

Barry Lord

HOWARD

IF I AM GOING to tell you about Howard, I had better begin with his home. Not that his home was particularly remarkable—it was as commonplace in its way as he in his. But he was one of those people who carry about them the odour of their homes, so that when you visit them you suddenly understand many things you wondered at before.

In Howard's case the odour was highly distinctive. He need not censure me for saying this: the sanitary modern home lacks both odour and character, while Howard's house decidedly had both. His mother's refrain as she welcomed you was always the same: "Don't mind the house, I haven't had a chance to do a thing all day." Since at times I have visited the house daily, the wonder is not that the air in it was scented, but that it was not coloured as well. Indeed, sunk as a boy in the musty depths of a great green armchair the springs of which had long ago collapsed, musing what to do with the infinite resources of a steaming August afternoon, I have seen the atmosphere take on the hues of the green velvet, the worn purple carpet, and the golden sun.

I do not want to give the impression that Howard himself could be smelled from afar. On the contrary, like many from untidy households, he was a model of good grooming. It was a matter of what used to be called "aura". On that same August afternoon, stretched out on the even more cavernous plush green couch, Howard's stocky body was one with the warm sun's rays as they lazily found a way through dusty curtains and a hot-house fern to form long beams of falling dust across the patterns of the purple rug. And if a fly stirred on the fern, a fly might stir on Howard with the same impunity.

Howard's home produced this "aura" in other climates besides that of a summer afternoon, because it drew upon the warmth of a mysteriously close family. And it was from this mystery that Howard spoke and acted. I suppose it is because this mystery has become so difficult to trace that Howard and his house were so clearly marked out.

Even in the earliest days of our common youth Howard felt differently from the others about his home. For the rest of us who knew and grew with Howard, home was something to be surpassed. We were not ashamed of our origins—in fact we were proud of the prosperous poverty we had behind us. But it was after all something we preferred to have *behind* us. None of this for Howard.

I remember being shocked once in early adolescence to hear Howard casually declare that he would contentedly dwell on Sparrow Street—our street—for the rest of his life, if the world allowed. I have heard his father say the same more recently—“Sparrow Street’s as good as any” or “you won’t find finer people”. This seemed to me to amount to a vote for sin and the devil. It was to nod the battered head to an endless prolongation of conditions which were not so much intolerable as tedious and petty. “The hot-house fern forever” said the Beatons—Howard Beaton was his name.

This hideous denial of the great white god Progress, and my reaction to it, has of course been explained by economists. “The home of the workers” was the phrase with which a government gazetteer described our region of my smoky city; and it is true that white collar met blue somewhere on Sparrow Street. My mother was a clerk, Howard’s father a bricklayer, so there you have your explanation: the middle class, however low, aspires to greater addresses, and the lower does not. But there was in the Beatons’ love for Sparrow Street’s weedy lawns something which seems left out of this explanation. Perhaps in those earliest days we lived too close together to discern the lines of class warfare.

There was something further which marked the Beatons out, at least for those of us who went to school with Howard. Among these “homes of the workers” many a sad story is whispered each night. My mother was a divorcee, another’s was a widow, still others knew more indeterminate and less legal arrangements. Howard’s family was a whole one, or as near whole as it could be with a grown-up sister and brother. The point is that he had a mother and father: on Sparrow Street this normality was singular.

To say that Howard’s mother was corpulent is to employ an efficient word on a grandiose romantic errand; to call her flabby fat is vulgar but accurate. She is the only person I have ever seen with jowls on her extremities. Her flesh hung in loose bags about her, like so much wealth, and when she arose from the verandah chair which was her summer capital it was as if a mountain of mud had begun to slide.

You may think me unkind, especially when you learn that she was often ill or pretended to be, which was the same thing for Mr. Beaton and Howard. But

when I remember the generosity and warm wit of Mrs. Beaton it is difficult for me to dissociate them from her girth. She might indeed be insulted by my reference to her weight, for I recall more than one crisis created by someone telling her that someone had said that someone had said that she was fat. (Her piercing eye and ready tongue forbade closer relation to so libellous a remark.) I can only ask you and her to observe that in this case at least there seemed to be a direct connection between *largesse d'esprit* and obesity.

The reasons for her evasion of the truth on this one point (on other points she coloured it) lay, I believe, in her youth. I had always been told that she had been an attractive Miss, and some years ago was able to verify this by an aging photograph showing her and Mr. Beaton as young marrieds at the seashore. She was not beautiful, nor even pretty; her plain cropped hair and dark eyes above a then trim short frame were frankly attractive, without being sensual or coy. What had happened was plain enough—this warm companion had grown in all ways into the rich personality I knew, a reservoir sustaining all circumstances in ribald compassion.

