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BOGGS ON THE HORSE

Who, me? On a horse? No, not me, friend! If I were offered the opportunity right now of mounting a horse -- or as they used to say in Wild West Weekly, "forking a bronc" -- I would smile politely, shake my head firmly, and depart without ceremony. I did ride a few nags back in my early years, but soon afterward I gave up horseback riding for good, preferring a more comfortable and convenient mode of travel: the automobile. This is a choice made long ago by the more civilized part of the human race, after all, which subscribes at least in part to the sentiments of Charles G. Finney in The Circus of Dr Lao, that horses are "anachronisms less speedy, less beautiful, less efficient, than the machines which have replaced them."

By "Boggs on the Horse" I refer to an early story of that title by Francis Bret Harte, which first appeared about 123 years ago in the pages of the Golden Era. Bret Harte (1836-1902) was the famous American author who virtually invented the western story with such much-anthologized yarns as "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat." The Golden Era was the San Francisco newspaper and literary journal, which in its heyday -- the 1850s and '60s -- published some of the early writings of Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, and Charles W. Stoddard, among others, as well as Harte.

Harte's literary career was in its early bloom. He had contributed a number of poems to various magazines from the beginning of 1857, and a series of travel letters under the title of "A Trip Up the Coast" to the Era in the summer of that year. But "Boggs on the Horse," which appeared in that pioneering journal on 20 May 1860, is only his second known short story. The first had appeared only three weeks earlier.

Never collected and reprinted in his lifetime, "Boggs on the Horse" is found today in Volume XX of The Writings of Bret Harte (Houghton Mifflin, 1914), along with other uncollected stories, poems, and essays. Although most of his fiction was local color writing, involving mining camps, stagecoaches, gamblers, and prostitutes, "Boggs on the Horse" is probably not a western story at all. At any rate, it takes place in an unspecified part of the country, in or near a village named Pumpkinville -- which hardly sounds western at all. There are horses in it, but the nag named Selim in the story gives no evidence of being a western bronc. However, he is surely worthy of commemoration as a more realistic specimen of equus caballus than the Lone Ranger's "great horse, Silver" or Tom Mix's Tony the Wonder Horse. The story, told in the first person by this namesake or ancestor of mine, begins, appropriately enough, with the simple declarative sentence, "I hate horses."

"Boggs on the Horse" is more of an incident than a story, but this is true of Harte's best known stories as well, which are long on local color (though largely the product of his imagination) but short on plot. It recounts a mere mishap, traumatic as it must have been, in the life of a certain Mr Boggs when he was courting a young lady named Kate Trotter. Even over the span of a century and more, Kate sounds as if she must have been a delicious creature. She is described as a girl with "a frank, daring eye and lithe, sinuous figure, graceful and indolent as a Spanish poem." I would have enjoyed meeting her. She is also an enthusiastic and accomplished horsewoman. To please her Boggs buys a horse and reluctantly takes up "equitation." One Sunday afternoon he is invited to join Kate, her family, and a friend of hers, "Captain Echellon of the dragoons," in a party of "equestrians" on a leisurely jaunt to a neighboring town.

Boggs' own horse balks at the start, and at Kate's suggestion he is provided with another mount, one from the Trotter stable, named Selim. This animal is not easily mastered. First, "he persisted in carrying his head up and his tail down, and then changing his mind he surveyed the road, backward, from between his fore legs." When Boggs in exasperation dashes his spurs "into the side of the revolting beast," he bolts away down the road, collides with the Captain's horse, and in sweeping madly past Kate, carries away her riding skirt when it becomes entangled in Boggs' stirrup. This event leaves Kate "striving, oh! how vainly, to cover her pretty ankles with her all-too-abbreviated -- well, I must say it -- petticoat." Boggs concludes his description of his disastrous downfall succinctly: "I never saw Kate afterward. I have not ridden since."

Then again, the title "Boggs on the Horse" might be used as the title of a disquisition by Boggs on the subject of the horse. Selim, in Bret Harte's story, begins to dispel some of the romantic notions about horses that have been conjured up by western movies and novels, but much more could be, and should be, said about the true nature of the animal.

Undeniably, the horse is a beautiful creature -- perhaps the most beautiful creation in the universe with the single exception of woman. Even the hero of a "B" western who kisses his horse and rides off into the sunset at the end of the movie would -- if he were fair-minded -- be forced to admit that the woman is incomparably more beautiful in every respect. To name a couple of ways, her legs are shapelier and her voice is more melodious. But the horse is sufficiently glorious to persuade us to believe the myths about his other supposed virtues. The truth about the horse is harder to swallow. Far from being the strong and durable companions of humankind that are depicted in cowboy stories, the horse is really a very delicate animal, likely to collapse and die if you run him too long and too hard or even if you water him when he is

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hot and sweaty. In western stories the hero dismounts after a frantic gallop across the range and dashes into the ranchhouse without another thought of his poor, exhausted steed. If this were done in reality, he would find a dead or dying animal at the hitchrail when he finally came forth to hurry away to town. An automobile, however prone to mechanical troubles at times, is a lot more durable and reliable.

