

## Chapter XX

*As Per Usual*

BRRRRING me my books and my bottle, YO-de-ho! they're singing at the Unfinished Aquarium, skipping cueballs across an indoor duckpond—who left the taps on? Random spheroids flying unseen, sinking into the never-never, smoothing out the surface of the eggshell. Quick!—glue your eyes to the cracks before they become crystalline! Appearance you see *is* everything, *through* everything, *look*—

BRRRRING me my books and my bottle and here she comes in all her oblivion, arms outflung caryatid-style, emptyhanded as though to display or embrace or maybe take a double stranglehold as she undergoes another upheaval, grasping and clutching, causing the frosted glass to shake-buck-quiver and a tankard-bell to CLANG CLANG CLANG—  
—on which note Peyton was brrrrrought up off the drawing table.

*Scheiss de la merde.*

And crick de la neck. Not to mention sick de la stomach as he lurched down the cuuuute little staircase, picked up the brrrringer and landed on the cold, cold ground. *Gag...* have to be more careful with those books and that bottle.

“Jussa minute!”

What the devil-hell time was it? AM or P? A, probably, given the extent of the crick; oh these mornings after. Unclench your jaws now, wipe your face, find the phone.

“Peyton?” it was saying. “Are you there? Can you hear me? Hello?! Peyton!!”

“Here.”

“*Jeez* you scared the hell out of me! What was that crash? It sounded like a gang of muggers got you! What’s going on? Why didn’t you answer the phone last night? I called and called—”

“Maybe I was out,” he told her. “What time is it?”

“About seven. Why?”

“What are *you* doing up at seven?”

“It’s Thanksgiving, you turk! We’ve got a meal to prepare here! Our folks made it in yesterday. You should have seen my mother’s face when she found out we’re having lamb; she about had a cow. But I—hey! are you listening to me?”

“Mmph.”

“What’d I say just now?”

“Your mother about had a cow but hey am I listening to you.”

“ExACTly! Keep right on taking notes; everything I say’s worth remembering. So when should I pick you up? How does noon sound?”

*Like it rhymes with June.* “No need,” he said. “I’ll get there.”

“It’s no trouble, I can hop into Clarence and be there in a jiff—”

“I’ll *get* there, I said. You tend to your cooking.” (Make an effort, man; take the sting out.) “Greek food, right?”

“You know it! No more turkeys for me! All right then, sweetie, be here around noon, okay? Or no later than one. Or two at the latest; we generally eat around two. Unless—”

“I will BE there. Have you ever known me to be late for anything?”

“No,” she admitted. “Okay then, I luvya—gimme a smooch... louder!... You *sure* you don’t need a ride?”

What Peyton needed could not be supplied; at least not over a telephone.

Groan up off the carpet, grimace out of yesterday’s saggy-baggy clothes, step into the bathroom—and damnation! How *was* the famous APE monograph coming along? Right off its dusty paper and onto the author’s face. That’s what you get for using the Liberal Studies copy machine...

Put on a fresh set of duds. Reassemble yourself for an alleged day off. Wallet, notebook, black pen, red pen. Keys, change, bandanna dry and folded...

Hell. One of the advantages of orphanhood ought to be “no forced holiday celebrating.” Last year, with the Chesterfield bungalow finally sold, he’d ignored both Thanksgiving *and* Christmas and enjoyed himself immensely, kneedeep in the *No-Nazz* resurrection. Before that turned into an upwardly-mobile ascension.

(You feed upon lambs, I’ll feed upon sheep.)

So anyway: down the elevator, out the door. Down and out and no one about. As though this truly were The Day After a neutron bomb killed off all living things, leaving the streets and buildings undamaged but empty.

Patchy fog today. Only to be expected, given how long you’re likely to be out in it. Normally to get to Deasil you’d take the Expressway and be there in no more than half an hour, depending on traffic. But today, of course, there were no express buses and damn few anything elses. Just the Ole 99, whose stop was only a couple of miles away, afoot.

