

Chapter 8

San Francisco, as *Holiday Magazine* continually reminds us, is a gourmet's paradise. The sign in a North Beach restaurant promises, "If it moves, we cook it." Its *specialite-de-la-maison* is *Baked Possum a la Dan'l Boone*. Elsewhere in the city, you can eat raw fish salad at Sam Wo's, snails at Ernie's, abalone at Fisherman's Wharf, seaweed soup at the Mingei-Ya, buffalo stew at Tommy's Joint, a hundred different hamburgers at the Hippo, gefulte Fish at Bloom's, and Locusts and Wild Honey at John the Baptist's.

England too has made her inevitable gastronomic contribution. On Hyde just off Kirk stands the *Olde Battersea Fish and Chips*, a conscientiously authentic monument to English *basse cuisine*. Its pride and joy is a genuine imported English fryer in gleaming stainless steel, whose only false touch is its antiseptic cleanliness. Bottles of imported malt vinegar stand on the Formica counters running along both ends of the shop and the chips are cut in the chunky English fashion rather than the slender strands of American french fries. "What'll you 'ave, Duckie?" asks the proprietor's wife, a plump comfortable Cockney, and she wraps your purchase in a specially imported *Evening Standard* after lining it hygienically with waxed paper.

The only concession to American know-how is a boldly-lettered sign in the window which reads,

**BETTER SAY
BATTER SEA
BATTERED SEAFOOD**

Paul noticed that someone had written **BULL SHIT** in lipstick on the window below the sign.

"The phantom strikes again!" he thought and went inside.

Ahead of him were a man in a BOAC pilot's uniform and sporting long carefully brushed moustaches, a short fat bald-headed man in a double-breasted pin-stripe suit, a pair of shabby beatniks whom the proprietor eyed as if he were waiting to disinfect the shop after they left, and a spotless secretary who looked as if she had been disinfected just before she came in. Paul took his place behind her and stared over her shoulder down the generous canyon between her breasts, his imagination supplying what was just out of sight. The exercise kept him occupied until his turn came and a generous portion of cod and chips was folded away inside a dire prediction of *The Imminent Collapse of Her Majesty's Government*.

Outside the shop Paul headed around the corner towards the *Highland Fling*. It was another of Britain's contributions to gracious American living, the English pub. Scotch really, but half a world away such distinctions went unnoticed.

Next door was a neat little shop which you could enter as a somber American male and leave ready to take your place in the front ranks of the Queen's Own Highlanders, resplendent in tartan, sporran, ghillies and thick knee socks, with bagpipes squealing under your arm like a tortured tomcat. Or, if your lungs weren't up to it, a stack of Kenneth McKellar records.

Do your pampered intestines yearn for something more substantial than a soggy bowl of cornflakes? There are packets of real Scots oatmeal, the sort that you put on the back of the stove before you go to bed and leave to simmer into semi-edibility.

Do you doubt your hereditary right to such old world authenticity? Somewhere in the branches of your family tree might be a Scottish-sounding name you can look up in a book on the counter and determine the clan to which you're entitled to claim a dubious connection. If he bears one of the lucky names, you can carry away a coat-of-arms in full color, suitable for framing. Most of the tourists taking advantage of this splendid opportunity are from somewhere in the Middle West; the real Scots are down on Market Street trying on tooled leather cowboy boots and ten-gallon stetsons.

But not all. Some, who hadn't seen a loch or a glen for half a lifetime, are next door, reaffirming their loyalties over a glass of Double Century. The noise carried out to the street. Paul could tell as he entered the double swinging doors that the tables were already full. He'd have to eat his fish and chips standing up unless there was someone he knew who'd squeeze up and make a place for him.

"Ah, Benning, a delightful surprise!" The voice came from somewhere to his left, halfway along the wall, sounding vaguely familiar but strangely out of context. Paul's eye ran along the row of benches and then came back abruptly to the benign, dignified smile of Professor Northcote, seated behind a trestle table crowded with British naval officers.

"If you'd care to join us," he called, "I dare say we can find you a seat." His voice sounded ambiguously mid-Atlantic. "Just drop your packet on the table and I'll keep a watchful eye on it while you fight your way to the bar." Northcote was a few drinks ahead of him, Paul decided. What a bore! Northcote, drunk or sober, was the last person he wanted to talk to. But you couldn't very well snub the chairman of your dissertation committee in a public bar, not unless you wanted to spend the rest of your life selling insurance.

Cursing the divinity who governs chance encounters, Paul mumbled his thanks, deposited his rapidly cooling supper, and headed across the room towards the bar, where a shouting scrummage of customers competed noisily for the attention of a single elderly bartender. It was going to be a long wait. By the time he got back to the table, his fish would have achieved the consistency of congealed library paste.

