

On the Side Porch

Robert Drake

"I DIDN'T HAVE a bit of business in this world going off to college or having a career or anything else because I was born simply to move furniture, entertain my friends, and sit on the side porch and look out the window." That was what Evelyn Henning down at Barfield said to me the first time I went to see her after many years away from home. "And I don't suppose there are many porches — front, back, or side — left in captivity down here, with air-conditioning now the universal order of the day," she continued. "Really, that's done more to change the quality of life in the South than integration or segregation (I never can remember which is the one we didn't want) or television or supermarkets or most anything else in the so-called progress line. You don't see anybody sitting on the front porch in the swing just watching the folks go by: a lot of new houses don't even have front porches. For that matter, I suppose some benighted souls now would want to know what you wanted to sit on the front porch and watch people go by *for*, which I think is all the same as asking what is life for. People that ask a question like that — well, there's just no answering them. They'd probably ask you where you expected to *get* in a porch swing, too! And of course there's no visiting in the side yard on Sunday afternoons any more: we had to move off the porches to our yards then because so many of the neighbors came, especially

here, where we're right on the corner and can see the whole world coming from more than one direction."

"But, Evelyn," I said, "you're not exactly public yourself now because this side porch we're sitting on is just that — a *side* porch. And you can't see anybody pass by; and you've got it all inclosed as part of the house, not open to the outside, like in the old days. And as for 'progress', don't forget that Memphis, which has been the great city in all our lives down here, would give its very soul now to be another Atlanta — you know, 'the city that is too busy to hate' — and with, God help us, an even bigger airport!"

"Yes, I know that," she said, "and my idea of Hell has always been an enormous cocktail party in the Atlanta airport. I'm certainly not trying to stop the clock or empty the ocean with a teaspoon in such matters. And if you can't lick them, join them, is what I always say. But I tremble at some of our future prospects. Incidentally, do you know that I just recently sold off the last of our farm property out on the edge of town to some 'developers' that want to put in a shopping center, right here in this one-horse town? I guess we're just lucky they didn't envision a full-blown *mall*. (Of course, that seems to be the wave of the future: life in towns and cities has become so dangerous, you have to move as much of it as possible indoors and then lock it all up.) But the quality of our

life down here is certainly altered these days — just like everywhere else — and I don't know that it's particularly an improvement. And maybe it's all somehow tied up with the rise of air-conditioning and the decline of the front porch."

"Anyhow, to get back to what you were talking about, you said you were born to sit on the side porch. And I'd like to know more," I said.

"Well," Evelyn replied and sat there looking out the window at her garden — not much in bloom there because it was late fall, "I think what I was born to be is a *hostess* or a bringer-together of people or a presider over meetings or something like that, a sort of *facilitator*, if there is such a word. Most people in the world today — and, I suspect, maybe it's been true always — don't really have enough get-up-and-go to reach out to other people or get in touch with anybody else about anything and, really, would just sit there all alone in the dark and starve or freeze to death, whichever came first, if you didn't do something about it. Everybody *needs* everybody else really, but some people say they're really too timid or too shy or something to make the effort. But I don't buy that for a minute because some of the biggest rascals I've ever known in my life were always being let off the hook by being supposed to be 'shy'. I don't doubt that someday somebody somewhere will decide that that was Hitler's trouble: he was just 'shy'. And the more fool they if they do! Most of the time it's nothing but pure-down laziness. They don't want to take the trouble and make the effort. And that's nothing either but another form of selfishness."

"A lot of people today would say it's all because of the domestic help situation — or rather, the lack of it," I said. "You just can't get it. And that puts a crimp in anybody's entertaining or 'facilitating' or whatever, now or any other time. The times *have* changed, you know."

"That's partly true of course," she said, "and we have in our own time seen the end of the seated dinner, though I will per-

sonally die before I come to paper napkins or cake mixes. But if you're smart and plan ahead and do a little along the way every day beforehand, you can manage, help or no help. Again, most people simply don't want to take the trouble, whether it's food or drink or anything else. And anything in this world that's good is trouble. You can just count on that."

