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He admired many of the big names in American literature. When he discovered that Saul Bellow had not only once taught at Bard but modeled one of his most memorable characters (the wildly erratic Eugene Henderson of Henderson the Rain King) on a man who lived just two miles from the campus, well, that was big news. The young man did some research and found that the real Henderson was Chanler Chapman, a local legend who owned a substantial farm in a nearby hamlet called Barrytown. Emboldened by his proximity to the source of a much admired book, this ambitious young man decided to call Chanler and arrange a meeting.  "Hello?"  "Yes!" (Mr. Chapman spoke very loudly.)  "Is this Mr. Chapman?"  "Yes!"  "Ah, . . . Mr. Chapman, my name is----; I'm a student at Bard. If it wouldn't be inconvenient, do you think I could come talk to you about Henderson the Rain King?"  "I see. Well, where are you?"  Sensing an unexpected victory, the young man was eager in his reply. "I'm just down the road, sir . . . in Annandale."  "Do you want my advice?"  "Yes, of course."  "Stay there!!"  ChapmanThis baffled and vaguely embarrassed young man had had his first encounter with what was commonly known in these parts as "vintage Chanler." Chanler Armstrong Chapman (1901-1982) has been dead for 23 years, but his memory still provokes vivid reminiscences from those who knew him. As when he doused a timid but resolutely teetotaling couple with a bath of whiskey flung from a pitcher, or when he went roaring into the local savings bank wearing only a bathrobe to defend the honor of his caretaker who had overdrawn his account by two dollars; or when he menaced his aunt with a shotgun until she, a woman who hated melodramas, sternly commanded him to cease being a fool, go home, and leave her to the morning paper.  Who was this outrageous Ahab shaking his fist at the sea? Any competent psychiatrist could have offered a plausible answer by referring to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders under the listing of "hypomania." Hypomanic people are energetic, expansive types capable of both wit and charm but sudden irritability; they are often grandiose and highly self-regarding, filled with ambitions but easily distracted. To some degree this profile accurately describes Chanler, but scientific classification is necessarily reductive, and Chanler's was too large a personality to be so easily reduced. For better and for worse he was a supreme carnival barker, commanding anyone who would listen to come see the show--The Chanler Chapman Show. Instead of dancing bears and acrobats one could wonder at the various versions of Chanler blustering in the spotlight: a gentleman farmer in muddy overalls, slingshot in one pocket and a collection of pens in the other; a journalist and newspaper publisher; a frequent author of poetry and occasional author of prose, a wartime adventurer, and an often irascible but sometimes tender father, grandfather, and husband.  Without question, a generous proportion of Chanler's vivacity was passed along through the blood. He descended from a fascinating melange of grandees who spent more than 200 hundred years creating a series of pleasure palaces along the east bank of the Hudson, from Hyde Park to Germantown. First were the old names: Livingston, Beekman, Armstrong; then, in the mid-19th century, the new money: Astors, Chanlers, Delanos, Roosevelts, and Vanderbilts. Except for the Vanderbilts and Roosevelts, Chanler was linked to all of these families either directly or through marriage. Chanler's mother was Elizabeth Chanler, a beautiful and tough-minded woman who even in the nursery was known as "Queen Bess" by her siblings. These siblings were a garrulous and indomitable Gang of Eight, orphaned far too young, but set for life by the largesse of their great-grandfather, William B. Astor. The Astor orphans grew up unfettered in a magnificent mansion overlooking the Hudson just south of Barrytown. They called it Rokeby and it was as it remains today: a vibrant locus for an unfolding Chanler history, never without incident.  In 1897, to the consternation of Elizabeth's equally formidable sister Margaret, Elizabeth married a temperamental genius named John Jay Chapman. Chapman descended from the first U.S. Chief Justice and Federalist Papers contributor John Jay. Chapman had a capacious intellect; he was a lawyer, political reformer, essayist, and literary critic. Whether contemplating the plays of Shakespeare or the life of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Chapman was an erudite thinker and writer who had the rare skill of communicating sophisticated ideas with an extraordinary clarity. He was outwardly an accessible person with an easy smile and wit, but he often fought an anguished inner battle against his demons. Once, in a moment of hysteria, he destroyed his left hand by thrusting it into a coal fire as an act of atonement for thrashing a Harvard classmate; years later he had a complete physical and emotional breakdown and spent 18 bedridden months in a curtained room at Rokeby recovering his sanity.  By 1904, the Chapmans had established themselves on the several hundred acres that abutted the northern border of Rokeby. They called their estate Sylvania, and like Rokeby it was a combination of manor house and functioning farm. For the young Chanler and his half brothers Victor and Conrad, life at Sylvania was one with the usual boyhood adventures of chasing cows or falling through pond ice, but it was also an intellectual life. Between his parents and his Rokeby aunts, uncles, and cousins, Chanler was surrounded by worldly, cultured people. Chanler inherited their appreciation for all of the arts, and most particularly their facility with words, both on the page and in conversation. Indeed dinners, whether at Rokeby or at Sylvania, were inevitably competitive, as the various egos asserted themselves at ever higher volume, such that guests often ceased to try and keep up as the Chanlers talked around them.  