

The Unspeakable Turk

"Let's eat at the little Turkish place," Parrish said. "Does that sound OK?" I didn't say anything. "It's good food," he added. "Really great. I eat there often." I still didn't say anything. I was too busy thinking of eggplant, surely the most tasteless vegetable ever invented. A Turkish restaurant inevitably would offer eggplant, as well as other barely edible things like lamb bones, black olives, bulgar, and grape leaves, to mention a few.

Humankind, in order to survive, eats up the world, but there are some things I prefer not to ingest. I'm a lover of music, too, as well as of food, but that doesn't make me a connoisseur of noise. I don't go out to hear buildings fall under the wrecking ball. I wouldn't even attend a concert featuring John Cage or Stockhausen. A person ought to put some limits on his enthusiasms.

Parrish looked at me closely, and added the clincher. "The place is right around the corner," he said. The worst restaurants in town are always just around the corner, and you go to them because it's easier than driving three miles in the rain in order to wait for a table at a really good restaurant. Since we were in San Francisco I thought wistfully of beef brisket and latkes at David's and the bountiful buffet at Lehr's Greenhouse amid the blossoming flowers -- neither are gourmet palaces, but at least they are acceptable places for a leisurely meal. Then I capitulated politely. We walked around the corner.

I think the place, if it had a name, was called the Sultan's Delight, or perhaps the Arabian Steed. It was one of those places where you order at the counter, being sort of a Middle Eastern hofbrau. All the food was displayed in trays behind glass, which was convenient because the people dishing up the food neither spoke nor understood English. You could point at whatever you wanted, or were willing to chance. Everything looked about the same: unappetizing. I pointed at some entree more or less at random, and we went out into a little courtyard to eat. Our food was brought to us by a young waitress who was far more attractive than the food. She told us she had learned her English at a school in Istanbul. At least she could make herself understood.

We didn't say much during the meal. Parrish was too busy stowing away his food to talk, and I was too busy choking down whatever it was I had ordered. The anticipated eggplant was cold and limp, the pilaf cold and hard. Dessert was a dish of mushy rice, swimming in thin milk, and overladen with a crust of cinnamon. The coffee had a turgid taste of cardamom. Finally Parrish said, "What are you thinking about?" I hesi-



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tated. It might sound too much like Walter Mitty saying "Puppy biscuit," but I decided to tell the truth. "Meddybemps," I said.

He waited for the punchline, and when none was forthcoming he said, "Meddybemps? What's that?" "It's a little town in Maine," I explained. "I'm always thinking of Meddybemps." Robert Frost once wrote that he found it "restful just to think about New Hampshire," adding that "At present I am living in Vermont." Well, sometimes, at present living in California, I find it restful just to think about Meddybemps. Although I have never been there, I picture it as a rustic village with (as someone might remark) a marmalade works at the edge of town. Anyway, it's a long way from here, and there's not a Turkish restaurant in sight.

The Road to Gumbo-Gumbo

"Everything will be hunky-dory when we get to Gumbo-Gumbo," I assured a friend the other day. Immediately I felt abashed. We weren't really going anywhere, after all, and certainly not to Gumbo-Gumbo, wherever that is. I had merely wanted to say that all was going well, and we should feel encouraged. The rest had just slipped out before I could stop my tongue. I couldn't blame her for falling silent. She looked askance, I looked at the floor and tried to remember. What in the world did I mean? Then I was able to make the connection. "Oh, it's an old catch-phrase," I explained. "It recurred a number of times in a very old movie called 'The Cohens and Kellys in Africa.'"

I don't think I had called the movie to mind in many long decades, although (for all I know) it may have been seen often on the Late Late Show. On the other hand I may be the last person in the world to remember the film. There was a whole series of Cohen and Kelly movies, if I'm not mistaken. The only other picture I can recall the title of was "The Cohens and Kellys in Hollywood." I suppose the films rivalled the later series of "Blondie," "Pa and Ma Kettle," and "Porky's" for cinematic excellence. Looking back, I surmise that the pairing of two families named Cohen and Kelly in the movies was inspired by the success of the stage play "Abie's Irish Rose" a few years earlier. I thought the films were pretty funny, but I suppose I wasn't very critical back in those days. I can easily imagine the level of ethnic humor in such films in the Age of Unenlightenment.

For all I know, "The Cohens and Kellys in Africa" may have been the first movie I ever saw. I must have seen it on a very early trip to the "movie show." At the age of 11 I started keeping a list of every film I saw, continuing the custom till sometime during my career in the armed forces during world war 2, at which time (for the only time in my life) I was seeing nearly every movie currently being made. But none of the "Cohens and Kellys" appeared on that list. I don't think I saw too many movies before I was 11. We were poor, and counted every dime and penny. I saw a few pictures: Charlie Chaplin's "City Lights," Amos 'n' Andy in "Check an' Double Check," and nearly every episode (silent, I think) of the serial "Eagle of the Night." I don't suppose, on second thought, that "The Cohens and Kellys in Africa" could have been the first film I ever saw. I must have been only five or six when my grandfather took me to my first movie. I remember being confused by the flickering images on the screen, which I could barely see because of all the towering grownups sitting in the dark in front and on both sides of me. I don't

think I could figure out what was going on in the picture at all. "The Cohens and Kellys in Africa," on the other hand, impressed me sufficiently that I remember a catch-phrase from it after all these years. It is disconcerting to find such trivia from childhood cluttering one's mind at this late date.