The horse's intelligence is not great. His compares unfavorably to that of the dog and the elephant, among other animals, although in Gene Autry movies one would assume that the horse is the cleverest animal ever created, not even excepting his rider. Horse breeders do not strive to develop more intelligent animals; stupid horses are easier to train for the duties and tasks such beasts perform.

As for being loyal and devoted, horses bitterly resent any and all human creatures who bestride them. They will unseat the rider at the least opportunity. As you tumble from the saddle after being swept away by a low-hanging branch of the tree under which the horse has bolted, and lie broken and bleeding on the ground, the horse will stop nearby and peacefully crop grass without the merest glance in your direction, even though you groan and call out frantically.

The truth about horses ought to be told, and the Boggses will tell it. Just look for the title, "Boggs on the Horse."

A LITERARY GHOST

Most of what I know about Bret Harte -- but by no means all -- comes from an unimpeachable source: Mark Twain, who devoted several chapters of his Autobiography to Harte. He heartily despised the man, reporting that "In the early days I liked Bret Harte and so did the others, but by and by I got over it; so did the others. He couldn't keep a friend permanently. He was bad, distinctly bad; he had no feeling and he had no conscience."

I admire Mark Twain above nearly every literary person who ever lived, and his dissection of Harte is wonderful and final, the last word on the subject. His anecdotes about Harte -- not all of them to Harte's discredit -- are among the funniest stories the great raconteur ever put down on paper: Harte's sudden and prudent departure from the mining camp Yreka, for example, and Harte's overnight completion of the short story "Thankful Blossom" in a bedroom of the Clemens house, companioned by a roaring wood fire and two quarts of whiskey. Everything Mark Twain says about him, especially those things said in dispraise, are quite probably true, but I think I would have liked Bret Harte, as I have liked other rogues and scoundrels.

That's why I have always been pleased to recall that I brushed elbows once with Harte's ghost. You will remember that in 1871 Harte left California, never to return, having become famous and much lionized by the prodigious success of his poem "Plain Language from Truthful James" (better known as "The Heathen Chinee") and his early short stories. And you will remember that he had by that time already "lived all his life that was worth living," as Mark Twain observes, and would henceforth be burdened with "poverty, debt, humiliation, shame, disgrace, bitterness." Till the end of his life he lived far away from the locale of his most famous stories, and he was in fact an exile in Europe -- the ultimate

irony of his life -- for more than a quarter century. He died in London in 1902.

His abode (or one of them) during his last expatriate years in London was at 74 Lancaster Gate. In December 1944, when I was on furlough in London, I met a delightful woman whose name and address I still preserve among my old war relics, scribbled in her own hand on the back of someone else's business card. I visited her at her apartment, and she lived next door to a literary shrine, although it was not so indicated by any plaque or sign. She lived at 76 Lancaster Gate.

SOAP BUBBLES

Julia Vinograd is a Berkeley street poet, perhaps the Berkeley street poet. As part of the scene on Telegraph avenue she is as familiar to passers-by as Cody's bookstore, the Mediterraneum coffeehouse, or La Fiesta restaurant. She was born in Berkeley in 1943, and has been a fixture along the street for a long time. One can see her almost every day on Telegraph, usually on The Block between Dwight and Haste, wearing her yellow striped cap and tossing soap bubbles up into the wind. Meantime she writes poetry that is usually printed in a series of neatly done booklets from Thorp Springs press of Berkeley. I have read four of them: Street Spices (1973), Street Feet (1974), The Circus (1974), and Time and Trouble (1976). Each is fronted by a photo of Ms Vinograd, who has a pretty, sad, pixie-like face of unusual innocence and impassiveness for a street person.

Her poems under the paper covers are also unusual to be coming from such a source. She writes little of drugs or -- unlike so many of her contemporary sister poets such as Lenore Kandel, Erica Jong, Robin Morgan, and Alta -- little about sex. She is certainly a proletarian poet, a feminist, and perhaps a revolutionist, but not outwardly a sexual revolutionist. Her political stance is similarly unobtrusive. She sees herself in league with the indigenes against the tourists and casual passers-by, but this is pretty basic in-groupishness. Some of her poems picture her consorting with others, or in conversation with kindred spirits, but most of her poems are sweetly sad meditations. She seems to drift a little above the scene like one of her soap bubbles.

She has an ironic eye, however. I like her poem about "Holy Hubert" Lindsey, the street preacher, and the reaction of his audience to his energetic harangues: "...Some dude who couldn't make a pick-up last night / gets told he's a whoremonger. / He struts off / glowing, / feeling quite a devil of a fellow." Perhaps her best observation comes from a poem about the Bicentennial: "Of course there'll be a party in '76 / celebrating American history / from start to finish." But she is not a close observer of the scene. Her specialty is the silvery overview.

In most of her poems she says in essence what she says literally in one poem: "Maybe. And maybe not." She is delightful, eccentric, and extraordinarily ingenuous: that is part of her charm. But is she a good poet? Maybe. And maybe not.

When gods go, the half-gods arrive.