I wanted to stay and hear more, but I had another engagement so I had to leave then. But from then on I became a regular visitor at Evelyn's, every time I came back home. It was as though she had thrown down a sort of gauntlet then—an explanation or vindication of her life, maybe more than just her own life—a whole way of life. And I felt called on to keep going back, to see whether she had changed in any way and also, I should confess, because I felt Evelyn was a good counter-irritant to much of what I was exposed to in my job and my life away from home. And she *was* a great joy-giver, and she was always *there*. She said, "All my friends know that, from four o'clock in the afternoon on, I'm always at home to them on the side porch, with bourbon or Coca-Cola or whatever else they want. Really, in a way, the side porch is the center of my life."

And this became more true as the years went by, even when Evelyn became increasingly debilitated by arthritis. She couldn't go to her friends so much as she had before: now they must come to her. Her husband had been dead for many years, and both her children lived in Memphis; so there was no one else to be considered in her domestic arrangements. And somehow she always managed to have some help in the kitchen, usually some of the Negroes who had been born and raised on the Henning place. But as everybody always said, Evelyn worked harder than any of *them*. And when she could no longer move furniture (because of some idea she'd just had about rearranging things) or stand on a ladder to straighten a picture frame or squat down in the garden to work in her flowers, well, she said, she could always polish silver. And it always shone too.

What she had done, of course, when she and her husband moved back to Barfield after some years in Chicago, where he had practiced law (not too successfully, I understood), was take the old Henning house and renovate it so they could live there and not in some brand new "home" in a "development" — the kind of house she always described as being fit for nothing but to watch television in. And that was a tall order because all the Hennings except her husband were long dead and the house had been rented out for years to what Evelyn described as "the wrong element or, to tell the truth, just plain white trash, so you can just imagine the state it was in." And then on top of that, her husband had died shortly thereafter and she discovered there was by no means so much money on hand as he had led her to believe. About all there was left, really, was the farm property. And that was along in a time when land was worth very little: everybody you knew was land poor.

But that didn't stop Evelyn. She just called in all the people, black and white, who were making crops on the Henning farm (yes, there were real live sharecroppers then) and told them they'd have to stand by her: she was new to the business but she was going to learn and they'd have to be patient with her and she wouldn't ever forget them. And it all worked out well too: Evelyn treated her hands right and they responded in kind. But not everybody could have done it, I can tell you. Most people would have tried to bluff it out, to get away with knowing more than they did. But not Evelyn: she told the truth, had sense, and worked hard. Most people usually respect that combination. And so both she and the hands on the place did pretty well in those years.

I had heard of her all my life, nearly, but usually as a rather exotic bird of passage: people down at Barfield (I lived six miles away in Woodville, the county seat) often didn't know what to make of her. Because, without batting an eye, she came back there from what they could only assume

was a glamorous life in Chicago and seemed perfectly content to exist in a town so small that people were still going down to the drug store to have a Coca-Cola every morning at ten o'clock — and meeting all their friends there — and, later on watching the two I.C. streamliners meet (on the double track) in mid-afternoon because Barfield was just about halfway between Chicago and New Orleans. And on top of that, Evelyn didn't always observe the local caste lines. She even entertained first families ("Papa always said. . .") along with comparative newcomers — folks who had lived there only ten years, say, and had gotten no further than selling insurance (accented, of course, on the first syllable).

But Evelyn never crossed the color line, as it were. She had grown up in the Delta down in Mississippi even if she had lived in Chicago; and whatever she may have thought privately (and I always suspected that she was at once more conservative and more liberal than people thought — if that makes any sense), she wasn't rocking the boat in public. I once did hear her say that some Negroes were about as trifling and sorry as white people and worse she couldn't say; but she was also a worldly woman with a very long head, who knew how the world wagged. She was fair and honest with everybody: no one every suggested otherwise, and she was respected if not always beloved. And you never heard of any of the colored hands on the Henning farm leaving either. But Evelyn believed in *society* (sometimes with a capital "s," sometimes not) just as she believed in any other reasonable organism or machine; and she wasn't about to tamper with its workings.