So chalk it up to exercise. *Once I had a Porsche, now it’s gone—buddy can you spare the time?* Sure can; it’s The Day After, remember. Just keep walking briskly. Should take no more than forty-five minutes to hike down Dee Ridge. No rain, no snow, no dancin’ sprite by your side; nothing to hold you back. Onward and downward to the Dee Valley Highway. *Okay fine, fer shure fer shure: take the Val Highway ‘cause there is no cure.* Nossir, just the Ole 99 with its resident onboard sideshow: bearded ladies and human skeletons, Bobo the Dog-Faced Boy and Roscoe the Snake-Geek—they baffle science!—looking like fugitives from an oldtime comic strip.

Patchy fog...

What was it? two, three—four?—years ago? he’d been doing research for his master’s thesis on the contents of the Ash Can School, sifting through microfilmed copies of the Philadelphia *Press*. Eyes blearing over, he’d taken a break to check out vintage 1908 comic strips—and stumbled across *Skinny Billy the Kid Chimney Sweep*, drawn by someone signing himself “APE” with a tiny stick-figure monkey for a flourish.

(“Oh cuuuute!” Skeeter Kitefly would one day say. “Look at it swinging from the

E!... That curly tail sure is suggestive, don't you think?")

Skinny Billy swept the chimneys of a city existing only at bird's-eye level, all shingles and smokestacks and capering flames in sooty stovepipe hats. As though this were the uppermost reaches of Montmartre, drawn by Toulouse-Lautrec's taller brother.

Certainly by a capital-D Draftsman: there was delicacy of line, yet dark emphatic contours; silhouettes precisely defined, yet isolated with a few rapid strokes; moments seized and trajectories traced against bold Gauguinish backgrounds.

Our friend APE appeared to be a dues-paying Post-Impressionist.

But one about whom the comic history books said as little as possible. For every George Herriman or Winsor McCay, there were a score or more of forgotten pioneers lost in syndicate archives or buried in newspaper morgues. Peyton had begun digging through these, and over the next few years was able to compile a sizable dossier on the life and works of Mr. Asa Pursch Ewell. Who had wanted, in his 1890s youth, to go to France and study painting, become another Eakins or Homer, join the Great & Sublime. Had made it as far as the Chicago Art Institute, till he was caught "coarsening his style" by doing caricatures of the models in life class.

So he'd abandoned canvas, become a newspaper illustrator, worked as a sketch artist in Good Old Heartland USA till hitting the big time: hired by Hearst to join the New York *Journal/American* combine. His cartoonist colleagues there, Hall of Famers all: Rudolph Dirks, R. F. Outcault, Frederick Opper, Jimmy Swinnerton, Tad Dorgan. No reason why A. P. Ewell shouldn't have risen to their ranks right there, except that his first comic strip—*King Stork in Babyland*—was less than remarkable. Picturesque idylls, Sunday after Sunday: nothing to make your jaw drop or sides ache.

To Philadelphia then, *Skinny Billy* at bird's-eye level, Toulouse-Lautrec's Taller Brother paying his dues with those dynamic-patterned dancing flames—all in the space of two, three years. Then back to the Middle West to hook up with Inter Service, who distributed a color supplement to rural Sunday papers. Retreating to the boondocks, some might say; but out of it had come *Daring Dewey*, which Peyton would exhume from the catacombs seven decades later.

(Over the river, across the Dee, the Glazier Street Bridge we use. Far less glutted than the Hynde even at rush hour, and empty today—you could drop a body off this bridge without fear of interference. Lots of broken branches and fallen leaves down there for it to sink into, be covered up by. The river was narrower here, flowing through a deep gorge before twisting sharply to the east and hastening to empty its mouth into Lake Windohwa. Accompanied elbow-to-elbow by the Valley Highway’s hash houses and gas stations and used car lots, motels catering to the street trade and nursing homes featured on *60 Minutes*. All silent today, all secret. No snow, though—just patchy fog...)

