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Redd Boggs'
SPIROCHOCCE

SOMETHING GOLDEN FROM SILVERBERG

Sometimes in the summer a big wind blows from the east over the Berkeley and the Oakland hills and empties the Central Valley of its hot and dry air. The Bay Area sizzles with the unaccustomed heat. The temperatures in the afternoon reach the 80's; sometimes, improbably, even the 90's. It's the top headline in the *Chronicle* and the *Tribune* ("HOT! HOT! HOT!"). People who have forgotten their origins in the east and midwest complain that such heat is unendurable and wonder how civilization can exist under such conditions. For a day or two the Bay Area is almost as sweaty and uncomfortable as New Orleans or Omaha in summer. Then the sea fog creeps in during the dark, the mornings are cool and grey, the afternoons bright and sparkling. The Bay Area's natural airconditioning has kicked in again. This is fact, the rest is fantasy.

On one of those hot and windy days Robert Silverberg the author sits in his cactus garden glancing over the fresh printout of his latest novella for Pulphouse. The cactuses enjoy the weather, and therefore he does too. Besides, it reminds him of Brooklyn in July. He separates the pages and puts them down for a moment to sip a cool drink. Just then a mighty gust of wind picks up the papers and hurls them around the garden. Silverberg snatches at them, though not as frantically as he would have 30 years ago. After all, the story is safe on hard disk and a new printout is not difficult. He retrieves every page but one, the very last page of the manuscript, which flies like a kite over the garden wall and sails away above the rooftops. He waves it goodbye and licks a prickle on his forearm where he brushed a valued specimen of *Opuntia vestita* while trying to recapture the scattered sheets.

Blown by the hot wind, the errant page finally scuds to earth on Telegraph avenue in Berkeley at your very feet, just as you are about to enter Moe's to buy — is this too much of a coincidence? — a copy of the Bantam Spectra paperback of *Thebes of the Hundred Gates* by Robert Silverberg. You pick up the drifting paper and hurry into the bookstore to get out of the relentless sun. You sit on the stair to the split level and look at the page curiously. It's obviously a page from a story, the very last page, and it's by Robert Silverberg. How do you know it's by Silverberg? Let's see. Ah yes, these days, in addition to the page number, he has a header that says "© Robert Silverberg 1993." Pausing only to wipe away a drop of sweat that trickles alongside your nose, you read the page of the manuscript, which runs as follows:

Holden picked up his pack and slung it over his shoulder. He looked down at the alien creature on the ground. He thought it would be all right. After all, this was its native planet. He was the alien, not it. He still couldn't read its face, or what he took for its face, but something in its posture, so twisted and awry, made him wonder. Reluctantly he took the alien by its spindly waist, and set it on its feet. Its many limbs spread out like calipers measuring every dimension at once, and it stood frailly, swaying a little, shifting a little, as if adjusting itself to the horizons. Holden took a couple of steps, then stopped. He couldn't leave the alien here, a hundred miles from where he found it. He looked into the grey, emery distances, imagining the lander waiting impatiently for him. It was a long hike, his ankle still hurt, and now there was the alien. With a sigh, he took the creature by one upraised trembling claw and leading it along, began to walk, thinking forlornly, *My friend, we will have to stick together after all, and not say goodbye just yet. Hard as it will be, together, then.*

If you are astonished to read this story fragment, appearing for the first time anywhere in a fanzine, of all places, imagine Silverberg's consternation. For one reason or another, he will be stunned to read this passage here. He will probably protest, with good reason, that he never wrote such a clumsy piece since "The Silent Colony" in 1954, and threaten a lawsuit. That's if I'm lucky. And I suppose he will be right, for it was I, not Silverberg, who wrote the paragraph. I wrote it in my sleep. I dreamed that I was reading a Silverberg story, and waking, I arose in haste and jotted down the conclusion of the story as well as I could remember it, just as I transcribed it above. I didn't think you would believe me if I told you the real circumstances of its creation, and made up the fantasy of the manuscript page whisking over the garden wall. You will agree that the big wind story is more believable than the dream story. After all, writing science fiction while sound asleep! Has that ever happened before?

