

Rough Magicke
by
John William Houghton

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Part I: The Constitution of Silence

Chapter 1: Friday, October 23

“Morning, Holiness,” a voice shouted from behind me as I entered the Humanities Building.
“Where’s your Coke?”

I didn’t have to turn around to recognize the cadet who’d called: “Good morning, Keeks,” I answered. “It’s in my pocket. Aren’t you going to be late for Mr. Acker’s class?”

Climbing the marble steps two at a time, in accord with an academy tradition that had been old twenty years before, when I wore Annandale’s blue and gray, Chris Pruett, the Regimental Aide to the Chaplain, soon caught up with me. “Aren’t you going to be late for yours, sir?” The bell rang.

“Apparently. But I no longer have to answer to the Commandant of Cadets, and the class won’t start without me.”

“True, sir, but Mr. Acker hasn’t sent anyone to the Commandant for twenty years.”

“Twenty-five, I’ll bet,” I said as we came to my classroom door. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t write you up myself. Now put it in gear!”

“Yes, sir. See you at the soccer game.” He

saluted, more or less, and ambled down the hall to Jack Acker's room.

Reflecting on the absolute authority enjoyed by the faculty of a military academy, I opened the door to my own classroom, a generous rectangle, but crowded with twenty student desks arranged in a rough circle, my inevitably cluttered workspace, two mismatched bookcases of the some-assembly-required variety, a metal cabinet of AV equipment and a hall tree my father had once had in the breezeway of our home. With my seniority at AMA, I had a corner room—Jack could have had it, but preferred to have more wall space—with blackboards on one wall and a bulletin board, adorned with an old *National Geographic* map of “Shakespeare's England,” on the other. One set of windows looked west to the Auditorium, the other south, over a parking lot and the Annandale Inn, to the lake which had enchanted my pioneer ancestors more than a hundred and thirty years before. Alumnus and native son, teacher and priest, I was as much in my element as one could hope to be. Tom Adams, the section marcher, called my Third Classmen—sophomores, in the civilian world—to attention.

“Sir,” he reported, “the class is formed. One man absent.”

I tried to look a little more military than Chris had done when I returned Adams’s salute, but between reaching for my M.A. gown and trying to remember where I’d stopped in my lecture on the witches in *Macbeth* the day before, I’m not sure I was very successful. A quick glance over the fifteen boys standing beside their desks didn’t reveal the absentee; but my poor memory for faces is notorious. “Very good, Mr. Adams. Whom are we missing?”

“Mr. Brandon, sir.”

“Oh, Larry? Where’s he?”

“He’s in court, sir.”

“In court?”

“Yes, sir. They said he’s getting a divorce from his parents, sir.”

So much for keeping the chaplain up to date on counseling problems, I thought to myself.

“‘Emancipation’ is the word, I think, Tom, not ‘divorce.’ But we can look it up during vocabulary drill. Give the class ‘Seats,’ please.”

It was an uneventful day, to tell the truth, until eighth (and last) period, my second daily section of

First Classmen. While some schools offer their seniors a variety of elective English courses, in preparation for college, my department has always felt that the graduating class needs some common experience. Consequently, First Class English is a course in Modernism, and we were discussing *The Sound and the Fury*, concentrating on Faulkner's use of motifs to give unity to the novel: it was a subject I had found more stimulating before I discovered that it is covered in one of the most popular cribs for the book. But some things are too important to let drop, even if they are soiled in the marketplace. Annandale, after all, has long prided itself on having both more Medal of Honor winners and more Rhodes Scholars than any other prep school in the country of equivalent age, and the boys usually rise to the challenge of a demanding curriculum. On this particular day, though, it was obvious that about half the class had used the crib notes, and I finally sent the lot of them away, telling them to come back next week with the book read. They had the decency to look embarrassed as they filed out.

Two of the kids hung around – Rob English, a silver striper (that is, an aviation cadet – we have

infantry, artillery, and cavalry as well, and a naval program in the summers) who was the first from his squadron to have been made Regimental Commander, and Richard Platt, in the red-striped trousers of the artillery battalion, where he was personnel officer, the cadet with general responsibility for the morale and *esprit de corps* in his unit.

“What’s wrong, guys?” I asked, taking a last sip from the Coke – my fourth of the day – which I had been nursing all period. “Are you the only innocents in this mass of perdition?”

“Not that innocent, sir,” Platt answered. “I’ve read the notes, too. But I never would have picked up the business about honeysuckle blossoms, gasoline and camphor if you hadn’t explained it.”

“Thanks, Dickey. I’m glad there’s still some use for me. And that motif of odors is a favorite example of mine, because most people *will* use some repeated *picture*, and I have such a rotten visual imagination. In any case, since you’ve made your confession, why don’t you try that assignment on Dilsey for your penance? The extra credit couldn’t hurt.”

“Well, sir, that’s true,” he said, running a hand through his dark brown hair and allowing himself an embarrassed if non-committal smile.

“Actually, Father,” Rob said, “confession is more in the line of what we wanted to talk to you about. You know, more the biretta than the mortar board.”

