

## Chapter 2

Professor Henry Northcote had moved to his new office with misgivings. Any change in his daily routine was, ipso facto, unwelcome. True, it was more spacious, more modern, and certainly warmer. Of itself, it was just like any other office in Dwinelle Hall: deep-set casement windows, fluorescent lighting, gray steel bookcases, and cream walls of that uncertain shade which is the customary institutional compromise with white.

But Professor Northcote had brought with him certain refinements which echoed faintly the far-off but never-to-be-forgotten grandeur of Oxford senior common rooms. A threadbare oriental rug all but covered the gray asphalt tiling and on the one wall not occupied with windows, door, or bookcases was hung a row of framed Minnesinger illuminations, in which brightly costumed lovers were discreetly affectionate under trees whose branches curled and blossomed in perfect symmetry.

Professor Northcote liked order. His heavy walnut desk, installed after a brief, futile protest from the head janitor, displayed only those papers with which he was presently occupied, and which he would carefully lock in a drawer before he went home. These papers, in fact, comprised the second chapter of Paul Benning's dissertation: *Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy as Revealed in the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*. Professor Northcote's eyebrows - the only unruly element about his person - met in studied disapproval. Benning was certainly a promising student. He had passed his doctor's orals in rather less than average time and with rather more than average distinction. But post-examination ennui seemed to have set in. His third chapter was long overdue and Professor Northcote had asked him to call at the office this afternoon for a consultation.

A knock at the door brought Northcote's hand to his necktie for a superfluous tug at the knot. "Please come in," he intoned and leaned forward with just the right mixture of dignity and solicitude. But the gesture was wasted. The door was kicked open by Jean-Pierre Seurat, who plopped down unceremoniously on the edge of the desk.

"Allo, Henry, " he said. "Why ze sanctimonious expression? You were expecting ze Virgin Mary?" Seurat had lived in America for ten years and spoke flawless English, but with an almost comically exaggerated French accent which will henceforth be left to the reader's imagination.

"On this campus? Don't be absurd." Professor Northcote smiled his closest approximation to joviality. "Aren't you holding office hours today? When I passed your door half an hour ago the corridor was littered with love-sick undergraduates. Even Solomon in all his glory . . ."

Seurat shrugged his shoulders and tried to look modest. "I have been eavesdropping at a SURGE rally. The natives are restless. The Silent Generation recovers its voice."

"Don't count on it. I have one of the SURGE officers in my English IA class. He hasn't opened his mouth all semester."

Professor Northcote took up one of the pages spread out in front of him. "What do you think of this?" he asked. A sentence near the beginning of the page was bracketed in the margin. "But it is perhaps over-zealous," it read, "to assume from *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, as Tyrwhitt has suggested, that Chaucer met with an unfortunate experience at the hands of an alchemist. It would be as reasonable to assume that the Wife of Bath's Tale grew out of an unhappy affair with a widow, or that he wrote the Pardoner's Tale after regretting the extravagant purchase of a Papal indulgence."

Seurat chuckled. "Too much common sense for his own good. No one with a sense of the ridiculous should devote himself to literary research."

"I don't know about that. You haven't done too badly." Northcote pulled surreptitiously at his waistcoat to smooth out a nonexistent wrinkle.

"Mr. Benning," he continued, "has an admirable wit. But he sometimes has a tendency to lean too heavily upon it at the expense of careful scholarship. In fact, his approach to Middle English literature might more appropriately be applied to a public perusal of the daily papers in one of those North Beach night clubs."

"I'm continuously amazed at your catholicity, Henry." Seurat peered at his watch, unwound his legs, and slid off the edge of the desk. "Perhaps the little birds have flown south for the winter. I will go to my office and see if I am allowed to work."

Seurat shambled out of the room and, closed the door behind him with a bang which shook the mediaeval lovers momentarily from their sleep of centuries. Northcote frowned his private disapproval and returned to his meditations.

PAUL BENNING was distracted on the way to his appointment with Professor Northcote by a disturbance in front of the administration building. A thin bespectacled undergraduate in a tweed skirt was trying to hold the attention of a small crowd, most of whom seemed on the point of leaving. She was flanked by a ragged Praetorian Guard of supporters, without whose silent encouragement she might have fled in panic.

"What's the student government doing, anyway," she was pleading. "Most of them don't care about anything but football games and fraternity dances. What about the off-campus students? Most of the students at this university

live off campus and commute from all over the Bay Area. They have to contribute to a student association which they never use, which they couldn't care less about. It isn't a democracy, it's . . ." – she searched for a word - "it's an oligarchy. And SURGE intends to do something about it!"

Half a dozen muscular boys in football sweaters whistled and jeered like a company of Trojans expressing their contempt for Cassandra's latest prediction. "Go back to Robbie's!" somebody shouted. "Crawl under a rock!" "Go wash your feet!" Each made his ritual contribution.

A balding middle-aged student with a bushy black beard leapt onto the steps beside the speaker. "Let her finish!" he shouted, holding up a hand. "You'll have a chance to ask questions. We don't try to break up your football games; don't interrupt our meeting." The whistles started again. "All right," he shouted above the noise, "if you don't believe in the democratic process why don't you go to Germany?"

A large German Shepherd started to bark hysterically. The crowd turned towards the pavement behind them where a small bitch in heat panted happily while two enormous dogs circled each other, their teeth bared.

"At a boy, Rudolph," shouted one of the football sweaters, "don't let him cut in on your territory." The crowd laughed and closed in around the circling rivals. The speaker cleared her throat, found herself without a single listener except her companions, swore in disgust and stalked away, followed by her retinue arguing heatedly among themselves.

