

MEMOIRS OF A
PROFESSIONAL HOUSE GUEST

from

AUNT JENNY

With a motorist's fleeting interest I had often glanced down at the streets of Ilion while speeding along the New York State Thruway. From the ridge top I could take in the entire village spread out on the valley floor. At those moments my eyes would seek out a certain mansion whose lofty brick tower was capped by an ornate cupola. I remember wondering once or twice about the family who might have made their name synonymous in village memory with its imposing façade. This landmark would have remained nothing more than a source of passing curiosity had it not been for a job that fell into my lap one November. As a result of that windfall assignment I was hired on as a visiting poet to the Ilion schools and became a guest in the very mansion, now a Bed and Breakfast that I had glimpsed from the Thruway. From my window beneath the tower that had been like a beacon for half a dozen years, I could look up and see traffic lights streaming along the highway ledge cut.

My students that week were a pack of junior high kids. I loved the age. They had one foot in grade school, the other in high school – and hadn't yet left behind the spontaneity of the child even as they were starting to test the waters of young adulthood. Junior High kids could often write circles around high schoolers because their budding intellectual powers were super charged with raw enthusiasm. Predictably, these students from Remington Middle school – Ilion being the home base for the arms manufacturer -- cautiously sized me up that first day. The boys especially weren't quite sure writing poetry was a masculine pursuit. I knew I had to assure them of two things: that this poet named Corrigan standing before them led a life not entirely different from their own and that their personal life experiences were worthy of poetry.

Usually, I'd start by telling kids about growing up in a mill town in the middle of the Maine Woods up near the headwaters of the Penobscot River. I had poled pulp wood into grinder sluices in the paper mill to earn money for college; I had worked in the woods with my father felling spruce and fir trees for a log cabin he had his heart set on building -- trimming, skinning and skidding each log out of the woods; and in summer as a whitewater guide I'd run rivers with raft loads of thrill seekers. These biographical tidbits seemed to stir up the kids so I reached for a couple poems of mine, one about hunting deer with my dad, the other about raspberrying with my mom. I liked how poems about both parents set up an inclusive atmosphere so both the boys and girls could see the potential for writing about their own lives. This first day was mostly a get-acquainted session and it seemed to come off pretty well.

I had to laugh at some of the more curious students. Aware that I made my home up in Maine, they wanted to know if I came all that distance each morning.

Not content with my standard reply that yes, I had indeed made the journey in a bi-plane piloted by a crop duster friend that I had met in a Bangor and Aroostook box car during my hobo days, the more forward class members bore in relentlessly until they extracted from me the location of my temporary lodgings. The kids were only too familiar with the B and B where I was staying. Known locally as Chassum Place, they called it the “ghost house.” A ripple of ghoulish laughter ran through the classroom, and one student, a horror fan of some sophistication, wished me a “dreadfully” pleasant stay, intoning the words in an upper crust British accent like a young Boris Karloff. Sitting across from their classroom teacher in the faculty lounge at lunch, I mentioned their reaction.

“It’s just that they remember the house when it was vacant with the yard overgrown and the porch railings missing posts and the wooden tower in bad need of paint. It was pretty creepy in those days.” The teacher went on to explain how my hosts, Bob and Liz Drexel, had taken the once shabby, vine-enshrined homestead, and restored it to its Victorian Gothic grandeur. Since arriving from California they had done a mountain of work, and the community was highly gratified to see a cultural landmark rehabilitated by their energetic hands. Though they had done sufficient wonders with the exterior to impress the curious stroller, the lion’s share of their effort was hidden from view within the high ceiling interior.

When I got back from school that first day, Liz Drexel’s informal tour gave me a feeling for the thoroughness with which she and her husband had reassembled a lost world. Liz was tall with graying, shoulder length hair and a rather stately way of walking befitting her role as the statuesque matron of the house. As we moved from room to room, examining antique furniture, regal tapestries, Persian rugs, busts atop pedestals, elegantly framed landscape paintings, book cases with hardback editions, a grandfather clock ticking off the seconds of our modern century, I felt the fine dust of another era settle over me. When I made some flippant remark about how the atmosphere would surely attract ancestral spirits back to the house, Liz candidly remarked that a long term guest had seen the apparition of a woman on two occasions.

“We think it’s Jenny Chassum. Howard Drew who stayed with us last fall calls her Aunt Jenny. She was a physician who lived up into her nineties. Curiously enough, she was an accomplished herbalist. We found an array of area flora neatly pressed and catalogued in wooden trays in the attic.”

“Don’t worry,” Liz said to me as we paused to admire a tapestry depicting medieval hunters on horse back galloping after a heavy antlered stag, “Jenny’s a rather benign ghost, maybe a little playful. Howard Drew claimed she tweaked his bare toes one night as they stuck out from beneath his quilts.”

“Sounds like she’s full of the devil,” I quipped.

“I wouldn’t have phrased it quite that way,” Liz corrected, with mild chagrin in her voice, “but it does sound as if she likes a good joke now and then, doesn’t it, Mr. Corrigan?”

I smiled faintly and didn’t reply, feeling a little chastised. I made a mental note not to speak disrespectfully of the resident sprite again. Every Bed and Breakfast needs a little ghostly lore, I reasoned, to add a dash of romance to a traveler’s stay. Newlyweds might hunger after charming tales of wraiths roaming the halls, but I was here to teach kids. I didn’t have a tourist’s leisure to indulge in such fantasies. Still, a little too much espresso with dessert at some area bistro and

there was no telling what an overactive brain might make of the creaking and settling of floorboards while drifting in and out of wakefulness -- or on summer nights, when a breeze from an open window made the loose, transparent drapes billow mysteriously.



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From the upcoming book *Memoirs Of A Professional Houseguest*