No cutting to the chase in *Daring Dewey*. Nothing else to cut from: the title character’s constant pursuit of an artful-dodging entity called Farf Etched, who would change his/her/its appearance from frame to frame. Sometimes a gloating moustachio’d villain; sometimes a delectably beautiful lady; sometimes the Supreme Hee-Haw, Oldest and Wisest Jackass in All the World.

Dewey’s pursuit never had any overt motivation, other than the unrelenting end-in-of-itself that Wile E. Coyote’s would one day be. Farf Etched relied heavily on onomatopoeia, wrenching a CRUNCH or SQUEAL off the vibrant backdrop to conk Dewey over the head with; but Dewey always vowed vengeance anew upon his elusive quarry, even from the depths of a tarpit:

“So you think me beslubbered, do you Farf Etched? Ha ha! Blighted being! We shall see who laughs last!”

In *Daring Dewey*, APE took distortion to elliptical heights. Peyton would search for some confirmation of contemporary influences—the Fauves, *Die Brücke*, Kandinsky, Cubism—but there was only Farf Etched hitching rides on speech balloons, stealing a scowl from a scowly and using it to transform from Stone Age caveman to Louis XVI *gentilhomme* to elegant lepidopteran taking wing into the surrealistic twilight sky.

Powerful stuff. Vivid; even lurid.

Then one day in 1914, SHPLOOP: no more Dewey, no more Farf. *Vesta the Vampire* took over their supplement space, going through weekly Theda Bara motions as Carmen or Cleopatra but revealing her true self each time to be a stringy schoolmarm-type.

“Bewail your fate, wretched man! You have lost your heart to Vesta, the woman who does not care!”

Nor did the reader. APE’s *Vesta* was a far more hackneyed comic strip, repetitive and somewhat vindictive.

(Had Ewell perhaps been unlucky in love?)

(Haven’t we all, Asa P.)

Unlucky in something, anyway: big time to small time to no time at all. *Vesta* axed by Inter Service; APE drawing an inferior version of *Skinny Billy* for awhile, then ghosting strips for other artists till the early Twenties. By then the “funnies” were a big business, run by major-league syndicates that forced cartoonists to draw down the middle of the road. Leaving Asa Pursch Ewell off by the side in doleful obscurity, illustrating children’s textbooks: a shuddersome fate.

Peyton had set out to save Dewey and Farf from oblivion, and incidentally win himself (he was not shy) a little critical recognition with a proposed article that grew in FLAIR, SCOPE, and DEPTH till it dilated into a definitive full-length study. The famous APE monograph: “a scholarly treatise on a specified subject,” written with one hand tied behind the scholar’s back.

Those had been the best of times—Peyton at his very sharpest and keenest, chock-full of touché potential. Grad school at Use ‘Em, GTA at Merely; praised as “insightful” for his Ash Can thesis, urged to seek a research assistantship and press on toward a Ph.D.

But that would have meant signing up for the tenure treadmill, wasting your nose on the publish-or-perish grindstone. Did universities scorn Merely SAD as no place for an art historian? You could take advantage of the flexibility there, the liberty to freelance on the side—do artwork for the *No-Nazz*, review gallery shows and traveling exhibitions. At Merely you felt at home: you lived there, did most of your drinking there, holding fresh raspburials as Lord High Nazztril of all you surveyed.

Within spitting distance of the Valley Highway: then as now.

With the Ole 99 materializing out of the patchy fog to disclose its onboard sideshow, ready and waiting for you: *Gobble gobble, one of us! one of us!*

Freak up and twitch someone.

LURCH of stomach as we embark on an hour's crawl to Deasil, jouncing along among the scratch-and-sniff set.

But what more could you expect? what better could be hoped for? after the past two comma three years? Certainly zilch on the academic side. Not that you hadn't tried to throw yourself into your work—big plans, big projects, devising agendas, concocting syllabi, applying for (and failing to get) NEH grants. Dayjob Diddlybop: a rising gorgeful of broken branches and fallen leaves. Early efforts backburnered, pigeonholed; later ones scattering like a mess of all-the-hell-over catalogs.