“Well come on in, how are youse anyways, kid”, she would begin. “Don’t mind the house, I haven’t had a chance to do a thing all day. Our Howard’ll be down in a minute. I haven’t been feeling too well today, kid. I got something new the doctor sent me, but some bloody good it’s doing. How about a coke, kid?”

This was the standard beverage, which at mealtimes accompanied the standard fare, fish and chips—and by standard I mean four evenings out of five. Mrs. Beaton’s only prolonged activities were a walk down Sparrow Street to the corner confectionery for coca-cola, and a walk up Sparrow Street to the fish-and-chip shop. On paynight—when bricks were being laid—she shuffled down the crumbling sidewalk in as high style as her low frame could support, and Mr. Beaton would drive her away for “a real hoi-polloi meal” in the dusty Chevrolet coupe that managed, like Howard, to carry about it the aura of the house.

I do not want to pretend that Mrs. Beaton ever did much good in the world, and I cannot deny that she did some little mischief. But she always welcomed me in just that way, and I am sure she understood me as well when I was five as when I was twenty-five. Why is it then that when I find myself on Sparrow Street of a summer evening I cross by on the opposite side of the street, acknowledging the gleam of her eye with only a vigorous wave? She is garrulous and nosy, it is true—her knowledge of my character is only partly based on insight—but there is something else that keeps me from her verandah chair. Perhaps only the young can be enfolded in those fleshy arms.

As for Mr. Beaton, he smoked cigars and listened to baseball games. His cigars were long and very wet on the end he smoked, and his baseball games were long too. This fatherless child has cause to remember the shapeless brown pants and the spotted once-white undershirt, often curiously completed by a cloth cap of the twenties, stretched out in the back sun-porch where for some reason the radio was kept to crackle its accounts of the Dodgers' fortunes into the long hot afternoon. Later of course he lay prostrate before living-room television football, but I better recall him stretching between innings to find a beer in the humming refrigerator and rasping out in his sand-paper voice, "Hey, Mary, the Dodgers just scored three runs. They's ahead."

"Listen to that, would you? What the hell do I care if they're ahead or not? Bring me another coke and shut your mouth."

Her reply was serious enough, but somehow in good humour too, and Mr. Beaton could retire to the next inning without loss. I have met many richer men, but none wealthier in the goods of this world than Mr. Beaton on a baseball afternoon.

I mentioned before that Howard had a brother and a sister, and if you can understand about them perhaps you can understand what I want to say about Howard himself. Of the sister there is not much to say except that she is as much like Mrs. Beaton as I suppose anyone could be in these latter days. She is married to a crane operator and they live in a war-time house which they are breaking down into Sparrow Street conditions. They have given Mr. and Mrs. Beaton three grandchildren, but one of them is retarded and does not improve. "No, our Brian's no better, bless his bleeding little heart", Mrs. Beaton would comment every time I asked.

But it is about Howard's brother John that you really should know. John Beaton was eighteen years Howard's senior, and sister Margaret was almost as old; Howard himself was an unexpected endowment, a child of the Beatons' late middle age. There is something to conjecture even in that, the older children of the warm companion and Harold the baby of the ribald fat lady, and as his schoolmates we whispered our own guesses in unkind language. Howard was a mystery in his coming, perhaps even to his mother.

John I never knew on Sparrow Street, but they tell me that when he lived there he was just like his father or just like Howard, which is the same thing. He had married a woman named Joyce when I first knew him, and had two children by her. "We don't see much of our John since he's married to Joyce and living on the other side" was Mrs. Beaton's summary. "The other side" of the city con-

sisted of the homes of the managers of the workers; it was where all Sparrow Street, except the Beatons, wanted to go. Later still John and family moved farther to a ranch-style box in an autonomous suburb. It was there that I went to see him one fall day with Howard.

I do believe that John himself had been what they say he was, a Beaton man. I remember he stopped in the road on one of his infrequent visits to Sparrow Street and helped me find a ball. And I remember a few years later he sagely advised me that an unfaithful puppy love was young yet, and would take years to know her mind well enough to grow into a real bitch. But perhaps it takes a Mary Beaton to sustain a man on wet cigars and fish and chips. John I know never wore a dirty undershirt around Joyce's home.

I wondered indeed how John could think of the suburban ranch-style as his home, after the colour and stench of the Beatons' on Sparrow Street. But then he had come to it by degrees, first a square apartment, then "the other side", finally this box. The only odours here were of fresh-clipped grass outside and fresh-cut flowers in. There was no porch, and the picture window framed a photograph taken in harsh light, a neon-flashing contrast with the patina atmosphere of sun on dusty carpet which was the husband-father's heritage.

