



Detail from Joseph Nash illustration in "The Mansions of England in the Olden Time" (Bounty Books)

A RENAISSANCE DOG HAS HIS DAY AT THE FAIR

By J.B. Sisson

The morning dark and rainy as all get out, we took French bread, blue cheese, and blood-red wine and Milk-bones for the dog — that's me — and set out as merrily as if the day were fine and journeyed westward watching for a sign: Renaissance Festival, a Camelot of chivalry and clowns called Puke and Snot.

We cruised through rolling farmland in our pack. There in the underbrush the rabbit cowers for fear some Shetland sheepdog might attack, and your sly raccoon counts the daylight hours dreaming sweet corn in rank late summer flowers, the goldenrod and nightshade and beyond the purple loosestrife choking every pond.

Etsoons we found a fair field full of Fords and, entering by the nearest city gate, were sore beset by two knaves crossing swords in highest dudgeon but complaisant hate and vinyl jerkins of uncertain date in this twee jumble of ye olden times, a marketplace from Mother Goose's rhymes.

Here joining in this country song and dance, a Renaissance itself, both foul and fair, fired city dwellers in a weekend trance may walk on greensward like an answered prayer and, from the sunlight's carcinogenic glare

and their own acid rain, sit under an oak and feast on turkey leg and Diet Coke.

A pure Commercial Revolution, this: two hundred forty artisans of yore hustling the Protestant work avarice with stained glass, candles, bric-a-brac galore in a huge novelties and sundries store, spice route into the past from nuts to soap, your Christmas shopping done in one fell swoop.

The myriad world becomes a treasure trove, wood-shingled shops embraced by white-oak boughs, Ben Jonson's hobbyhorse and trinket grove, where folks in baseball caps and blue jeans browse and plumed and booted popinjays carouse, where lusty ladies drenched with lavender bend down and plunge their fingers in your fur.

The fair performers prance their grand parade on mud and straw strewn over hill and dale, a motley crew: a goat led by a maid, an elephant, rude nobles quaffing ale, a unicorn from some forgotten tale. And obscene gestures of a pickde vendor invest the hokum with an airy splendor.

Stretched out and panting on a grassy hill, we watched a falconer with his red-tailed hawk who soared aloft in her precision drill and glided, through her master's nature talk, silent among the breathless human flock, then spread her wings in full magnificence

and sailed off backward past the fairground fence.

An armored knight bedight in black and scarlet confronts his enemy in blue and green, reins in his charger, and cries out, "Ho, varlet!" And down the lists the paladins career, again at three o'clock and four-fifteen. That's how a dog's companion-people scrap: One minute they're all smiles, and then they snap.

You can't know where it comes from, all that rage that humans spew in one another's face. They call their malice rattling someone's cage, and always they must put you in your place — no thought more devious than the human race. The hand that grooms you snags you with the brush. They tie you up in ropes and holler, "Mush!"

Now looking back on all that razzmatazz, I wonder — no adventure, plot, or quest or anything a proper story has, except for smells breathed deep inside your chest to save and savor through your winter rest and disentangle slowly and compare and meet again next summer at the fair.

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