

JANUARY 8, 1968WILLIAM M. RAMSEY

Fellow members and guests of The Literary Club: My paper this evening is titled: Beware: Senility and I am so busy.

Before reading it, however, I should like to make a slight apology and an explanation. I am sitting rather than standing to read my paper because a second cataract operation three weeks ago has left me not only with temporarily diminished vision but also with a tendency toward vertigo, if I remain standing for any length of time. It has nothing to do, I hope, with the general senility which has overtaken me and to which I am going to refer so frequently in my paper. And so to work!

Until this evening, my latest paper for The Literary Club was read on Monday evening, 20 April, 1964. It was titled: Sinescence Begets Anecdorage. At the time I tried to make it clear that I had used the word "anecdorage" in its original sense which, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is: "Anecdotic literature or series of anecdotes". I had not used the word in its secondary sense as given in the same dictionary which is: "garrulous old age". In that earlier paper, however, I did predict that the title of tonight's paper would probably be: Better Senility Begets Better Anecdorage. That prediction was fully intended to make use of the word "anecdorage" in its secondary meaning: "garrulous old age". And that's what you're all in for this evening, I'm sorry to say.

The realization that "old age" was rapidly descending came upon me with considerable force a couple of years ago when my wife and I spent a year in Europe. We had rented an apartment in Zurich, Switzerland to be near our son and his family who live there when they are not on the road giving concerts, filming TV tapes or making movies, westerns (all in German, incidentally). So, for that year we made Zurich our headquarters and travelled about Europe as our fancies dictated. During our Zurich stay we also tried to garner a speaking acquaintance with that most absurd Swiss-German language known as Schweizer-Deitch.

One morning there I boarded one of the ubiquitous

trolley cars or "trams". There was no seat available so I grabbed a strap and stood. A moment later I was flabbergasted when a pretty young woman arose and insisted that I take her seat. In fact I was so flabbergasted that I accepted her gracious offer, and even felt so old that I didn't offer her a seat on my lap.

With this much of a preamble, you will better understand the title of this evening's paper. I felt it only fair to issue a "warning" about it so that you who have come to hear it will know what you're up against - a series of meandering non-sequiturs, semi-pointless anecdotes, venerable but not necessarily astute observations about people and customs and so on. In fact, the whole paper adds up to a veritable hodge-podge of semi-personal memoirs and trivia - anecdotage in the less complimentary sense of the word.

As I have pointed out in my earlier paper, however, there is always the obvious respite to be had in the gentle arms of sleep, nor shall I be in the least bit hurt by the homey sound of a few snores.

So, at this point, let's take a hop, skip and jump and find out where we land. Ah! right here in the midst of one of my pet peeves which I shall call Middle Class English Women. Perhaps I have drawn my conclusions from too small a statistical sample but, be that as it may, I always try to avoid these representatives of the fair sex for a number of reasons. Chief among these is their attitude toward America and Americans. The middle class English women I have met have usually assumed a British supremacy attitude toward Americans which, in some ways, is not dissimilar to the White Supremacy attitude adopted by some of our neighbors South of the Mason-Dixon Line. If not actually an attitude of British supremacy, these women tend, at least, toward a supercilious or patronizing view of their American cousins.

As an example of what I mean, I might point to a woman here in Cincinnati who hails from the great English middle class but who manages to get about socially with considerable success. She is not unattractive in appearance, is usually slightly over-dressed and is given a too liberal use of the cosmetic art. Not long ago before a dinner party a friend and I were chatting with

her when she took a cigarette from her small silver case. Instantly, my friend whipped out his lighter and gave her a light. Instead of the usual "Thanks", her only remark was: "Oooh! I didn't know that American gentlemen ever bothered to light a lady's cigarette". My friend merely mumbled something politely. Had her remark been addressed to me, I should have replied, most impolitely: "Oh, no, my good woman, you will find that most American gentlemen are happy to light a woman's cigarette regardless of whether she's a lady". Incidentally, this same English woman thinks nothing of parking her children with kindhearted American neighbors while she goes to town "to see if I can possibly find a decent looking lamp for my living room".

Another example of British middle-class superiority is the little woman we met in Mallorca a couple of years ago. I happened to be wearing a waistcoat made of the bright hued Ramsey tartan. "Oh, how pretty!" said she. "Do you mean my waistcoat?" said I. "Yes, I do". But you surely must know, Mr. Ramsey, that in England we always call it 'wesket', and if you don't know what the tartan is, you might just ask my husband. He knows all about the Scottish tartans".

Should I be rude and tell her that a number of years before an Oxford friend had corrected my pronunciation of the word by explaining "You know, Bill, in England we usually leave it to the 'gentleman's gentleman to say 'wesket''. A gentleman usually calls it a waistcoat". Or tell her that the Oxford Dictionary lists the correct pronunciation as "waistcoat" and lists "wesket" as a vulgarism? Instead of resorting to either form of rudeness, I merely said that I understood that some English gentlemen preferred "waistcoat". Later in the day, I saw this woman again and she whispered to me: "You know, Mr. Ramsey, I've been thinking some more of our discussion this morning. The more I think of it, the more certain I am that my dear father always said "waistcoat".

