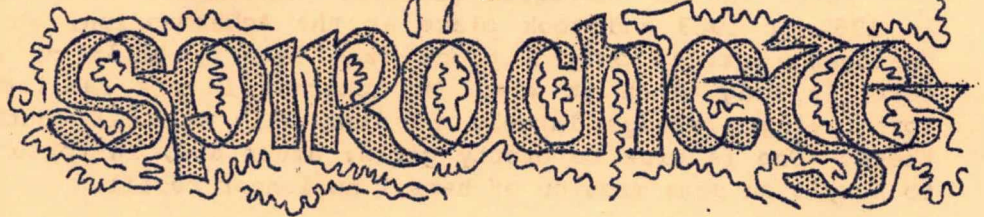


57

AUGUST
1991

Redd Boggs'


THE WALL

If I didn't have fandom, and FAPA, I would be sitting here alone, staring at the wall. It's cracked and stained and painted a faded landlady-green. There are cobwebs along the top near the ceiling. Nothing breaks its monotony except a calendar, hanging on a nail. It's a calendar without a picture, and I have forgotten to tear off last month's leaf. It's not a wall that would inspire a muralist to paint a "Last Supper" or even a "Last Roundup." It's a wall to keep out the rain and the sun; it offers nothing to inspire and encourage, no more than the blank side of a tombstone does. It didn't crumble and bury me in the great earthquake of October 1989, but what else can I say in its praise?

Good god, I *am* staring at the wall.

PETER PAN'S SPECTACLES

Dave Rike told me that he and Lenny Bailes attended a session of BayCon '91 that took place in San Jose on Memorial Day weekend in May. "Ah, did you see Forry plain?" I asked, for FJA was fan guest of honor, so I had heard. Yes, he did indeed. He had eaten lunch with Forry and Lenny and Art Widner. Since I haven't seen 4sj in many years I inquired about his health, and learned that he is in excellent condition, to all outward appearances. He may be a secret member of the Families who makes periodic excursions to the cavern under Lake Michigan; or perhaps he signed a pact with the Devil. But then Forry always was the fannish Peter Pan, sustained by our warm applause, although, strangely, he sometimes feels unloved by fandom.

Then I asked the important question: Does Forry still wear harlequin glasses? Yes, he still wears harlequin glasses. I suppose he no longer owns a sans-serif typewriter equipped with an emerald-green ribbon. The latter day communiques from him that I have seen were no longer in Ackermanese, and perhaps he no longer remembers how to parlez-vous Esperanto. But if he has given up the other variegations of a harlequinade, he still sports his harlequin glasses. Diversity lives in minuscule.

Coventry Patmore described his visit, as a young man, to the illustrious Leigh Hunt, during which he was made to wait in a small parlor for at least two hours before the elderly gentleman appeared. Well, it was worth it, I suppose. Who would not wait upon the author of such poems as "Abou Ben Adhem" and "Jenny Kissed Me" -- a dozen hours, if necessary. At least half a dozen, then. When at last Mr Hunt stepped in, wearing very picturesque garb, if I remember correctly, he rubbed his hands and smiled benignly and observed, without preamble, "This is a beautiful world, Mr Patmore!" The young man was so taken aback by this sudden observation that he never remembered another word of what was said in the following conversation. Perhaps I, like the callow Patmore, was a little overwhelmed, for I am similarly short on memory of what took place the first time I ever met Forry. Or rather, the first time I conversed with him at length, for I met him briefly at the Torcon, 1949. He introduced me to E. Everett Evans on that occasion, which was sufficient.

Peter Pan in harlequin glasses. The time I remember, if foreshortenedly, was in 1962 or 1963 and took place at the Ackermansion, which was then at 915 South Sherbourne drive, only a block from Beverly Hills -- such a terribly short and terribly long block it was. Mr Ackerman in his familiar glasses was amiable and forthcoming, perhaps largely for the sake of Gail Knuth, who had accompanied me there. One is nice to pretty girls; after all, in token of that, I had driven her to Acky's on some mission of hers I no longer recall.

