

Quintet: Doctor Banner's Garden: Family Agendas:

by Hugh Aaron

A sample of the opening pages

Dear Hugh, Lots of nitpicky queries, but more about details than essence

DOCTOR BANNER'S GARDEN

Shortly after I rang the doorbell, a small, bedraggled, bent woman in her mid-sixties came to the door. I could hear a dog barking inside. "I'm here to answer your ad for a part-time gardener," I said, showing her the newspaper clipping.

"Come in, young man," said the woman. Her short hair was bone straight, and she had a strong southern accent

I stood in the doorway, surprised. Her speech was hardly what I expected to hear in Chicago, where the purest American English is spoken.

"Are you a student at the university?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. First year."

"Well, young man, you must negotiate with Doctor Banner, mistress of our garden--which is, I must say, in much need of repair. Come in, come in."

She led me to a large all-purpose room, evidently once the dining room, which contained an immense threadbare Oriental carpet. In the middle of it stood a large oak dining table that had seen better days. A pool-table-style light hung from the ceiling over the center of the table, which was strewn with books--Hemingway, Forster, Myrdal, Einstein, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Rolland--on a bewildering variety of subjects. It seemed that nothing had ever been put away. The entire room looked chaotic except for a prim, elegant corner in which stood, to my amazement due to its inconsistency with the rest of the furniture, a massive mahogany cabinet that housed a state-of-the-art Capehart phonograph and amplifier. It was veiled in dust. I could see another room through the almost-closed sliding paneled doors along one wall. At one end of the room where we stood were two overstuffed chairs and a couch. An afghan partially covered a figure lying on the couch.

"Clarissa, this is the young man who answered our advertisement for a gardener," explained the woman who had answered the door. "Come over here, young man, so Clarissa can see you."

The figure under the afghan was a woman well into her eighties. She had evidently been dozing. Her small, web-lined face was framed in a scant wreath of stark white hair. Through an open doorway that led to the kitchen, I glimpsed a large, white-haired, sad-eyed dog sizing me up.

I stood looking down at the reclining woman, her head framed by a white pillow. Her eyes remained closed, but her voice was commanding when she finally spoke.

"Before I would consider employing you, I must have your assurance that you respect plants. Do you meet that qualification, young man?" She sighed.

"Well, I used to work in a nursery, ma'am," I responded.

"That hardly answers my question," she said with authority, her eyes still shut. "Can you distinguish the weeds from the cultivars? That's what I must know, young man. And what is your name?"

"Pete . . . Pete Albert," I said weakly.

She opened her eyes and turned her head to gaze at me. "Two good first names. Do you have a surname?"

"No, ma'am. Only first names."

"Well, at least you have a sense of humor. Now I shall see whether you have common sense. One dollar and a half an hour--is that satisfactory?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think twelve hours a week will be sufficient."

"That's okay with me, ma'am."

"When can you start?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, ma'am."

"I'm not a ma'am, Mr. Albert. I'm Doctor Banner," she said, visibly annoyed.

"Yes, ma'am--Doctor Banner."

"Show him the garden, Justine. But before you do, help me to my bedroom. My nap has been interrupted and I wish to rest some more."

Justine, who had been standing by the doorway to the kitchen tentatively smoking a cigarette, as if anticipating an early termination of my interview, hurried over to the couch to help Dr. Banner to her feet. Obviously the old lady was too weak to get up by herself.

"May I help?" I volunteered. At Justine's nod of acceptance, I moved in to support Dr. Banner under her legs and arms.

"I do declare, what superhuman strength you have, young man," said Justine as I lifted Dr. Banner.

"You needn't do this," Dr. Banner commanded. "I got here on my own, and I can leave on my own. Put me down, young man."

"You got here with my help," Justine reminded her, "and I haven't recovered from it yet." She turned to me. "So for my sake do not put her down. Here, this is the way to Clarissa's room."

I didn't know what to do until my burden made the decision for me.

"I'm quite capable of directing him myself," Dr. Banner said to Justine.

"Why, of course you are," replied Justine. "I wouldn't think of coming between you and your rescuer." Justine made a sweeping motion with her arms. "Go, young man. Your guide is an expert."

"Straight ahead, Mr. Albert," said Dr. Banner, apparently not only reconciled to the situation but enjoying it, "to where peace and harmony prevail."

I entered the bedroom and gently placed her on the bed.

"You may leave now, young man," the doctor said, waving me off. "Thank you."

I returned to the common room, where Justine was seated at the table snuffing out a spent cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and lighting another. The dog ambled creakily into the room and sniffed my shoes.