But if I'm unlucky, Silverberg may sue me for copyright infringement. Amateurish as the fragment seems, it may be because I remember it imperfectly from my dream. Perhaps I snatched the story from Silverberg's mind by means of ESP, just as he was twiddling it down on his mighty computer one warm morning in Oakland. If that's the case, I have more to worry about than Silverberg. ~~If it turns out that I received the story by ESP, what will Martin Gardner say?~~

WITHOUT A CLUE

Once when I was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, one of my professors — I believe it was the late William Van O'Connor, who taught an excellent course on literary criticism — told us at the start of the class session that he had to rush away to attend to some duty that I have forgotten and would not be able to conduct the class that morning. "But don't worry," he assured us, as we started to gather up our books and hurry off like schoolboys willingly home from school, "I have asked Mr Jones here to talk to the class about the subject of his dissertation, which he has just finished. Mr Jones, the lectern is yours."

Mr Jones, a callow young man with thick glasses and long lank hair, jumped up from a chair in the front of the room, bounded forward, and immediately began to speak even before the professor left the room. His words sped forth in an enthusiastic tumble, like puppies from an overturned basket. The lecture was unpremeditated, quite impromptu, it was clear. Apparently, however, he knew his subject in each direction, and up and down, and he had much to say about the man who was the center of much interest, or at least of Mr Jones' interest, and who lived and wrote in England just before World War 1. Mr Jones was wonderfully illuminating about the man and his work, though this was a difficult matter, for the man's influence had depended largely on his forceful personality in his small circle of friends and not on his minor writings, which included poetry, philosophy, and esthetics.

Mr Jones painted a vivid if chaotic portrait of the man and his times, more characterized by electrical colors than by clear streams of light. Alas, he told us more than anybody would want to know about the man after all these years, or probably even while he still existed, somewhere far off in another country and in an obscure intellectual milieu. Mr Jones spoke for 45 or 50 minutes nonstop, his hands waving eloquently, his face shining with enthusiasm, his voice highpitched with nervous animation. Just before the end of the hour, remembering to glance at the clock in the back of the room, he checked himself with great difficulty, and drew a deep breath. His canvas, obviously, was still not finished; many dabs of gorgeous pigments were needed to fill in the spaces, and many shapes remained to be sketched out to help depict this singular personality and his times. But the hour was ending.

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"Are there any questions?" Mr Jones said, beaming at us expectantly. He seemed to suppose that we were as eager to know more as he was to impart further information. But there were no questions. Members of the class looked at each other blankly, and started to stir, ready to get up and depart. I raised my hand. "What was the name of the man you were talking about?" I asked politely.

The young man's crisp assurance suddenly wilted. I could see his mind was casting back to the start of his lecture. Had he not clearly enunciated the name of the man at the very beginning? Or alternatively, was it not clear from the context of his lecture whom he was talking about? After all, he must have thought, we were advanced students of literature; we ought to know about this important figure of early twentieth century Britain. All this must have passed through his mind in an instant and left him confused and embarrassed. A glance at the faces raised inquiringly toward him revealed that everybody in the room was wondering, Who indeed WAS he talking about?

In a soft, reluctant voice he said the name. It was the name of a once-famous British literary figure, T. E. Hulme (1883-1917), hailed in his heyday, circa 1909, as the founder of the "Imagist" school of poetry, in which activity he was a friend of Ezra Pound. He was killed in September 1917 while serving as an artillery officer in France. I had heard of him, but knew little about him, and during the lecture I had wondered if Mr Jones was speaking of somebody named Holmes. Although Hulme was said to have rejected Victorianism in all its aspects and to have pioneered "the twentieth-century mind," I am afraid that he has been more neglected and forgotten in the intervening years than he was back then, despite Mr Jones' scholarly efforts on his behalf.

The incident remains vivid in my recollection. I often think of it when I read some of the mailing comments in FAPA. They befuddle me — even when they talk about something I myself have written — almost as much as Mr Jones' wonderful lecture. As in his case, I think that before you go dashing off in a flurry of comments about some subject, you ought to tell us, clearly and even bluntly, right at the start, what the hell you're talking about.

IRVING THE SHMUCK

My friend Sergeant Nat Kusher, from Brooklyn, loved porkchops more than anybody I ever heard of. When I went to dinner with him at the enlisted men's mess — which was almost every night, for we worked together every day at the airbase Public Relations office — I had to resign myself to a lengthy meal every time we found porkchops on the menu. I sometimes missed the movie at the airbase theater because of him and his obsession. We sat at dinner eating porkchops and chatting till they closed up the place for the night. He went back for seconds, for thirds, sweating out the long slow chow line again and again with amazing persistence. "Ah," he said, gnawing every morsel of meat from the bone, "if Momma could only see me now!"