“Oh, I see,” I responded, trying now to read their faces for some hint of what was up. Rob was so fair that he could probably have gotten by without shaving for two or three days in a row – though that wasn’t the sort of attitude that had made him the highest ranking cadet in the corps. His jaw was square, his eyes (just on a level with my own) an unrevealing blue. I realized, irrelevantly, how infrequently one saw his eyes: he managed to wear his pilot’s sunglasses almost constantly, just the way some of the troopers gave the impression of sleeping in their boots and spurs. Dickey (or rather, Richard, as he’d reminded me often enough), who’d gone over to shut the classroom door, had brown eyes that seemed huge even from half way across the room: they somehow counterbalanced his considerable nose, a feature which gave him, from some angles, the look of

a rather startled rainbow trout. In this case, though, it was more than being startled: *whatever they want to talk about, I thought, this boy is scared.*

I gestured toward the stole that hung—a bit informally, I have to admit—with my M.A. hood on the coat rack near the door. “Do we need . . .”

Rob shook his head. “No, Father. It’s not actually us. Something’s come up in B Battery. Dic-Richard, I mean, talked to me about it at DRC, and I said we should see you before we went to PE.” (DRC—Dinner Roll Call, that is to say, lunch—falls between sixth and seventh periods: so the two had wasted no time in coming to see me.)

Speaking of Phys Ed, I thought, I have to go watch Keeks in that soccer game this afternoon. But it won’t start until four. “What about the Battery? Did you talk to the Unit Commander or the Counselor? Or the Battalion Commander, for that matter?”

“Well, sir,” Platt said, by now sitting on the edge of a desk in the front row, “as you’ll see, it’s not the sort of thing we want to have a lot of people in on. That is the point of having a personnel officer, after all, isn’t it?”

“Touché. I’ve just been obsessed with Standard

Operating Procedure today, I guess. Well, come on: out with it.”

“Right, Father. You may want to sit down for this, though: it’ll take a while. Richard’d better tell you how it started.”

I sat in the armchair beside my desk while Richard took a deep breath and began: “Okay. There are these two kids on my hall, a third class plebe named Rhys Kirkfleet and a third class sergeant, Tom Adams.”

“I don’t know Kirkfleet, but Adams is the section marcher in my first period class. In fact, his father had Rob’s job my first class year. His given name is Geoffrey, after one of our classmates who died in a house fire.”

“Uh, yes, sir. Well, as I was saying, Adams has always been a little odd – sort of a New Age type, playing with crystals and hypnotism and that kind of stuff. By itself, that’s just been kind of a standing joke. But now Kirkfleet has gotten into the act, and it seems like he’s making more of it, somehow. They’re having these little sessions in Adams’s room on Friday and Saturday nights, and that has me worried.”

“Why? What harm can they do with a couple of crystals and a Ouija board?”

“That’s not it, exactly, sir. Somehow, Kirkfleet is making it all into a religious ritual, and it all seems to be, well, queerly convincing, at least to the younger cadets. They’re really beginning to draw people into this, and that’s what I’m actually worried about.”

“You make it sound like some sort of proselytizing – a Great Awakening, or mountain snake-handling: do we really need to be worried about that?”

Dickey looked puzzled, but Rob had followed my sloppy reasoning. “No, Father. When Richard said Kirkfleet had added religious ritual, he didn’t mean *Christian* ritual. It isn’t that they’ve lost any of Adams’s spooky stuff: they’ve made it worse, almost sort of perverse. You mentioned the Great Awakening, but this is more like Judge Hathorne than Jonathan Edwards. These two kids are starting a coven, ‘right here in River City.’”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding,” I said – hoping, actually, that they were. “Witchcraft in Main Barracks? Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner right here? It’s ridiculous – I don’t believe it!”

I sounded too vehement: they both jumped to their feet. “We don’t believe *in* it either, Father,” Rob said, “but you’d better believe that it’s happening!”

“Sir, they’re doing something strange, something abnormal, that’s sucking in a bunch of kids from my battalion. I don’t know if it’s witchcraft, but I know it’s wrong. And those kids are my responsibility. Sir.”

Richard’s tone was, I suppose, what I deserved for answering their problems out of a sense of my own; it nonetheless provoked a certain degree of asperity in my response: “Yes, Captain, your responsibility, and your Commander’s, and mine, before God. So what should we do with this burden of ours?”

“You’re scheduled to be Barracks Inspector in Main tomorrow night, Father. Are you still going to be on, or have you traded off?”

“No, Rob, I haven’t. I suppose I should have, to work on my sermon, but then I can usually get

some writing done on Saturdays, what with everyone being off at the movies.”

“Everyone who isn’t in Room 319 of Main Barracks, sir. That’s what Rob is getting at.”

“Exactly, Father. If Adams and Kirkfleet are having another one of their sessions —”

“‘Esbats,’ I imagine.”

“Right, esbats. If they’re doing it, we can try to join in, and then if you came by on your next inspection tour, you could look in to see what was going on, and have two reliable witnesses to start off with.”

“And all of that without your having to send a report through channels. It’s an idea with some attractiveness.”

Dickey’s smile was distinctly untroutlike: “You mean, you don’t have a better idea, right, sir?”