"My name is Justine Faray," the woman said, shaking my hand, "and that's White Princess," she said, pointing to the old dog. "Hello, sweet princess. Yes, Clarissa will see you again soon, dear." She stroked its fur, then turned to me. "Now, before we proceed, I must make one thing clear. The cellar is off limits, most definitely. Nothing must be disturbed there. Is that understood?" I nodded my head.

"Then please sit down and rest your weary feet. Now, let me take you through Clarissa's neglected paradise. I trust that after you've seen it, the magnitude of your task will not discourage you before you begin. Look upon the garden's restoration as a challenge, a noble endeavor, with consequences far beyond the space itself."

I must have looked confused. "I don't expect you to understand my absurd ramblings," Justine volunteered, "but I hope you will understand someday--if not now, then in years to come." She looked down at the dog. "You stay, White Princess. Now, I'm going to take Mr. Albert on a tour of paradise lost--soon to be regained. Right, Mr. Albert? A paradise soon to be regained. What a glorious thing to contemplate. Come, Mr. Albert. To the garden, sir, and let us dream of a new world."

Justine led me out the rear entrance of the old house onto a tiny wooden porch. She pointed out where White Princess resided for part of the day--a small corral surrounded by a rusty wire fence. We stepped off the porch onto a soft, damp dirt path that led into the garden. It was a large, triangular plot of tangled growth bordered on one side by a parking lot that belonged to

the university hospital. On another side a thick, high privet hedge shielded the jungle from the street, which was walled with an endless string of low apartment buildings. On the third side stood the doctor's house itself, a two-story, twenty-foot-wide Victorian affair with an ornate sandstone face. Many such houses once filled Chicago's Southside grid, but only a few specimens remained by the fifties, looking unappreciated.

"As you can see, you have your work cut out for you," said Justine.

"It'll be a challenge, that's for sure," I said, surveying the unruly garden.

"Ah, but what opportunity this disaster offers. What can be more satisfying than transforming the ugly into the beautiful? Now, if you've seen enough, let's go back to the house."

We walked along the path in silence viewing the plants and enjoying the surroundings. Bending down to feel the soil in my hands, I found myself eagerly looking forward to being in touch with the earth on a regular basis.

As we entered the common room, Justine lit another cigarette, then beckoned me to sit down at the worn oak table. "I presume, Mr. Albert, you are a man of your word and you will show up when you say you will. Please understand, sir, next to White Princess--yes, even before myself, good, ol', dependable Justine--the garden is the most important thing in Clarissa's life. Its curative power surpasses any of the medicines those quacks have prescribed. Clarissa and I maintained it with loving hands until finally it got beyond us." She laughed. "It would appear that old ladies don't revive each spring the way the plants do."

Justine went on to explain that the university allowed Dr. Banner, a professor emeritus, and her assistant to use the house rent-free for as long as the doctor lived. Although she was in her mid-eighties and hadn't taught at the university for more than ten years, she still conducted biological research in the cellar of the old house. Scores of cages full of peeping mice were stacked there

I had no inkling then how crucial those two old ladies would be to my future. I knew that my college years were one of the most influential times in my life. I was at an age when I sought to absorb all the learning I could, not because I had to, as in high school, but because I wanted to. And I was at an age when I was sophisticated enough to ponder life's meaning but not yet too preoccupied to ask. The two women were about to instruct me on why we live and why we die.

It became my custom several afternoons a week to study amid the formal echoes of the high-vaulted university library. I was drawn by the serenity of its simulated antiquity, a refreshing contrast to the raw atmosphere of commercial Chicago only a few blocks away.

I was not alone on these afternoons. A slight young man with an appealing smile that seemed to say life was a lark often sat across the table facing me. Because I thought that life was quite the opposite, I made no effort to introduce myself. Besides, he looked too fast for me.

One afternoon when I raised my eyes from a book to contemplate Aristotle's statement on the

soul, our gazes met.

"I'm not sure he's worth it," the young man said.

"You mean--"

"Who you're reading. Aristotle."

"But it's required," I said, intrigued by his audacity. "Anyway, I don't agree. Take his definition of the soul: it's the source of movement, the end, the essence of the whole living body. Not bad stuff, I'd say."

He laughed. "Hell, that stuff held back science a thousand years. No offense. I'm sure you'll get an A. Well, at least a B." He reached over the table and shook my hand. "Lenny Gladfeld at your service. Of course, you and I know that Freud discovered the soul, not your buddy there."

"Of course," I said, impressed. "Name's Pete Albert."