So much for trying to act useful.

Them's the breaks.

What other conclusion could you jump to? with gaunt Henry Bramham, that counter of pennies and paradigms, taking over as Dean? Merely SAD had been forced to face up to the need for hard-edged austerity, and who better to impose it than a Minimalist sculptor? Get out the adze and chopping block! Away with the fiscal-foolish, spectacle-at-any-cost previous Dean; away too with ten of the sixty SAD teaching positions. Not Peyton's, thanks to Dr. Ecklebury; but Isobel Otterburn's semicelebrated head had rolled. As had that of Thomas Stockwood, longtime Chairman of the Design Division.

Picture Foghorn Leghorn with a white leonine shock, blackstrap molasses drawl, and habit of sweeping aside anything he found uninteresting as "Irrelevant trivialities! What's important Ah say important heah is the DISPLAY! the PRESENTATION! the *IM*-PACT!"—and you've got Br'er Tom, Tennessee's favorite son for sixty years and big man on the Merely campus for nearly thirty.

Every September, December, and June, Br'er Tom would have all the Design majors out to the rambling country manse he called "T-Square Terrace." Much of the Dilated Pupils's raspburial spirit was derived from these raucous hoedowns, and many Stockwood mannerisms were borrowed by Peyton Derente for his own personal vessel. Br'er Tom, having built up the Design Division from hardscrabble scratch and regarding it as an entity unto itself, ignored the edicts of paradigm-counters:

“They might use a T-square as a backscratcher, now and again, but Gawdam if they’d ever let a body draw a straight line with one! There’s such a thing as fine art, sure enough, but there’s also such a thing as *practical* art. And between the fine and the practical there’s a heap o’ foofaraw that’s growin’ deeper every day, with all sorts of virtuoso sockdolagers wantin’ you to go and *step* in it. Nemmind ‘bout them, son—just drop bah mah office ‘n’ Ah’ll have Miss Emmy write you out an *exemption*, heah?”

In short: be a goodly vessel /that shall laugh at all disaster /and with wave and whirlwind wrestle.

But don’t let your divisional bookkeeping get too slapdash, lest Henry Bramham allege misappropriation of funds—and use that backscratcher to draw a straight line directing you to involuntary early retirement. Another shuddersome fate: not made any less melancholy by seeing Tom Stockwood hunched alone in Marr’s Bar, blank and inanimate, like one of Orwell’s broken-nosed old revolutionaries at the Chestnut Tree Café. A shuddersome sight: like beholding yourself through some cracked future looking-glass.

Heave and ho.

And arrival in Deasil: up we stand, out we go, leaving the bus and its resident fugitives behind—no, not all, some are following you out. Bound perhaps for the Glory Gospel Mission and their share of the day’s wishbones. (*Bon appétit.*) Head on to the heart of lowlying Wheeville, to the triplex whose ground floor is occupied by the girl of your dreams—though not those feverdreamy swelternaps. Nor that particular lass with her perilous lack...

(Nemmind ‘bout her, son.)

Come to think of it, one of those broken-nosed revolutionaries—Rutherford was it?—had been a famous cartoonist. Who, if memory served, ended up imitating himself, rehashing his earlier work in a hopeless attempt to relive the past. Probably came as a relief when the Thought Police finally executed him: *Stop me before I draw this again.*

Like the APE monograph in your own miniloft: dusty stacks of photocopied comic strips, with all the eyes in all the panels staring out to ensnare yours, demanding that you

shake a leg and stir your stumps, chop-chop mooeey pronto! make it snappy, Pappy!— whatever their speech balloons might actually say.