But anyhow, Evelyn was different: Barfield had to concede that and finally respect that. And though they may have thought of her privately as a high-stepper, they were forced to admit that nobody could be more down to earth when the time came. It was she who decided that it was high time the Barfield Methodist Church was equipped with rest rooms. ("Think of all those little children at Sun-

day School!" she exclaimed.) And how else to finance it but "throw open" all those "gracious historic homes" down there ("old houses at any rate," she said), with only an old maid or widow or some other left-over living in them, to the public in a sort of "pilgrimage" ("like marked-down Natchez") and charge admission? (One thing they did have plenty of down there, she said, was antiques — folks included — and they might as well get the benefit of them.) Starting with her own house of course, and she did have some handsome things—including a magnificent bed that some Confederate general was supposed to have slept in the night before the Battle of Shiloh. And Evelyn said that was perfectly all right with her but she wasn't going to make a life work out of it. The main thing about the past, she said, was that it reminded you that the world didn't begin and end with just you and that it hadn't been planned altogether for your own convenience either. And such knowledge was always good for anybody.

Evelyn didn't go off the deep end about the future either. She liked young people, and she liked having the grandchildren come to stay with her: she said it all kept her young. But she never tried turning back the clock. ("The young of any species are engaging, but youth is really wasted on them.") And it was she who really taught the grandchildren their manners. ("The older you get, the more good manners mean to you. Really, that's about all that separates folks from animals; and even then, sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. At the very least, manners keep the works greased; and I'm certainly all for that.") What it all came down to, I think, was *behavior*. Evelyn didn't really much care *what* people did, but she did like for them to believe in what they were doing and do it well and *enjoy* it. ("I'd rather for one of my children to be a first-rate bootlegger than a jack-leg preacher! I want people to be *professional*, to be *business-like*, no matter what they do.") And again, that might have been a little too high-stepping or, paradoxically, a little too democratic for Barfield. But, as I've

suggested, Evelyn was a kind of law unto herself down there: she spoke her mind perhaps too freely for some of them, but she always *behaved* and expected everybody else to do likewise. And of course there was also the suasion of what we now call the bottom line: she was solvent, and she always paid her bills.

As I said, it was some time after I had left home that I really got to know Evelyn. But thereafter I made her house one of my regular ports of call on visits back there. There were few enough of the old faces left for me now; so Evelyn became, in addition to everything else, a sort of touchstone, a landmark by whom I judged not only the world of my youth but also my present life and, indeed, myself as well. The years went by, and she began to show her age more and more; but always she was at home to her friends on the side porch from four o'clock onward every afternoon. And I got so I would drop by unannounced — something else that was going fast, she said. Now people in small towns — your own kinfolks, even — wanted to start calling you up before dropping by. And what was the good of their whole way of life if you had to start acting like you lived in a city and worked in an office from nine till five? ("If you've got to ask whether it's *all right* to drop by your friends' houses, they can't be much friends. And if you don't *know* whether it's all right to drop by without asking, you can't be much of a friend yourself.")

Sometimes I wondered about her health. I had heard she had everything in the world wrong with her insides though the only outward sign of infirmity was her arthritic condition. But she wouldn't quit going, walking finally with a cane. And she wouldn't quit entertaining on the side porch or even elsewhere. Nothing could stop that. It was no surprise to her, she said, that the central service of the Christian religion was a meal, even a sort of dinner party; indeed, didn't even Methodists sometimes refer to *celebrating* the Lord's Supper? That's what it was finally all about anyway — love, life, friends, everything. And you were a fool if you

didn't see it. Did you think it was all just three hot meals a day and double-entry bookkeeping?