PAUL turned back towards Dwinelle Hall. Berkeley, he thought, was a Petri dish for the discontented. Every conceivable alphabetical combination competed amongst themselves for supremacy, splitting up into primitive cells, multiplying, dividing, dying, like animalculi in a tiny sea of gelatine. For good or ill, radicalism in America was finished. You'd never get the masses to revolt on three square meals a day. Cell meetings had been replaced by enclaves of silent workers huddled around their television sets. Still, the universities were flourishing. Ageing Trotskyists and Shachmanites could make a decent living arguing the merits of the Third International in a handful of scholarly journals. There was plenty of room for everybody, providing you didn't expect your particular hobbyhorse to outstrip the supersonic jets that were speeding America forward into the future.

And what, then, was the relevance of Middle English to the twentieth century? As much as Bach or Botticelli or baseball, no more, no less. If you enjoyed it, it was a pleasant way to pass the time, a self-contained system of tension and release, a world of the imagination in which you could escape from the banalities and contradictions of a world in which Beauty was Miss America, Truth the daily newspaper, and High Seriousness the

stock market returns. And furthermore, university teaching had a measure of public acceptance: a Ph.D. after your name was a certificate that you hadn't been wasting your time.

But Paul was forced to admit that he had. For the past six months he'd fallen behind on the academic treadmill. And that was what this conference with Northcote was going to be about.

PAUL found Professor Northcote difficult to talk to. Even here in the privacy of his office he had the air of one addressing a large and attentive classroom. He spoke deliberately, with a weighty precision, as if he had written out every possible verbal combination and memorized them. *Northcote's Dictionary of Quotations* would fill a large library. He was reciting one of them now.

"A doctoral dissertation is not primarily a compendium of wit," he was saying. "Not that scholarship is synonymous with 'megrims, mollygrubs and collywobbles'." Northcote was one of the few men alive who could orally interpret a quotation mark. "But truthfully, don't you think you have a tendency to dismiss a theory with a quip rather than a refutation?"

"Yes sir, I'm afraid I do." ("And so do you, you old hypocrite.") The silent qualification made Paul's smile a little easier. He felt rather like Galileo. ("And still it moves.")

"It's all a matter of emphasis, Denning. You're a bit young to dismiss every established Chaucerian with Shavian irreverence."

("And you, sir, were a bit young when you established your reputation by making an utter fool of Skeat.") Paul's smile became downright ingratiating.

"Now, what about that third chapter?" Paul's smile faded. "It seems to be taking you rather longer than we anticipated. Are you having difficulties?"

"I'm afraid, Professor Northcote, that the difficulties are extrinsic rather than intrinsic." (Damn! Now I'm talking like him.) "The truth is that I'm having difficulty in getting down to it."

"I'm not surprised. Every dissertation seems to have a slump in the middle. Some never get past it. Now let me make a suggestion, Paul." Northcote leaned back and brought his fingertips carefully together as if he feared that they would explode. "Work of any kind demands discipline, and discipline consists of carefully formed habits. I suggest that you sit at your desk at least an hour every day and write. Something, anything, so long as it's related to your dissertation. I do appreciate your difficulty." He leaned slowly forward as he spoke. "When I was working on Chaucer's *Invention of Literary Dialect* . . . "

Professor Northcote began a heartrending tale of sleepless nights and impotent faculties. Paul imagined a teleprompter just behind his head on which the lines appeared in stately procession. As the exemplum progressed, Paul amused himself by imagining the narrator seated upright on the toilet, tearing identical lengths from the roll of paper and folding them meticulously along the perforations.

His scatological reverie was interrupted by the sudden realization that Northcote had stopped talking and was waiting for an answer. "Mr. Denning," he repeated with just a hint of impatience, "Do you really feel comfortable at the prospect of an academic career?" Paul's mind raced to catch up with Northcote's monologue.

"I wonder if any teacher worth his salt feels completely comfortable at the prospect," he babbled. "I mean, there's such a gap between the world of the university and the world outside. You know, the ivory tower and so forth. Don't you ever feel cut off from what's really happening?" He trailed off helplessly as Northcote looked impassively at him from beneath his legendary eyebrows.

"Reality," he said at length, "is a concept which has given philosophers a great deal of difficulty. But most of the acceptable definitions, I think, would include the body of man's artistic creations which have stood the test of time. It would be a mistake to equate what is real with what is newsworthy," he continued, plunging the point of his wit into a favorite *bete noir*. "Scholarship may not be dramatic or lucrative, but I think unlikely that future generations will question its relevance to reality."

Northcote leaned forward with a reassuring smile. "You're a good scholar, Denning. I sympathize with your self-examination, but you shouldn't worry yourself unnecessarily. America's universities are among her oldest institutions. They are unlikely to disappear overnight. Certain values such as reverence for the past, academic ability, excellence of intellect – these will be with us for a very long time. Even our eminently real politicians and industrialists still appear to consider them worthy of support. So go write a couple of pages and you'll feel a lot better."

Paul mumbled his gratitude and hurried from the office. Outside the sun, an obedient echo of Northcote's cheerful optimism, was erasing the last evidences of yesterday's unseasonal rain. The campus was bustling with a purposeful activity which rebuked Paul for his morbid romanticism of the night before. The mere presence of so many people made all the difference. Wordsworth could never have composed his lines above Tintern Abbey if he had viewed it overrun with busloads of babbling tourists.

But Northcote's question stuck in his mind. Could he actually spend the next forty years re-reading Chaucer? Put that way it sounded like Sartre's *No Exit* – even such an eminently urbane, sensible story-teller with his

disarmingly modest air of self-effacement would begin to pall after a lifetime of enforced and exclusive intimacy. Paul decided he would go home and give the question some serious thought.