“Right as usual, Richard. I’ll see you two tomorrow night, then, in Room 319. Dismissed.”

I noticed their salutes were getting a bit sloppy, too.

Between watching Keeks in the game (he's a good player, really, quick, with a good sense of position on the pitch, but he could write a book about how to trip people without getting caught) and facilitating the Jewish Services (the Commandant, Col. Somerset, wants an adult there, but I can't help thinking it is at the very least silly for a *goyishe* priest to lead the Shabbos worship), I didn't get home until fairly late.

My house is the place my brother Dan and I grew up in, in the part of Annandale my family reserved for itself when they were laying out the town. Between them, town and gown surround the north end of Lake Annandale, including Glenarm's Bay, which protrudes into AMA's campus, providing a sizable harbor for the summer naval school's use. From School Street, just west of my house, to the monument on the far side of the Academy which marks the pioneers' first camp site in the area is exactly three miles, spanning three sections of land. (In all the states of the old Northwest Territory, the pioneer surveyors marked the land they were stealing from the Native Americans off into 'congressional townships' of 36 square miles, numbered as sections 1

through 36 in an unrelenting imposition of Cartesian order on the wilderness.) The Academy and the bay take up the two eastern sections of the three, 17 and 18; the boundary between the town and the Academy is Pershing Road (Black Jack visited the school once, after WWI), which runs north and south along the section line between 16 and 17. Thus from my house, at Mears Street and Academy Road, to the Wabash Gate, where Academy ends at Pershing, is just nine-tenths of a mile, a distance Dan and I measured pace by pace for years – my father was a great believer in walking (or, admittedly, bicycling) uphill to school in the snow – until I got my license, about halfway through my sophomore year.

It's not a big house – only two bedrooms, so that Dan and I shared bunk beds until I left for Harvard in the fall of '70. But there was enough room for me and Dad when he invited me to move off-campus after Mother died, in my second year on the faculty. And when his own health required him to move to Happy Villa, the nursing home just across Great-Aunt Irene's cornfield to the north of us, there was plenty of space for me by myself.

I hadn't had supper at school, so my first step

on getting home was to put a cheese lasagna dinner in the microwave. Then I sat down at the kitchen table to go through the mail. I don't get much correspondence at home: back in the days when everyone lived on campus, the local post office developed the practice of automatically delivering all faculty mail, both personal and business, to the Academy branch, but as a native son, I'd established a pattern of getting mail at 609 Mears Street long before I started work at AMA. Most of what came to that address, though, was junk mail or stuff intended for Dad. I was a bit surprised, then, to find a real letter in the box – until I saw that it was from Fr. Mathis, the Rector of Christ Church in Withougan, the county seat. For most people, it would have been more natural either to phone me at school or to send a letter to me there – or even, for the up-to-date, an e-mail. Herbert Mathis, however, had a private fixation on the fact that Annandale – both the town and the Academy – fell within his parish. If I, or some other Anglican priest, had not been the Chaplain, there would have been Mass in the Chapel only when Herb drove down to preside, probably on a weekday evening. The faculty, townsfolk and lake people who

came to Sunday Mass at the Chapel would, according to canon law, have had to go to Christ Church instead, though I imagine a fair number would in fact have gone to the monastic services at All Angels' Abbey on the east side of the lake, or simply attended whatever services happened to be offered at the Academy. In any case, from the time of his arrival at Christ Church and discovery that the Bishop had explicitly authorized the locals to come to the Chapel, he has affected (always politely) to ignore my connection with AMA, communicating with me as a brother priest who just happens to live in a neighboring town.

“My dear Jonathan,” his handwritten note began, “I write to you privately, but in your capacity as President of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Michigan City” – Standing Committee, I should explain, is sort of like the Senate of an Anglican diocese, elected by the annual diocesan convention partly as a group to advise the Bishop and partly as a separate power center to carry on relations with other dioceses during the year – “to bring to your attention certain concerns I have developed about the nomination of Fr. Donald Newman to be Bishop of Delaware.” (In our church, each diocese elects its own

bishop, but it has to get the consent of a majority of the other bishops and of the other Standing Committees, or else of both houses of the triennial General Convention. Some objections are usually lodged whenever there's an election, but it's almost unheard-of for a nominee actually to be rejected.) "Fr. Newman's election, I am sure, will attract organized opposition; for that matter, I have already received a request to join a letter writing campaign against him. The fact is, I do not think he should be a bishop; I do not think he should be a priest. My opposition does not, however, come from the same principles I understand to lie behind this movement: I have other information about the nominee. This information, however, is not of a sort which one would necessarily wish to have widely publicized. I wonder whether we might meet one day this week to discuss the matter. Given the demands of your own schedule, I could arrange to visit you on campus if it would be more convenient for you. With every good wish, Faithfully, Herbert+"

Coming from Herb, the offer to appear on campus was roughly the equivalent of alarms going off in a bank. I even thought for a moment about phoning him yet that evening, but reminded myself that nothing irreversible was likely to happen

overnight. I had my lasagna and spent what was left of the evening working on a sermon for Sunday.