We were surrounded by all the books in the universe (or all of them that mattered), crammed into every cranny of the place, all the rooms, the garage, the gazebo, the tool-shed. Ackerman was a volume himself, and not the least of those that were present in the house. And he wore harlequin glasses. I know not what else he wore, but he wore harlequin glasses just as he was supposed to. I remembered that he had been wearing contact lenses some time before, and I thought (but did not say) we've got our old 4sj back again! Aloud, I asked him why he had gone back to his old familiar glasses. A rather malapert inquiry, perhaps, and inappropriate. Emerson, calling upon Wordsworth, was amazed when the elderly poet stood and recited three of his latest sonnets to him, "like a schoolboy declaiming," but soon realized that Wordsworth had the right impulse: Emerson had come a long way to see a poet, and the poet was reciting poems to him. But I was visiting a famous fan and collector, and I spoke to him of his spectacles when I could have talked about the rare editions of *The King in Yellow* and *World D* that must have been sleeping quietly on the shelf not far away. Forry explained that he had taken to contacts because he was a science fiction fan, and believed that as such he ought to be in the vanguard of scientific developments. I hazard that around 1946 Forry was also the first kid on his block to acquire a television set (steam-driven). In the same spirit, I am backing the project of the first pedal-powered space shuttle, hoping to advance the ecologically correct conquest of space.

But this did not explain why 4e had given up wearing contacts. He said contact lenses gave him lots of trouble. At a movie once or twice he developed a fierce pain in his eyes from the lenses and had to excuse himself and hurry to the washroom to remove them. I supposed that if it were at a showing of "Metropolis" he knew the movie so thoroughly, from seeing it 3200 times, that he could have pictured it in his mind frame by frame while he was out of eyeshot, much as F. Tower Laney played over in his mind his favorite jazz records (complete with surface scratch) while he was in church with his wife.

Once during a convention (so he told me) 4e was visiting someone's house in the con city, and lost a contact lens on the front lawn. A dozen people rallied to help him find it among the leaves of grass, although most of them hardly knew what a contact looked like. When it was finally found, by Ackerman himself, I believe, he held it in the palm of his hand and exhibited it to the wondering gaze of those who had never seen such a thing before. "Here!" he started to say, "this is what a contact lens looks like!" But the little puff of breath that he expelled

SPIROCHETE : Number 57 : August 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-sixteenth mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press association. "Question I most hear: Why have you spent almost a third of your life in this Roman apartment? I quote Howard Hughes. When asked why he had ended up a long-nailed recluse in a sealed hotel room, he croaked with perfect candor: 'I just sort of drifted into it.' That's almost always the real answer to everything." -- Gore Vidal. The Spirochete heading by Gretchen Schwenn, done for the first issue (1964). THE GAFIA PRESS.

to utter the triumphant word "Here!" blew the frail thing out of his hand. It fell lightly as a baby's tear into the grass again, and was never found.

Did I speak with him further, perhaps about the time he went 32½ times into the USO to acquire the pocket Testaments, two copies each time, that he circulated in FAPA in 1947 or 1948 (a jeu d'esprit unmatched in this organization all these years)? Did I reminisce about sending exchange copies of the Alamogordo (New Mexico) *Blockbuster* to Fort MacArthur (California) for the *Alert*, when Sgt. Ack Ack was an editor of the latter army newspaper? Did I ask him if he still admires Simone Simon, the movie actress, star of "The Cat People"? Did I try to talk him out of a copy of the April 1926 issue of *Amazing Stories*? I don't remember at all.

I could have brought up those matters; he was friendly enough. But I do recall that I chatted with him about his signature glasses. That was a shameful waste of the famous eardrum, perhaps. Would I fail, would you fail, in other such circumstances? You meet Emily Dickinson, and not a word about her poems hidden in her bedroom; you inquire about her eye ailment. George Bernard Shaw, and not a word about his plays and essays; you ask him if he could eat chocolate eclairs while wearing such a beard. Auguste Renoir, and not an eager question about Aline Charigot; you talk about vintages of wine. And what of Chaucer, Charlotte Bronte, Whitman, RLS, Mark Twain? (Is the old sciatica plaguing you, Sam?) But why not? It's more fun sometimes to consider such illuminati as Camilla Decarnin, Alain Everts, Walter Breen, Mary Mason, without reference to their work or works. All I know is that when I was in the august presence of FJA, aka Jack Erman, Weaver Wright, and all the other bizarre pseuds that so amazed and impressed me when I was first in fandom in the far ago, I inquired about his harlequin glasses, and I am glad to learn that he is still wearing them.