Joyce welcomed us crisply and showed us to a chartreuse squarish chesterfield. The three of us sat looking out pictureless window at the dark green handkerchief of lawn—Sparrow Street grew rags by comparison—and at the suburban ranch-style box opposite. She ignored her husband's brother and guessed that I must be back at school now, meaning the university; I said I was. I noticed that a place of honour had been reserved beside the false fireplace for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. No other books cluttered the neat corners of the square chairs and chesterfield, not even a magazine obtruded on the polished coffee table, but the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* with matching bookcase had been invoked against the Philistines, and stood shored up against the dam of illiteracy. I was asked for an opinion on the room's single picture, and I guessed that it was as good a reproduction of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* as could be had.

Now all this time I was embarrassed for Howard, and Howard was proud of me. I was embarrassed because Howard and his parents were cultured—Mr. Beaton knew cigars and Mrs. B. knew people—while encyclopaedias and blue boys were the products of perverted ignorance, and John's wife was enlisting me on her side. Howard was proud of me—why? Because I knew the language, I suppose. Because the secret of his wisdom lay in his ignorance of it, and he was content to have a friend in what he considered high places. He once memorized

a phrase of my high-school Latin days, "*Noli nos vocare, te vocabimus*", and I suppose he knows it yet.

I was embarrassed for another reason. The atmosphere around the homes of the workers was angry that fall, and we had brought it with us in the dusty Chevrolet which Howard was driving now. We had trodden it into Mrs. Joyce Beaton's gray pile carpet and it lay swirling around our shoes now. Sudden lay-offs had curtailed the factory and the home-construction brick-laying along with other trades much sooner than usual, and a bleak winter was expected. Howard was here to ask of John, who was inspector of a factory bricklaying section, that he find work for Howard, an apprentice now, and their father. It is a measure of his affection for me that he had asked me to come along on so difficult a mission; my acceptance of the invitation only shows that I could not think of a way to get out of it.

John of course had only to say that he took orders from above like everyone else, that even the rumour of family favouritism in the plant would cost him dearly, and Howard's mission was ended. We walked down the crushed gravel driveway in silence, and the October wind swooped at our legs. But the close quarters of the Chevrolet front seat enforced conversation, so I said that John was somehow different from the other Beatons. I think Howard was glad I had come to the point because he made his father's deprecatory palm-down gesture and answered "John's been no good since he got married. Joyce's taken him away and made him one o' hers." We drove out of the suburb down a long street where there were no autumn leaves because all of the trees were saplings.

Somehow Howard and his father found enough work through that winter like others, and the Beatons did not starve or go down deep in debt, which on Sparrow Street is worse. It was not only that winter though that he accounted for a major share of the Beaton income. At a time when I was working summers and saving zealously for university, or later when I had a scholarship but banked my summer cash anyway, Howard gave all his spending money to his mother. To my question about this he would say that as long as he had enough to go out on a Saturday night Mrs. Beaton could do what she pleased with the rest. When I spoke about savings, he looked the other way; the Beatons did their banking at home.

It was this warmth of family, extending even to finance, that Howard brought into his life with those of us who grew up with him. I am tempted to call this loose and always changing group "the gang" or "the boys", but at the time it was only the Beatons and Howard himself who had the vision to see a community among

these individuals thrust together by geography and economics. If there was cohesion, Howard made it.

Howard's fierce loyalty to a nebulous "gang" cost me pain at times. I remember an adolescent crisis in which I had sided with his girl-friend and mine against Howard; lives were of course at stake, and in a final attempt to wrest me from the females' grasp he pleaded, "Stick with me, we grew up together—come on, for the sake of the gang." This appeal to a community spirit I was until then unaware of was the same revelatory gift that Moses founded a considerable reputation on. Not that Howard could be Moses. His limitations were the limitations of Sparrow Street.

Some years before, when I was particularly angular and unevenly developed, no young ladies would have been interested in luring me away from what Howard insisted was a gang. But hunger persists despite angularity, and weekly, on Saturday nights Howard and I among many others would visit one of several neighbourhood dances. Howard was short but stoutly built, darkly handsome and well endowed with what has been most simply labelled "sex appeal". He could pick up and drop three girls of an evening and still be certain that one would be available to be taken home, fondled and dated for the following week. This, as everyone knew, was the acme—well, almost the acme—of human experience. For his ability to attain this zenith at will Howard was envied by the entire sport-jacketed stag line. His charm, consisting of a boy's healthy dollop of manners (which Mrs. Beaton had cuffed and sworn into him) and a grown man's attention to the child-woman's appetite, need only be turned on some unlucky soul's prospect and all was over for the night. But the females often travelled in pairs, and I was Howard's best friend. I, the angular and unevenly developed, invariably failed at this game of "Would you like me to take you home?" They would not like me, *etc.*

I was putting on my coat in the cloakroom next to the "Ladies" door when I heard behind it a voice I recognized: "Okay, so I'm glad you're going home with Howard, so big deal. But I'd rather go home alone than get stuck with that guy Howard hangs around with. I mean really, honey, I'm your buddy and all that, but there are limits."