Luckily his mother was thousands of miles away, over the sea in Brooklyn, for this was during World War 2, and we were stationed at an Eighth Air Force bomber base near Rackheath, Norfolk, England. I could easily picture her pain and dismay at the sight of her beloved son eating just a single porkchop, let alone the porcine multitudes that he consumed with such gusto. I found the feat almost as unbelievable as she would have.

We talked of many things between devouring the savory porkchops. He told me about Keesler Field, Mississippi, where he had spent his weeks of basic training. He claimed it was the worst hellhole on the American continent, at least in the summer of 1943. But I could match those stories with tales of Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where I had endured basic training, the hottest place in the System outward bound from the planet Venus. He also told me about Brooklyn, New York, a much stranger place than Mississippi, and the stories were like Munchausen tales of an alien country, which I guess Brooklyn was to me, a kid fresh from the Minnesota prairies. From his stories I received a vivid impression of a world of grifters, poolroom bums, whores, and smalltime numbers racketeers. Nearly everybody he knew in Brooklyn was a crook of

some sort, usually of some odd sort. At least that was my bewildered impression. He had friends who called pennies (i.e., one-cent pieces) "browns," a slang term I never heard before, or since. How's that for exotica?

Nat was short and rather rotund (from all those porkchops), with taffy-colored hair and a pimply face. He beamed animatedly through thick glistening glasses while we "shmoozed," as he called it. Once I learned the rudiments about Brooklyn, he lent me a copy of Betty Smith's novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (he came from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn where Francie Nolan lived). I read it and enjoyed it. It didn't seem too weird. But his stories about himself and his friends were like something out of Bernard Malamud's book of marvelous short stories, *The Magic Barrel*, or even of Israel Zangwill's equally marvelous *The King of Schnorrers*, though of course I didn't know it at the time. I hadn't yet read Zangwill, and Malamud's stories hadn't yet been written in that summer of 1944.

He told me jokes he remembered from the Brooklyn burlesque theater: from raucous skits unknown to me. They fascinated me like the bowls of marmalade on the dining tables fascinated the wasps that flew in the open windows of the mess hall. I still remember one of the stories. It consisted of a loud dialog between two low comedians. One of them is telling a long boring anecdote (there was more to the skit than I can recall or that Nat ever described). "There we were," he explains to the other comedian, "wading through the mire and muck!" "Hei-LO, Meyer!" the other comedian hollers, to which the first comedian answers, "Hei-LO, Shmuck!"

By that time I had learned that "shmuck" is some sort of insult, common on the streets and in the bars of Brooklyn, although I wasn't sure how it differed from "shnook" and "shlub," two other terms Nat used in casual conversation.* That was the era of the great Jewish comedians on the radio: George Burns, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, and especially Jack Benny, who had a stooge on his show named Shlepperman, later Mr. Kitzel. Therefore I was at least a little familiar with a few Yiddish expressions, but I don't believe "shmuck" was ever heard on the radio. It was, after all, a taboo word, although used as an amiable insult among friends, as "nigger" was, or is, among blacks. Nat often referred to his Brooklyn friends by the term: "Those crazy shmucks!" he would chuckle.

One evening he told me a rather touching story involving the word. He and some friends back in Brooklyn decided for some reason to attend night school. I don't remember why; I don't remember what class it was. Perhaps they went for recreational reasons (probably to meet girls). At least it was for some less urgent reason than for those students in the night school depicted in Leonard Q. Ross' *The Education of H*y*m*a*n K*a*p'l*a*n*, for they all decided to adopt pseudonyms for the lark. One of Nat's friends called himself "Mike Hunt," a sexual jeu d'esprit that was hilarious, I'm sure. (Well, they were just kids.) As for Nat, he contented himself with the nom de guerre of Irving Shmuck. His revelation of the name during the rollcall at the beginning of the class inspired the anticipated guffaw from the assembled students. But after the class, to his astonishment, the kindly instructor called "Irving" aside. "Don't be ashamed of your name, son," he said, patting him on the shoulder. "The others may laugh at your name, but it's an honorable one. In fact, one of the most prominent and honored judges in New York City is named Shmuck. Wear your name with pride."

As a serviceman far from home Nat could devour porkchops with cheerful defiance of ancient tribal taboos, but as a teenager, back in Brooklyn, he was so embarrassed and ashamed of his prank that he never dared attend another session of the class.

* Leo Rosten (whose penname was Leonard Q. Ross) wrote two entertaining and informative books, *The Joys of Yiddish* and *The Joys of English*, that define and explicate these and other terms. On his authority I spell the terms "sh-" rather than "sch-."

They've got a moon in this town, too.