BLUE WAVE

With the twenty-first century only a hop skip and a jump away (as my mother would say) I feel nostalgic about Pierre Berton's *My War with the Twentieth Century*, the book, the title, the century, the ullage of which is less than half a pint. Berton's war, and ours, is almost done. We are in the gloaming of autumn, and the jucund and the dismal of an era merge dimly into one another like aspects of the landscape at dusk. It won't be long before everything named for this century, like Twentieth Century Fox, or connected with this century, hippies, yuppies, Valley girls, designer clothes, Norman Schwarzkopf (played by George C. Scott in "Dr Strangelove"), will seem as out of date as hoopskirts, reticules, hansom cabs, and General Gordon. That is, if they don't already. There's a touch of melancholy and of dying splendor about some of those things, sad residuum of an age.

Mr Berton's book came out in 1965, before nostalgia was as Big as it has become, but being a smart fellow, he anticipated the trend and spends much time reminiscing fondly about the things of his youth. And by golly, as we used to say when I was a kid, his youth must have been very much like mine, and maybe yours too. In one essay he remembers some of the slang expressions now lost in the blue shadows of popular culture. He fingers them meditatively, much as I, when I was a small child, played with the antique buttons in my mother's button jar on a rainy afternoon. He remembers everything from "twenty-three skidoo" and "Vas you dere, Sharley?" to "You ain't just whistling Dixie" and "Man, that was Endsville." He talks about the comic strips of the 1920s and '30s that popularized such outmoded phrases as "Good gravy," "Gloriosky," and "Leapin' lizards." He remembers Bill Holman's "Smokey Stover" that, he says, "tried to put the word 'foo' in the language," and he asks, "Does anybody remember 'Nov schmoz ka pop'?" I feel like Scrooge confronted with the scenes of his childhood by the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Because he views life from such a prospect it's no surprise to learn that Mr Berton, although a Canadian, read *Tom Swift* and *Bomba the Jungle Boy* when he was a kid, and all the pulp magazines. He especially loved *The Shadow* -- but then, didn't everybody? -- which he read every issue, twice a month, between regular doses of "everything on the newsstand with the possible exception of *Ranch Romances*." He mentions, among other magazines (a few he mistitles), *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Stories*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Thrilling Wonder*. He laments the end of "an era that is dead as the Big Apple." I think, but I'm not sure, that he refers to the once-popular dance, not New York City.

But if it's no surprise that Mr Berton, a popular columnist and TV personality, was a "voracious reader" of boys books and pulp fiction, I was considerably more amazed to discover that another, much different writer -- one of the literati and of far greater magnitude -- read science fiction magazines of the long ago (if not as long ago as Mr Berton's boyhood). The writer is Randall Jarrell, the late poet and critic (1914-1965), and in a collection of his letters (published 1985) we find reprinted a letter he wrote to Mary Von Schrader, the woman who became his wife. Writing sometime in February 1952 (around Valentine day, apparently) he reports: "Yesterday I was bored enough to buy not the good science fiction magazines, which I buy every month, but one of the bad ones." He doesn't mention which one it was -- perhaps Norm Metcalf can identify it -- but goes on to say, "There were 20 pages of 'Letters to the Editor' (plus editor's comments, some quite witty) and they were absurd and funny and strange beyond belief. There was even (I have to judge from the Editor's veiled euphemistic account) a discussion, very tongue-in-cheek, about whether sexual intercourse will be possible in spaceships under conditions of free fall...."

Mr Jarrell is amused enough by this discussion to go on in a fresh paragraph to say, "Apparently there's great controversy about whether you should have ill-clothed girls and spaceships on the cover, or just spaceships. The purists say 'No Sex'; the impurists say that the purists are immature and use bad grammar and that there's nothing like the female form; one lady said that she wanted ill-clothed males on the cover with the spaceships, and the reasonable majority say that they realize the girls have to go on the cover to sell the magazines but for God's sake keep them out of the stories."

Reading that account of a prozine letter column of nearly 40 years ago I was swept away by a great blue wave of nostalgia that looked and felt very much like the one pictured on the wrapper of a bar of Ivory soap: clean and suddy and sad, stinging the eyes to tears. I often wonder why I have no impulse to read the science fiction magazines anymore. I mean, beyond the fact that they are very hard to find on the newsstands these days. Part of the reason is that they don't print wonderful letters like those in *Planet Stories* and *TWS*, not even in *Asimov's*: letters that are better than the stories.

WONDER STORY

On their way to the edge of the universe, 20 billion light years away, they turned back after traveling only one billion. They had seen many amazing things, red chaos and the blue serene: pulsars, quasars, darksars, black holes, and see-tee galaxies, planetary civilizations more ancient and more advanced than Arisia, but nothing half so marvelous as the women they had left at home.

He kept talking to me of graven images, but I had no time for idol chatter.