So the last time I was ever in her house, she had invited me (it was Christmas and I was home) to one of her famous Sunday brunches, where she had everything in the world to eat, all set out buffet-style, on the old mahogany dinner table that had been in the Henning family as far back as anyone could remember, as well as a regular bar set up in the front parlor. There were some Negroes who used to live on the farm to tend the bar and help serve; and nearly everybody from that end of the county was there, wandering all over the house and spilling out onto the side porch in due course. More and more, that was where Evelyn lived, only a step from the kitchen and where she could look out at the garden. Now Evelyn, even with her cane, was all over the place, urging everybody to have more food, another drink (though she was no friend to intemperance), asking everybody about his family or the friends who, for one reason or another, weren't there. And throughout it all, she never forgot a face or a family connection. ("When you live in a place like this, you have to remember that, in the old days, the roads were all mired up with mud half the year and nobody could get out. So they just stayed right here and married each other. And everybody's kin to everybody else, and so you'd better be mighty careful what you say to whom.") A lot of people said — and not always kindly either — that Evelyn was "in her element" on such occasions. ("She'd rather go to a

party than be in Heaven.") I thought so too, but I meant it every bit in admiration. And as she moved among her guests now, she reminded me of a Queen Dowager making a royal progress, dispensing good will, cheer, even grace, and perhaps receiving in return more than admiration, more than thanks — the knowledge that she was following her profession too, the hostess, the facilitator, and ultimately, the life-giver. And she blessed and thanked us all for our friendship.

I'm glad that's my last memory of her, but her death only a month later was not out of keeping with that occasion. One of the cousins wrote that some friends were going by to take her out to dinner: it was somebody's birthday, I believe. And when the friends arrived, they found her all dressed up, sitting in the big easy chair where she usually received guests on the side porch; and she was dead. A heart attack, the doctor said, and of course more than normal wear and tear. But then she'd always told me and everybody else that she'd rather wear out than rust out.

At the funeral two days later, my cousin wrote, the Methodist preacher said that Evelyn had always given her friends joy, had always celebrated life. And I thought that was a good way to put it: she had been a party-goer all right, but, even more, she had been a party-giver. Maybe that had been her true calling, her real vocation all along, more than anything else. And I liked to think that she died very much as she had lived: when her ultimate guest had arrived, Evelyn, all dressed up for a party, was right there waiting for him on the side porch.

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A Voice of Truth

Clyde Wilson

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WITHOUT PRESUMING to provide a definitive list of the elements that make up that phenomenon or tendency known in the second half of the twentieth century as conservatism, one can state with certainty one that is essential — a realistic concept of the limitations of human nature and human potential, based upon both history and practical experience. No American political thinker of our era has better exemplified this stern and hallowed dictum than James Burnham. It was, as Dr. Samuel T. Francis shows, one of the unifying themes of Burnham's various books and of his *National Review* column (1955-1978).

Francis's respectful examination of Burnham's thought is an exemplary piece of intellectual history in its succinctness and precision and in the insight with which it discerns and portrays recurrent and characteristic themes. Burnham's writings were all to some degree entangled in the issues and events of their own day. By looking at them systematically and in retrospect, as a completed corpus, Francis has given Burnham's thought a consistency and a depth that do not self-evidently emerge from particular works.

By this analysis Burnham's realism has its roots in a Western tradition going back to antiquity and usually associated with the great Renaissance realist Machiavelli. In Burnham's case the influence was refined through the medium of the two modern social thinkers who figured in his 1943 book, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* — Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Machiavelli's sincere republicanism did not prevent him from looking candidly, some would say cynically, at men and motives. In fact, one might argue, only through such toughness of mind could the hope of republicanism be kept alive. By the same token, Burnham's very allegiance to Western liberty forced him to look realistically at its weaknesses and saved him from that easy and sentimental faith in the certainty of its endurance that characterized his time. His apprehension of the vulnerability of the West could only have been reinforced by his personal experience before 1940 inside the communist beast and his intimate acquaintance with the merciless efficiency of Marxist dialectics. In the final analysis, few Americans were better equipped to look this frightful century unflinchingly in the face.

Burnham thus had a unique immunity to the two most characteristic failings of his countrymen — sentimentality and superficiality. Pareto and Mosca, as well as Marx, taught Burnham that the study of