It could use the services of an entrustable editor. (So could *Current* magazine.) Peyton was sick of it, the stomach-twisting cut-and-paste contraction necessary to overhaul any overwritten manuscript. But all through the bad times, and the worse times, and the two or three years since, the APE monograph had been there for him. To set the thing in order at last, to declare it well and truly completed, would be to gather the loose ends of his own unravelment and tie them together again. And he'd especially hoped to wrap it up this year, the fiftieth anniversary of A. P. Ewell's pauperized death; but there were only thirty-seven days left and he knew he couldn't manage it in time.

So some of it lived but the most of it died and the rest simply faded away, relegated to the Litter of Unfinished Projects, along with the vast bulk of Orson Welles. Amounting to little more, in *The End*, than a hill of might-have-beens.

The old question: What is the purpose of Life?

The old answer: To puncture romances, O Tillie.

So take off your green spectacles and see your Emerald City as the handiwork of a hoodwinking Wizard, a snake-oily charlatan peddling purple-bark sarsaparilla to the unwary. *A fraud and a sham: I am, I am—*

(And there was Skeeter peering through the window, Skeeter popping through the door, Skeeter in a bright red apron and ovenmitt, radiant as any sled-in-the-furnace rosebud. Look at that glow: see what a month's absence from really nice bars can do to combat inanimate blankness.)

"You made it! Smooch me for real!... *that's* not for real!... OOG your face is sweaty! Are you okay? You look awful pale. I knew I should've driven over." Yanking the bandanna out of his pocket, making as if to mop his face—

"I can wipe my own nose, thank you."

He took back his hanky and dabbed at himself. Dripping, all right. Ready, at any rate, to head indoors and take the chill off—but Skeeter held him back.

“We’re having *kalamarakia* as an appetizer; please don’t tell my folks it’s squid. And my mother insisted on bringing some of her cranberry compote; when I tug my ear like *this*, that means I’m going to distract her so you can stick it in your napkin. Believe me, that’s the safest thing to do with it—”

“Are we going to stand out here all afternoon?”

“Oh and I keep forgetting to ask—did you watch that nuke ‘em movie last Sunday? You know, *The Day After*?”

“...why?”

“Mom and Sadie had a ‘discussion’ about it. My mother’s gone all goopy over Ronald Reagan; she’s even become a Republican ward heeler or whatever they call it out in Booth County. Don’t ask. Better just avoid any talk about politics.”

“I shall be happy to,” he said.

Skeeter, beaming, grabbed him around the waist and gave his ribs a squeeze. All too feelable even through his overcoat and her ovenmitt. “Skin and bones!” she tut-tutted. “Starting today we’re going to fatten you up.”

So on to the slaughter, Skeeter leading him into the triplex where a Greek record was playing Zorba music and Sadie, annoyingly cheerful since her Merely re-entry, was passing round the squid. (Desi should have been following as instructed with fresh lemon wedges, but she was off in a corner turning them into snifftoys for Brooke.)

ARNOLD Benison was just as you might expect: big and solid, quietly genial, offering polite commonplaces as he shook Peyton’s hand. Skeeter’s mother was quite good-looking in a Republican cocktail waitresy way, with the Otto blue eyes and Wunderlich chin and hair a metallic shade of blonde. She shook Peyton’s hand too, demonstrating a political grip.

“So you’re Kelly’s young man,” she informed him.

“Who?” said Peyton. “Oh—you mean... yes. I suppose you could say that.”

Carrie bent a critical Otto-blue eye upon him. Yes, he must be making a terrific first impression. I *am* your daughter’s gentleman friend, Mrs. Benison; I may be only twenty-seven but I look a decade older, and used to be goodly-portly though now I’m sallow skin and bones, dampfaced, baggy of pants, SAD of sack, with a Lumpy Rutherford nose. I’m

Kelly's sugardaddy and she's my *petite amie* out of the kindness of her heart and the greenness of my cashflow—my “currency,” if you will.

When he refocused, Carrie had just finished offering him formal thanks for helping to coax Kelly Rebecca back toward college to complete her degree.

“Just like me,” said Sadie in the Lilliputian dining room. “She always did have to do everything *I* do.”

