it was done by "excellent clerks" who handlettered it. (If a watch implies a watchmaker, surely a printed book implies a printer.) But the strangest thing is that only by chance, or very nearly by chance, do the women accompany Hugh Hoyland and his crew when they leave the Ship. The men almost follow Joe-Jim's advice to leave the women behind: "To Huff with the women! You'll get caught! There's no time." They are all so very ignorant, but not so ignorant as to believe there would be any future without women. (There's no question of ever returning to the Ship once they leave.) The women's role in the situation is minimized, but surely their essential, biological purpose could not be overlooked by the author or his characters.

Despite its shortcomings "Common Sense" is a good story, and I'm glad I decided to reread it again after so many years.

DREAM STUFF

A few of the epigrams and apothegms in Scintillas from World's End (Gafia press, August 1982 FAPA mailing) were the creations of my dream self. They occurred to me when I was asleep and were written down when I wakened. There may have been other examples, but one was "A connecticut truth is better than a texas lie," and another was "She dances round and round in her delight at dancing round and round." These remarks seemed to me significant, if obscure in meaning, and deserving of the frail immortality of Gestetner print.

Just the other night I "wrote" another remark in my dream, and I jotted it down on a scrap of paper immediately upon waking. I have pondered it a long while since then. It seems to make no sense at all, but I will print it here: "The jackers topped your blood off." Well, as someone once remarked, "It must mean something; it came out of my head."

MAKING FRIENDS IN THE INSURGENT MANNER

Gretchen and I had dinner some years ago with Mr and Mrs Nowell Masters of the Walnut Creek gentry. They live in a rambling and ostentatious house somewhere along Lilac lane in an exclusive neighborhood that's as close to Bel Air and Piedmont as that outlying suburb can muster. Their place is hidden behind a high fence at the end of a private road and has a private parking lot as big as a liquor store's.

Mr Masters, a wealthy retired business executive, proved to be a nonentity whose major talent, so far as I could tell, was that of mixing cocktails with less alcohol in them than in a cheap thermometer. Mrs Masters is of much sterner stuff, a woman who possesses boundless energy and has devoted her life to numerous club activities; She is president of this club, chairperson of that one, a center around which things seem to whirl as around a black hole in space.

At dinner she relaxed a little, but presided over the table like a grand dame. She dominated the conversation with her pronouncements and observations. She can tell an anecdote well, however, and her table talk is not boring. She told us about a foreign student she had housed for the previous academic year. Upon departing for home -- Indonesia, I think it was -- the student had exclaimed to a friend, "The Masters are rich -- but they're nice!" In truth the Masters are not bad people, but I thought Mrs Masters' self-puffery was a little infra dig. Gretchen remarked sweetly that they should etch the student's words into a brass plaque and fasten it to the front door in the event of a revolution.

Mr and Mrs Masters had of course traveled widely, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, Japan and Hong Kong, and even all the way across Siberia on the Trans-Siberian railroad. They had also visited Jerome, Arizona. Mrs Masters had not inquired if Gretchen and I had ever been to Palermo, Istanbul, Osaka, or Vladivostok, but she paused to ask if we had ever visited Jerome. We had. I remembered Jerome. For nearly 50 years, beginning in 1883, Jerome was the site of the incredibly rich United Verde copper mines, which made it a great boom town. As late as the mid-1920s it had a population of 15,000, and was once claimed to be "the toughest town in the west." The crash in the copper market in 1930 made it almost a ghost town depending on the tourist trade for its revenue. Now Jerome is just an untidy cluster of old buildings clinging to the steep slope of Mingus mountain in the upper Verde river valley.

"Did you visit the restaurant there?" Mrs Masters inquired. "It's a real gourmet restaurant and quite famous." No, we didn't even remember that there was a restaurant in Jerome. "What's the name of it?" I said.

"The House of Joy," she told me.

"Ah, that explains it!" I exclaimed, suddenly inspired. "They asked me if I wanted to visit the House of Joy, and I said no, I'm here with my wife."

I thought Mrs Masters' manner turned a little chilly after that.

I've got a backache, headache, and bellyache, and you've got a Jordache!

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