Howard told honey there were no limits, and I suppose she went home heart-broken, though of course she was back alone next week. I had to be angry with him because I could not afford to be anything else. "Howard, you shouldn't have done it. It doesn't make any sense. You don't have to sacrifice yourself to me."

Howard answered slowly and simply, sure of himself here. "You're my

friend. If they're not good enough for you, they're not good enough for me." There was not much logic to this statement, but there was something else.

Earlier still I remember Howard's response when I, the least of four boys watching a lacrosse match, angered by unnecessary provocation a far bigger and older seller of programmes and peanuts. One blow of his fist to my plexus brought the earth up hard beneath me, and I lay trying to find my breath and trying to avoid his boots at the same time. The punch had drawn the attention of my three companions, but Bob, a football player and greatest among us, foresaw an impossibly out-matched fight and withdrew, while Jock, an intellectual, probably reasoned that I had been asking for it. Howard, four years younger and six inches shorter than his opponent, took time neither to calculate his chances nor to arbitrate responsibility. A few seconds, bloody noses, and chipped teeth later, the policeman could see that Howard had held his own. The seller of programmes had met the wrath that Mrs. Beaton turned on her husband's employers and her elder son's remote wife. An attack on Howard Beaton's friend was not to go unchallenged.

The power of the Beatons' love prevailed against the fists of the programme seller, but could not endure the Joyces of this world. Howard's sex appeal varied inversely with his girth, which began to approach that of his mother. Meanwhile the rest of us were marrying—too young, for the most part, because a wedding was the surest prelude to a move from Sparrow Street, for boys no less than girls. Toward the very end of adolescence the insidious fact emerged. All the others in what Howard still called "the gang" had moved with young wives and now with first babies, some out of the city and all out of the area, while Howard himself, the prophet and creator of this group, sat in his Sparrow Street living room speaking wistfully of reunion. It became more and more unfortunate to encounter him on the street, for his conversation was all of a past that as he described it grew fictional. Incidents were invented and elaborated until they became a sentimental bath of group loyalties which had existed only in Howard's imagination if at all.

I was at university by this time, while Howard, armed with his single Latin quotation, remained a brick-layer working beside his father and under his brother. At Howard's begging insistence one attempt was made to relate him to the flinty comfort of my undergraduate colleagues. He remembered my early enthusiasm for poker, an interest which I had forgotten myself, and after several evasions I carefully selected a group who claimed to take pleasure in the game. Howard, who had watched his father winning over beer bottles as a baby, took most of the students' money and rewarded them with earthy stories in a language they were learning to suppress. One or two of them told me afterward that they had liked

him—as a sociological specimen; another got drunk and picked a fight with him. But it was apparent even to Howard now that more than a library wall had come between us.

He had been visiting each of us in his gang as regularly as distance permitted, like the faithful secretary of some veterans' association whose members can no longer recall the names of the battles they fought together. He had been finding less to talk about each time, except to tell us of one another, for we had no other contact. I think it was to join the conversation of baby-sitters and diaper rash that he married Barbara, a younger and darker Joyce. Before the wedding he said he hoped to find a home on Sparrow Street or nearby, where rents were low, perhaps even to live with his parents in the house that would some day become his. Barbara told my wife privately that she would not consider either alternative. They moved first to an apartment at the other end of the city, and now live in a newly developed area that tries not to look like the home of any worker. Howard has left the trade of his father, the trade he learned as an apprentice, and is now selling furniture in a new shopping plaza. He has opened two bank accounts. They have a baby girl, whom he loves as best he can in the roomful of sanitized bunnies Barbara calls a nursery. The end of it is that Howard is dead to us.

But the end of Sparrow Street is still a factory fence—aluminum now instead of wood, but a factory fence no less. And Mrs. Beaton still sits on her verandah, to be avoided when I occasionally visit. The Dodgers have moved to Los Angeles, and Mr. Beaton, whose health is failing, watches T.V. football if anything.

Perhaps John and Joyce Beaton are building something different in their box. Perhaps Barbara can convince Howard that he prefers furniture sales to bricks. What is certain is that Howard knew something I can't forget—that you have to find the heart of Sparrow Street, find it and keep it, or the picture windows will afford no view at all. And he knew something else too, the clue to a mystery which has nothing to do with the ways you and I live. I cannot understand it, but I think I saw it once in the sun-gold haze of a musty living-room, between the hot-house fern and the green plush chesterfield.