Round about A.D. 2035 somebody who is a mere tad today will chuckle with satisfaction and say to a friend, "I love it when a plan comes together!" -- and have to explain, a little lamely, "It comes from an old TV show called 'The A-Team.' I remember it from when I was a kid."

A Letter from Jean (March 1985)

All day it's been "partly cloudy," but in the past 20 minutes the setting sun has broken through the cloud bank a couple of times, throwing golden light through our scraggly trees, across our soggy lawn and boggy garden, making everything super golden 3-D. There's golden light from the window above the sink on the fake-brick of the wall behind the stove as I turn my supper porkchop over, with my shadow, big and black (dark red, really) in the middle. There's gold-orange light on the mess around the barn, on the tractors, on the tops of the trees down the valley, the sharp shadow of the hill cutting across them. There is very strange orange-reddish light across the "lawn" under the spruce trees on the north side of the house, where every little hummock, dead grass blade, and chip of wood catches this light that lies along the ground. The trunk of the big spruce by the garage glows red, and the rusty buzz-saw blade we hung on the white garage wall in a mad decorative fit is dark red, and the garage wall pale orange. My porkchop is almost done, and the sun almost gone. A cold night's drive lies ahead.

Me and the Beatles

It was a very historical moment. On 5 September 1964, as related in "The Fan on the Mezzanine" (Bete Noire #10), Gretchen and I drove a carful of fans from the Pacificon II in the Leamington hotel in Oakland to Berkeley for dinner. History, indeed, was being made. On that trip I visited Berkeley for the first time in my life. Talk about man first setting foot on the moon! (Gretchen had been in Berkeley before; I don't know about the other fans with us, who included Bill Blackbeard.) It was also a significant moment in quite another way. We had borrowed Fred Whitley's little Rambler for the trip, and Fred was one of those people who keeps the car radio on all the time. When I switched on the ignition, the radio blared out. Gretchen and I flinched from the noise. "What in hell is that?" one of us said. "Why, that's the Beatles," somebody else grumbled from the back seat, as if we should have known. It was the first time I had ever heard the Beatles, although I had heard of them. I hastily turned off the radio.

I heard the Beatles on one other occasion, at a party on 11 August 1967 at the Berkeley home of Allen Cooper, who was imprisoned years later for his part in the Wounded Knee affair (1973). When Gretchen and I arrived at the party the radio in the livingroom was playing a song called, I believe, "Rita, Rita, Meter Reader," which somebody kindly informed us was the Beatles again. Gretchen urged Allen to switch off the radio and bring out his guitar. Soon we were singing "We Shall Over-

come" and other songs of the Freedom March (1963), in which Allen and some of the others had participated. So far as I recall, that's the only other time in my life I ever heard the Beatles or their songs.

I often read about the Beatles and their activities in the newspaper, but popular music -- despite all the million-copy records that have been sold -- was by then effectively dead. In his long account "In Memoriam: Spirit of FooFoo" Jack Speer reported how a popular song of world war 2, I think it was "Pistol-Packin' Mama," swept across the country while he was traveling from Washington D.C. to Oklahoma and on to the west coast in 1944. The song was brandnew when he left the east and by the time he reached Shangri-LA everybody was singing it coast to coast. Such things never happen any more, or at least very seldom. I don't think I can name a single popular tune of the past 20 years, much less recognize one when it's played. In earlier times you couldn't avoid hearing a popular song like "Pistol-Packin' Mama," even if you didn't own a radio. Such tunes permeated, and sometimes polluted, the whole atmosphere for several weeks or months when they were new.

I always have had to think twice to remember that Mick Jagger, whose name I sometimes misremember as Dean Jagger, is not one of the Beatles, but rather is one of the (I think) Grateful Dead. I have heard him interviewed once or twice, and he sounds only semiliterate, and possibly of low IQ, but with an accent I thought resembled that of Liverpool. The names of the real Beatles were only vaguely known to Gretchen and me. In the early hours of 9 December 1980 I heard a news bulletin on the radio, and went and told Gretchen, "I just heard that Lennon is dead." She looked up from her book and growled, "Lenin's been dead since 1924."

Seeing Red

For the LASFS Halloween party of 1964 I published a fanzine purportedly from the year 1972, picturing a future in which Barry Goldwater had become president. I depicted myself in the fanzine as a beachcomber (and I wore the appropriate costume to the party) who had spent those eight years in hiding and had become Gray Boggs. In the real world I don't think I became Gray by 1972, possibly because Goldwater was soundly defeated in the November 1964 election. But only a few years after that, I began to detect some gray hairs, or what I thought were gray hairs, on my head. Gretchen loyally denied their existence, however, and insisted that the California sun had bleached my hair and I ought to wear a hat. (She bought me a Stetson for that purpose.) Unfortunately she is no longer here to defend me with wifely devotion. The other day a young woman came to the door to sell a subscription to the Oakland Tribune. She started her spiel by saying "My name's Patsy, what's yours?" "Redd," I said. She smiled at me very prettily and said, "I'll bet your hair used to be red!" Urk.

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