“I'm afraid that's true,” Skeeter's mother sighed, triggering a Sadie-sowl and causing ARnold to murmur, “Now Carrie...”

“Well, she was pushy and got born first!” Skeeter hollered from the kitchen. “*I'm* still going to work part-time; RoBynne's finding me a job in Radiology Records. I can hardly wait to go tell Aunt Rhodie her old gray goose is cooked.”

“Kelly RebecCA!”

“Yes ma'am!”

“Don't you be reckless. She's still your boss.”

“Not for much longer,” Skeeter sang, coming out and handing Sadie her mitt. “The zucchini's in the fricassee; take it out in fifteen minutes and let it cool for ten... Guess what!” to Peyton. “I forgot to tell you on the phone—I actually unearthed a copy of my Mount Oriela transcript! Isn't that thrilling? Aren't you proud to know me?”

“Always,” he told her, his tone perhaps too acrid; Carrie again bent an eye.

“So why aren't you having Thanksgiving with *your* parents, Peyton?”

“They're dead.”

“Oh! I'm so sorry.”

“Well, I don't hold *you* responsible, Mrs. Benison. It was sort of a circus accident.”

“A... circus accident? What were they, acrobats?”

“Carrie!” went Sadie. “I need your help in the kitchen right now with the pilaf and asparagus please!”

Accepting this as holiday gospel, Carrie hastened to obey. Then, from the kitchen: “What does he mean, a ‘circus accident’?”

“He means it was freakish, Carrie! He doesn't like to talk about it.”

Not his favorite subject, to be sure; but there were other things he didn't care to discuss even more, matters meant to be kept to oneself. A fact of life that Skeeter Kitefly had yet to learn—here she was propelling him into the bedroom she shared with Desirée, ostensibly to examine her transcript but really to have fingers snapped—playfully, but *snapped*—in his face.

“All right” [snap] “unknit those brows” [snap] “what’s the matter? I know it’s not just my mom, you *got* here looking crabby, and you know I don’t allow that sort of thing. Do you feel sick?”

“No.”

She peered up past the smudgestache, over the broad banked nose and into his eyes: rung-down, closed-tight sets of blinds inside them.

“Just a headache,” he amended. “Nothing more.”

“What’d you take for it? You want some Tylenol?—”

“*No!* no more pills!”

She stepped through the echoes then, laying hands on his arms, squeezing his elbows. “Has something happened? Tell me. Can I help?”

*Come sing me a bawdy song. Wink your bellybutton, make me merry; take the sting out.*

“As per usual,” he said, returning to the living room where ARnold was watching football on Sadie’s aged TV. (Dinner ready yet? Few more minutes.) Content not to talk—unlike women, who never knew when to leave well enough alone. And it wasn’t like she didn’t have enough on her plate already, what with That Would-Be Colossus and Use ‘Em and Radiology Records and staying away from really nice bars.

He sat down, dug out his notebook, red pen, black pen, trying to get something going; doodle if nothing else. Just ink on paper, after all. Loops and lines and ellipses. On the floor by the chair, that morning’s Elsew *Reflector*, turned to the comics—*Blondie*, *Tumbleweeds*, *Apartment 3G*, *Hagar the Horrible*. And *Peanuts*, of course. The pattern of bittersweet defeat. Circle and squiggle, zigzag stripe: you’re a good flop, Charlie Brown.

“You’re a good drawer.”

Desirée, standing unexpectedly at his elbow, forgetting her sullenness at having to put Brooke outdoors. “Can you do Garfield?” she wanted to know.

Of course, little girl. That one’s not in the *Reflector*, though; bring me something to copy. Desi ran to her room, brought back a Garfield book, a *Ranger Rick*, her new phantasie calendar and Auntie Skeeter to watch Peyton turn out facsimiles of fatbellied cats, ermine lynxes, unicorns regarding their foreheads in pools of water.

All the king’s horses and all the king’s men. Feeling, but not meeting, a troubled pair of Otto-blue eyes.

