

Chapter 4

Like an Elizabethan panorama, Berkeley's Great Chain of Being stretches upward from San Francisco Bay into the surrounding hills. At the very bottom are its handful of factories interspersed with the modest bungalows of its Negro population – not quite bad enough to redevelop, not quite good enough to be proud of. But some take pride nevertheless. Freshly painted houses with trim gardens stand next to peeling shacks, their weedy front yards full of the corpses of derelict autos.

Further up the flat, gently sloping plain lies Shattuck Avenue, a middle-class artery where a steady flow of inter-city traffic passes the banks and

department stores in which Berkeley's respectable non-university inhabitants keep the engines of commerce ticking over. From there the plain ascends more sharply to the university and its rival Main Street, Telegraph Avenue, where a few blocks of colorful coffee houses, bookstores, beer joints, clothing shops (and a lonely, anomalous Christian Science Reading Room) lead through Sather Gate straight into the heart of the campus.

And winding far above them all, past the renaissance palaces and Georgian plantations of the Pan-Hellenics, are the steep, tortuous streets and lanes and footpaths of Nut Hill, where Berkeley's architectural lunatics have built their precarious castles in air—Grecian temples, Swiss chalets, Viking banquet halls, Arabian

alcazars, log cabins, Elizabethan cottages, glass boxes, and, most envied of all, the mad polyglot masterpieces of Bernard Maybeck.

One of the maddest and most polyglot of these belonged to Jean-Pierre Seurat. Set back from the bend of a hairpin turn, it climbed straight up the face of an abandoned stone quarry. Its outline was that of a tall perpendicular Gothic arch with a broad low-pitched roof supported by massive redwood beams which extended several feet beyond the edge of the building. These beams also formed the high ceiling of an enormous living room which looked far out over San Francisco Bay through two Gothic plate glass windows covering the entire wall except for a broad flat diamond just below the roof beam. Below these

two heavily lidded eyes the facade broke up into a small crazy quilt of interlocking Gothic windows, some turned upside down, some pointed at both top and bottom, and all of them stitched together with swirling sculptured traceries which rambled in all directions and led one eventually back to the starting point, like a laborious exercise in mediaeval rhetoric. Behind this towering wall of leaded glass lay a labyrinthine pile of rooms leading upward by quarter- and half-levels; and straight up one corner from behind a massive studded redwood door rose the open iron cage of a prehistoric elevator which creaked and groaned its way to the top.

The gate flew open with a resounding crash and out stepped Paul Benning into the great living room. It was like

ascending the Tower of Babel. About sixty guests stood around in little knots, shouting at each other and trying to make themselves collectively heard above the piercing trumpets of the Berlioz Requiem. It was the middle of the *Tuba Mirum* and a powerful stereo system with speakers perched at opposite ends of a long balcony was announcing ruin and desolation. Under the center of the balcony the remains of an oak tree were blazing on a stone hearth over which one might have roasted a baby elephant on a spit. The walls at both ends of the room were covered to the eaves with bookcases. Everything else was redwood: ceiling, floor, walls, tables, great box-like sofas, and the two recessed snuggeries at either side of the fireplace, in which loving couples

were making appropriate use of the shadows. The only light came from the fire and from the distant twinkling San Francisco skyline. If this were indeed the day of wrath, thought Paul, one couldn't ask for a better way to go.

"Aha, Paul Denning! Welcome, welcome." Jean-Pierre Seurat detached himself from the largest circle and came towards him with both arms extended. Paul was whisked into the circle and someone stuck a martini under his nose.

"You must understand," a small bald-headed man in an Irish knit sweater was saying, "that Einstein developed his theory of relativity in two stages. The General Theory has to do with the consistency and the velocity of light and the interrelations of time and

space, and the Special Theory extends the General Theory by the phenomenon of gravitation and by implication of all natural phenomena."

During the pregnant silence which followed a girl just behind Paul's ear was whispering, "Of *course* I think Jackson Pollack's paintings are sexy, but that's no reason to go to bed with *you*. Before Paul could catch the reply, Seurat dragged him back towards the elevator to meet the latest arrival.

"Dearest Ursula, how very nice of you to have arrived," Seurat exclaimed, his French accent even more exaggerated than usual. "Paul, make intercourse with this magnificent creature while I fabricate another martini."

Paul found himself face to face with a short dumpy girl in jeans and an ambiguous black pullover. A bumper crop of flaming red hair was pulled sharply back into a pony tail behind a round moon face with little pig eyes and a squashed up nose. Paul did not relish being stuck with her for the rest of the evening.

"Hello," he said, not very cordially, and waited for her to take it from there.