The only contented creature at the bar was a parrot at the far end who hopped back and forth in his dingy cage from one leg to the other, conscientiously rehearsing his private phrase book.

"Last orders, gentlemen," he croaked. "Name your poison. Awk! Always be an England! Auk! Long live the King!" Several years of conscientious training hadn't succeeded in bring him up to date on the last coronation, and for him the late King George was still firmly on the throne.

But then, some of the customers were hardly more contemporary. Here and there about the long room were the elderly remnants of empire—balding, moustachioed, tweed-clad survivors of the Golden Age, their heads together in rueful contemplation of a world which had carelessly thrown away its better qualities. Outside were the neon vulgarities of the twentieth century, but in this dingy high-beamed public bar they could retire amongst the dusty mementos of faded glory. Tattered regimental flags hung limply in a row under the high ceiling; on a raised platform in the smoky distance, a handful of cloth caps threw darts in turn at the tightly packed bristles of a dead boar, which suddenly emitted a long blood-curdling squeal of agonized protest.

No, that must be the piper warming up in the store room. Sure enough, there he was at the end of the room, kilt swinging above knobbly knees, his pubic sporran hanging down like a hairy fig leaf, the puffed-up bladder under his arm giving voice to the furious drones. He limbered his fingers with random fragments of melody and then went straight into an incongruously funereal rendition of *Home on the Range*. Some of the younger customers joined in, the parrot screamed his protest at the unwelcome competition, a beagle on a leash by the door howled mournfully above the confusion and imagined its visual counterpart in which a tropical tribe in the middle of a clearing piped and cavorted around a dog on a funeral pyre, clad ceremonially in kilts and cowboy hats, while exotic birds screamed in the surrounding jungle. Imagining the dog with the head of Professor Northcote, the fantasy had much to recommend it.

Paul obtained his mug of Mackeson's by deftly outmanoeuvring a couple of burly sailors and made his way back to Northcote's table. "Of course, it's been years since I was at Oxford," he was saying, "but one never forgets the English spring. The eternal return of the seasons takes on a ritual

significance; one can imagine Proserpine returning to her supportive Mother from her Plutonian prison."

One of the naval officers winked privately at his companions and cleared his throat. "I would think," he replied deferentially, "that your perpetual California springtime had something to recommend it. I'm always happy for a bit of sun when we're on Pacific manoeuvres. Spend quite a bit of time looking at it, actually. Try to memorize it for when we're in Portsmouth drydock."

Northcote was undaunted. "But that's precisely what makes you appreciate it so much more than we natives who take it for granted. Pleasure is defined by its absence. The nought is the basis of number." He smiled with quiet satisfaction as *Northcote's Dictionary of Quotations* was given an added entry. A skinny Sub-Lieutenant giggled and then covered his indiscretion with a fit of coughing.

Paul spread out the newspaper and nibbled tentatively at a soggy chip. It was cold as a witch's thumb. But hunger triumphed and he began to chew his way methodically through a fillet of congealed cod. A stout Lieutenant Commander with a bushy black beard drummed his fingers on the table top and looked at his watch. It was time to leave, he decided, after a final round of pleasantries. He shifted his weight carefully like a net of valuable cargo and cleared his throat.

"What I like about you American chaps, he began, "is your energy. You get things done" None of that tea break nonsense every ten minutes. You can't count on a British workman any more. "When I was a lad," he proclaimed as if about to launch into a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song, "a man took pride in his work. You asked him to do a job, and by God, he did it! Knew their place in those days! No shop stewards to come along and tell 'em they had to have half-a-dozen dog's bodies sitting around keeping the floor warm. Give an order today and likely as not your man'll look you in the eye and tell you to do it yourself. No discipline, no respect for their betters. Why, when I was in Simla, I had a black'd go to hell and back for me if I asked him. Loved me like a father, that boy did. Look at 'em now! Stick a knife between your shoulder blades if you turn your back on 'em! Mark my words, Professor, you Americans had better watch your step! You're too good natured, too generous by a damn sight! Keep an eye on those black boys! Let 'em take too much for granted and by God, you'll wake up one morning to find a wog in the White House!"

I wrote that decades before Obama!

And that's where I stopped writing back in the early 1980s, having been advised by a trusted friend that the story was without merit and that my literary attempt had been a waste of time. Rereading it almost half a century later, I realized that showing it to him had been a terrible mistake, for I had subsequently learned that he had had sexual inhibitions that were more disabling than the fictional Paul's, and that he had had periodic relief with a woman as corpulent as Ursula, but that these had only been occasional and unsatisfactory. What pain my narrative must have given him!