Chanler was a true Chanler with his oversized personality and restless need for stimulation and adventure. With the influence of his father omnipresent through his life, it was unsurprising that Chanler was highly literate, frequently embellishing his conversation with passages from everything from the Bible to Tennyson or Coleridge. As fortunate as it was for Chanler to benefit from such an abundant heritage, it was unfortunate that he often willfully combined some of his families' less desirable traits--the volatility, melodramatic flair, and egocentrism--into his own version of bloody-mindedness. Even as a teenager, Chanler was advised by a contemporary to resist the urge to always play the jester and to please "take off his cap and bells."  But the instinct in him to perform was powerful; it was his muse and his guide as he became a kind of Hemingway figure, not just a man, but a self-made persona unwilling to behave conventionally and pursue a conventional path. A summary of his life tells a story of a polymath whose appetite for experience often exceeded his ability to confine himself to the task at hand.  His school years were scattershot affairs because he couldn't resist subverting scholarship with outlandish extracurricular behavior: once he organized a prizefight which not only featured him as the punching bag, but also the main beneficiary of the receipts. After Harvard, he had a period of drift before trying journalism, first at the Springfield (Massachusetts) Union and then the New York Times. But he found newspaper life boring and became a reader at a publishing house. When that was no good, he returned to Sylvania in 1932 to establish a dairy operation (which was self-sustaining, but only just, until it had to be abandoned in 1969). Because Chanler was prevented from fighting in World War I, he couldn't be stopped from somehow participating in the next one, even though he was by then too old to be accepted by the Army for combat. He hated the Vichy regime and in 1940 he proposed a plan to liberate the islands of Miquelon and St. Pierre off the coast of Newfoundland. An alarmed State Department quickly put an end to that fantasy.  The wartime Chanler was undeterred, and in 1942 he started on a journey across the Atlantic to join up with the American Field Service in North Africa to be an ambulance driver. His boat was torpedoed by a U-Boat near Trinidad and sank in seven minutes, sending Chanler and nearly 30 others into a lifeboat for a week before they found safety in British Guiana. Chanler wrote about his experience in Life magazine; naturally he was impervious to the sufferings brought on by tropical sun, little water, and almost no food, writing to his wife: ". . . I never had a better time in all my life." Eventually he made it to Africa where he drove his ambulance through much danger, though his commanding officers found him to be as hard to contain as a fractious horse. At one point he had to be sternly dissuaded from trying to establish a brothel behind the lines.  After the war, he settled into life at Sylvania as lord of the manor, overseeing the dairy operation in his usual inimitable way, sometimes roaring orders to the men and the cows through a bullhorn. But he was immune from the hard work of farming and was more often than not seen about town in his muddy overalls and straw in his hair. He had sympathy and affection for his fellow dairy farmers and was a consistent advocate for fair prices; indeed for a time he was a vice-president of the local dairyman's association and seemed to know every farmer within 50 miles. Chanler was a ubiquitous presence in the neighborhood, with an encyclopedic talent for knowing everything about everyone.  From 1958 until 1982 Chanler gave voice to both his literary aspirations and social curiosity when he started his own newspaper, a monthly appropriately named The Barrytown Explorer. The Explorer, circulation 1000, was pure Chanler: a journal essentially about himself and all of the local people and incidents that caught his fancy. It was amusing, brash, and occasionally obscure. A typical headline was "Kingston Attacked by Giant Mall" and its motto was admonitory: "When You Can't Smile, Quit."  Whether in the Explorer or around a dinner table, Chanler's undoubted vocation was an impressive talent for words. True, his poetry could slip into doggerel and his prose could become wayward, but more often than not his writing and speech were a continual flow of aphorism and metaphor which could confuse but also dazzle. And when he dropped his blustering side and read aloud with feeling and a sense for drama, his listeners were always gratified. Chanler's greatest literary achievement was his memoir of his years at St. Paul's School, a boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire. The book, The Wrong Attitude: A Bad Boy at a Good School (Putnams, 1940) is superb. It is not unlike Evelyn Waugh's great school story Decline and Fall in skill and style: very amusing without ever straying in tone from an ironic detachment which spared neither the school nor himself.  Years after Henderson, Saul Bellow described Chanler to Philip Roth as a "tragic or near-tragic comedian and buffoon heir of a great name." Hard words from Bellow, who as a tenant of Chanler's in the mid-1950's had fraught relations with him (there were many drunken dinners when the future Nobel Laureate and Chanler would come to blows). "Tragic comedian" is pretty-sounding but hyperbolic. When Chanler sometimes behaved like a buffoon, then that guise was by choice. If there was any tragedy, it was that his various passions were never reduced into a one compressed legacy. Rather, it was a diffused picture of many shades, and like all provocative art, his life was contradictory, exhilarating, maddening, but never boring. | Right spacer of article | |