"Hello," she said, sending the ball back into his court. They stood silently, each daring the other to speak first. Seurat floated back and produced a martini with a little flourish. "Ah, I see you two are getting on. I'm going to leave you to entertain one another." He was back in his circle, arguing the pre-

eminence of Einstein as poet. The *Tuba Mirum* reached its second climax and conversation became a feat of endurance. Paul turned to look at the view and, out of politeness, included Ursula with a gesture. They stood and looked at the glittering panorama.

"Why do you think professors always take houses in the hills?" asked Ursula as the music subsided. "I think it's a manifestation of the power syndrome," The fire spat little nuggets of glowing charcoal onto a blackened oriental runner.

"Up above the world you fly Like a tea-tray in the sky." quoted Paul, deciding to keep up his end of the conversation. Ursula grinned up at him, the corners of her eyes crinkling up into little crows' feet, and she

suddenly became not unpleasant to look at. She's OK, thought Paul. "What do you do?" he added, out of interest as well as politeness.

Her grin widened. "I'm a poetess!" she declared with conviction.

Paul laughed outright. "Splendid! I thought that label was reserved for women with three names, like Alice Corbin Henderson."

"Not any more. I'm creating a new image with lots of sex, sweaty armpits and four-letter words."

"Good for you. That's better than pots of dead geraniums any day."

"Are you a poet?"

"No, I'm a scholar. I batten off their corpses after they decompose."

"You're welcome to mine after I'm through with it if it'll do you any good. But I ought to warn you that it's been used a lot." She tilted her head and looked at him with what was intended to be a provocative expression, but through which she was closely observing his reaction, as if it were a scientific experiment.

"That's OK. My necrophilia is literary, not biological."

Paul looked her straight in the eye. Better reach an understanding right away before she started fondling his earlobe. Paul didn't care much for outright refusals, whichever end of the transaction he happened to be on. He'd always been mystified by the fact that some men could just walk up to a strange woman and ask her if she wanted to screw; he couldn't even

summon the courage to ask Daphne politely after he'd dated her for years. The only time he'd made love the woman had had to put the question. How could she dare to risk being turned down? It hadn't seemed to worry her at all. Didn't she have any pride? And yet, it had been a relief for him not to have to assume responsibility, just to lie there and let her undress him. He rather wished someone would do it again. But not this shabby specimen standing beside him. She was nice to talk to but the thought of touching or being touched by her made him squirm. No, keep it light. Definitely.

The poetess was just reaching the end of a monolog. "So, with all the established poets in the universities, tied to teaching and research, reading more and more becomes a substitute

for experience and poetry turns into a celebration of other poets. It's like the royal family in Ruritania—all haemophilia and feeble-mindedness. Someone ought to take them out for an airing, make them look at the sun, even screw a little. Do 'em good."

Back to that again, thought Paul, looking around for an excuse to change the subject. Someone had taken off the Berlioz and a wispy faggot in the far corner was playing the harpsichord, emphasizing the trills with little shakes of his head. The music strutted and postured and stamped its tiny feet like a mouse with delusions of grandeur. A weedy brunette in a black satin dress and dangling earrings was vibrating in time to the music, on the edge of orgasm, while her companion, a bearded lecher in a tweed suit that

looked like a haystack, stood behind her and gave himself over to a private fit.

Paul and Ursula giggled convulsively and a bosomy matron in a Grecian gown stared her disapproval. "It's perfect," Paul gasped. "Hogarth is alive and well and living in Berkeley." Ursula took his arm—Paul hardly noticed—and they went in search of more martinis.

Seurat was sitting on a trestle table pouring gin into an earthenware bowl. He sat whenever possible on whatever was convenient—boxes, railings, ledges, fire hydrants, and sometimes the laps of not unwilling female undergraduates. He was listening respectfully to an elderly professor whose back was bent double with the weight of erudition.

"It's very simple, young man," he explained slowly between pauses with a voice like a rusty foghorn. "Every day I take a little card from a pile and I write a word. Some days I write *two* words on *two* little cards. Some days I write *three* words on *three* little cards. Then I take the cards and put them in a shoebox. When the shoebox is full I start another shoebox. And suddenly one day I have a dictionary!"

Seurat nodded meditatively, poured a token of vermouth, peered critically at the bowl, and added more gin. "*Festina lente*, the method of the French encyclopaedists. Unfortunately the modern university demands that one write like a journalist. The fad of the moment supersedes the wisdom of the ages...Ah, Ursula, you and Paul are

ready for more. Let me introduce..." He turned to the elderly professor, who had fallen asleep on his feet and was snoring gently. "Shhh! Do not disturb! Presently he will awaken and tell us of his conversations with Walther von der Vogelweide."