"Where are you from?" It was a reasonable question, seeing as the student body, several times larger than normal due to returning veterans such as myself, was from everywhere.

"The East," I said, expecting that he wouldn't recognize the name of my hometown.

"Well, that's pretty specific. I'm a native Chicagoan. How'd you like a home-cooked meal once in a while?"

I was dumbfounded. Such generosity toward a total stranger. "Sure. Why not? This cafeteria food does get a bit boring."

"My mother loves to cook. Let me have your phone number and I'll be in touch."

"I'm renting a room in a private home. I'll give you that number," I said.

The family I lived with offered to let me use their phone, within reason. As long as I didn't fall in love with one of the coeds, there was little danger that I'd abuse the privilege. I wrote down the number on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Are you one of those seasoned guys on the GI Bill, or an inexperienced, child like me?"

The distance between us seasoned veterans and students entering the freshman class from high school was palpable. Although not so far apart in age, we were years apart in our view of life. We were serious, hardened, and wise. The protected eighteen year olds still wanted to play.

"I was in the war," I said.

"Is that so? You look young. I'd take you for still being wet behind the ears."

"I was drafted right out of high school four years ago."

"Where were you?"

"Southwest Pacific."

"Really?" said Lenny, looking interested.

"My, you're a wordy guy. I see you can't wait to talk about it. Well, I was right here in Chicago keeping all the women at bay."

"Must have been tough," I cracked.

He looked at his watch and rose from his chair. "I gotta go. You'll hear from me. This is the beginning of an enormous friendship. I can tell."

As I watched him walk away, I realized that I liked him. His exuberance, his sophistication, and his obvious brilliance compensated for what seemed like naiveté and insouciance.

Being compulsively dependable, I did, of course, show up for work on time. The garden--a riot of excess growth, weeds well ensconced in the perennial beds, lily of the valley running rampant, massive thickets of roses--was to me no less exciting than a lump of clay to a sculptor. I found it especially appealing that by restoring the garden to its former splendor, I might also help restore the doctor's flagging health.

Through the month of September, I worked three afternoons a week bringing order to the morass. My relationship with the old women remained on a professionally distant plane. Justine greeted me at the door each time, a cigarette drooping from her pale lips.

October came, and the garden, covered with blowing leaves, was turning brown. After knocking at the front door, I waited bundled up against a strong wind coming off the western prairie.

Admitting me, Justine whispered, "Hush, walk tippy-toe. Clarissa had a most difficult night and is resting."

As I entered the common room, the sliding doors were uncharacteristically fully open, revealing a parlor beyond. The room was dominated by a massive concert grand piano and a large, old Victorian settee.

"What's wrong with Clarissa?" I inquired, concerned.

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong, unless you wish to call the natural process of wearing out wrong," said Justine as we both took seats at the table.

"Then she's not ill?"

Justine lit a cigarette and placed her lighter next to an open book that she had evidently been reading. "Why, Clarissa has never been ill a day in her life, at least not in the fifty years I've known her."

"But she seems so fragile," I said, confused, for Justine's statement didn't square with my observations.

"Don't be fooled. You see only her physical self. Her mind is as alert as the day we met when I became her student at the university. She was doing remarkable original medical search, which

later won her the Nobel--"

"Doctor Banner won a Nobel Prize?" I exclaimed loudly.

"Shh, she might hear. If she knew I informed you of her award--one among many, I might add--she would boycott me for . . . let's see, the last time I mentioned it to someone, she ignored me for a month afterward. So don't you dare reveal that you know. Do I have your word?"

"Of course. But I can't imagine why she's so secretive about it," I said.

"Because people glorify Nobels, put them on a pedestal. Clarissa wants to be accepted for the person she is, not for what she's done."

I hadn't considered it in that light.

"I suppose from now on you'll quake in her presence," said Justine with a twinkle in her eye.

"I'm trembling already. Is she still doing research?"

"Oh, yes, although not the way it used to be. I have to push her these days. As I say, Clarissa's mind is one hundred percent functional. It's her will that's failed." Suddenly becoming sad, fingering her cigarette lighter, Justine stared off.

"I see."

"I'm afraid you can't, my boy. Clarissa's eighty-five; she's been at the center of the world's attention for most of her life, and now she finds herself without a future, cast off to the side by a new generation. Oh, we have this house that the university allows us to use until she dies. As a professor emeritus, she has no financial worries. So I do my best to keep her will alive. It's difficult. She and I know that we don't have the time left to do anything worthwhile.

End of sample

Read the rest - the complete eBook is available at bibliobookstore.com