"My God," said Ursula when they were back at the window. "Who was that?"

"A living legend. Gottfried Borer, Emeritus Professor of Mediaeval Philology. Emeritus, by the way, comes from the Latin *e* or *ex* meaning out and *meritus* meaning he deserved it. Actually though, he's quite a guy. Still has an office with a cot in it somewhere at the top of Wheeler Hall. Whenever he leaves it he has to unwind a ball of string so he can find his way back. I had a seminar from

him last year. He was hung up on folklore and told us the first day all about the time he found a Mongolian riddle under a staircase in Chicago."

Ursula grinned appreciatively and Paul continued.

"At the end of semester he gave us all B's. Somebody asked why he didn't give us all A's. He stared out the window for a while and then gave us his explanation. 'Last month I sent you all to the library to look up a certain Buch. The next day I asked you whether it was a red Buch or a green Buch. You all replied, without exception, that it was a green Buch. However, I happen to know that it was a *blue* Buch!'"

Ursula shook all over like a sack of mice. It was so much easier to talk, Paul thought, than to act. He'd always

been a good talker. He felt at home in the university, where talk and action were synonymous. Sometimes when he was working alone in his room at night he would become terrified of his own silent company and set out for Robbie's, where he would sit over a beer and talk to one of the regulars until closing time. After midnight the crowd always dwindled to the same inner circle, some with their heads together in endless metaphysical argument, others sitting alone, scanning the faces of new arrivals, waiting for enlightenment.

It was the same with girls. He could never do anything without *talking* about it, analysing it, turning it over and over until the word overwhelmed the deed and stopped it short completion. When it came to indecision, Hamlet was a non-starter.

That was the comforting thing about girls like Ursula. He could talk until he was blue in the face and never have to carry through with anything.

The party lasted well into the early morning. The fairy threw up into the harpsichord, the black satin and the tweed disappeared into one of the snuggeries, Professor Borer went to sleep in a chair with Kluge's *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, and Paul and Ursula discovered a mutual interest in Gothic architecture and spent hours arguing the respective merits of cathedrals they had never set eyes on. It was two a.m. before Ursula began to wonder how she was going to get back to San Francisco.

"Don't worry about a thing. I'll drive you. No trouble at all," Paul insisted with gin-fed generosity. They said

goodbye to Seurat, who was still cleaning out the harpsichord, a cologne-soaked handkerchief tied over his nose, found Paul's ancient Plymouth a block from where he thought he had left it, and drove down through the sleeping city towards the East Shore freeway.

URSULA lived in a tiny flat at the top of a decrepit specimen of carpenter's Gothic on the side of Telegraph Hill. The halls smelled of stale wine and rancid diapers. Paul puffed his way to the third floor, feeling dizzy and more than a little sick. Ursula opened the unlocked door and switched on a dull red bulb which threw an angry glow over a wasteland of crumpled notepaper, cast-off clothes, and food-encrusted plates. The only furniture

was a mattress under the window covered with a tangle of pillows and blankets. Paul was in no condition to be fastidious. He threw himself down, closed his eyes, and began the delicate task of steering the room back into equilibrium.

Ursula retired to the kitchen and was back in a few minutes with two Dundee marmalade jars full of instant coffee. Opening one eye, Paul was relieved to find that she looked right side up. The room was settling down. He sat half-way up against the wall and stuffed a pillow behind his head. Ursula put down the jars and dropped easily to the floor in front of him in the lotus position, feet tucked out of sight. It seemed unnatural for her plump shapeless body to respond so gracefully. She picked up her coffee and grinned at him. Her squat

silhouette against the kitchen door was like one of those little statues of the smiling Buddha, belly protuberant, hand raised in universal benediction.

Suddenly he wanted to tell her everything, as far back as he could remember, his one-sided struggles with a dim and distant divinity which hovered somewhere just out of sight, like the ominous shadow which follows you through moonlit woods but is never there when you turn around. It was less oppressive now than in his childhood but still there, brooding, waiting, ready to descend on him abruptly when he least expected it and whisk him off to subterranean torment.

Paul longed for confession and absolution, for her cool hand on his

forehead, her arms about him, gathering him to herself, back to the bosom of Abraham, the womb of the Virgin, the dark dusty silence of the grave. He opened his mouth but the words clogged his throat like refuse that has lain too long undisturbed, until at last his breath tore through in long wracking shudders that shook his body like a slack sail.

"I can't," he sobbed over and over, "I just can't."

Ursula laid a hand on his knee. "Get some sleep," she said. "You'll feel better in the morning."