The all time prize example, however, of the condescending rudeness of so many middle class English women is contributed by the late Mrs. Trollope, the mother of the distinguished and talented novelist Anthony Trollope. Early in the nineteenth century she set sail for America in the hope of restoring the

Trollope family fortunes which had sunk to a near all time low. She decided to settle in Cincinnati and to build here a great Bazaar which would so capture the fancy of these provincial Americans that it would become a veritable gold mine which in time would reverse the tide of the fast dwindling Trollope fortunes. Alas, for this well intentioned English woman, the Bazaar and all that went with it turned out an utter fiasco and she subsequently returned to England - disillusioned, annoyed and just plain "flat broke". Once home again, she lost no time in writing and publishing her bitter condemnation of Cincinnati and Cincinnatians under the title *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*, a volume which ultimately did help to rebuild the family fortunes. Many of the British who read it undoubtedly were managed into a greater smugness of the knowledge of their undoubted superiority to their American cousins across the seas.

In Cincinnati, on the other hand, the book was reviewed with annoyance, irritation and even exasperation as something which painted a grossly unfair and biased picture of the Cincinnati of that day. For the following impressions of Mrs. Trollope, I am almost entirely indebted to my late father-in-law Davis L. James, a long time member of The Literary Club and its president in 1913-1914.

Mr. James' grandmother, Anne Wood, had come to Cincinnati from England with her family early in the nineteenth century. Her husband died shortly afterward leaving her with six children to rear. So she took to teaching and founded what is listed in the Cincinnati Directories of the early thirties as: "Mrs. Wood's School for Respectable Females". Classes were held in what is now the Taft Museum. All of this took place during the period of Mrs. Trollope's onslaught here.

According to Mrs. Wood, as relayed to her grandson, Mr. James, Cincinnati's impressions of Mrs. Trollope were that she was rude, overbearing, condescending, unattractive and above all, not a lady. No wonder that she was not handsomely entertained here nor that she became so vindictive in writing *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*. It seems to have been a stupendous example of what we, as children, used to call "Sour Grapes".

Before we jog onto another subject, let me correct any mis-impression I may have left in these tales of middle class Englishwomen. I am anything but anti-British. By profession and by inheritance I am a devout anglophile as were my father and grandfather before me. In fact, my late father was so devoted to the cause that after my mother's death, he gathered up the younger members of the family and moved to England which, at the time, he considered the most civilized country in the world. Several years later he moved back to this country because he had overlooked certain facets of the situation. Chief among these was the fact that he was a vegetarian and in England a steady diet of boiled potatoes, brussels sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower can be somewhat wearing. Also, that an Englishman can step on a newly polished shoe as smartly as can an American.

And now let's move on to the subject of words and specifically the origin, meaning and use or misuse of certain English words. This also is one of the primary interests I have inherited from my late father.

We shall open our discussion with the word "marmalade". Nearly fifty years ago when I was in college, a friend of mine asked me if I knew the derivation of the word and when I pleaded my ignorance he promptly explained it to me. In France, in the days of Louis XVI, years before the Revolution, word got around that Queen Marie Antoinette was seriously ill. In the streets people began to wail: "Marie est malade, Marie est malade" or as we might wail in simple English: "Marie's sick". Certain women in Paris wracked their brains to think of some goodie which would help speed the Queen's recovery and a group finally hit upon the idea of a new confection made of the health dispensing orange so recently introduced to France by her Spanish neighbors. So they rushed to the local shops, bought quantities of oranges, cut, prepared and boiled them to make a tasty jam for the Queen because "Marie est malade". Shortly afterward this confection entered the vernacular and became widely known as "marmalade".

Without hesitancy and without consulting a dictionary I passed along this version of the derivation of "marmalade" for many, many years. Actually, I estimate that over this period of time I have misinformed

some three thousand and fifty-eight people. If we assume that one out of ten of these people passed the information along to ten others and so on one can readily figure that I have been responsible for misinforming two or three million people on the subject. Then about three years ago I finally looked up the word in a dictionary. It is derived from the French "marmelo" or quince and has come to mean: "a preserve made by boiling fruits (originally quinces, now usually Seville oranges) with sugar".

There is an equally beguiling story about the origin of the word "mayonnaise" from the time of its discovery by the late great French General Albert Louis Henride Val Mayon but it is much too long for the purposes of this paper and is equally erroneous.

While we're still dealing with the subject of words, I should like to comment briefly on some of them which seem to me to be sadly overused these days. One of the commonest of these is the word "area". To be sure the dictionary lists a number of definitions of the word but it seems to me that it has spread far beyond its normal usage - the "area of your thinking", the "area of your interests", and so on ad nauseum. A couple of years ago the weekly bulletin of one of our largest churches here, carried two short paragraphs on the need for a missionary church in the "Over the Rhine area". In these two paragraphs the word area or its plural had been used exactly fourteen times. I clipped the article, underlined each use of the word and sent it to the church's minister with the simple question: "If you or I were an 'area' shouldn't we feel somewhat exhausted? Then, on the Today TV show there is a five minute local broadcast titled Calendar in which a honey voiced Miss Rosemary Kelly tells the audience what's going on that day "in and around the Greater Cincinnati area". Other overly tired words are "unique" (particularly when incorrectly modified by such words as "most", "very", "rather", etc), "contact" and "alert" used as verbs and so on. Probably I'm just an old fuddy-duddy but such careless use of the mother tongue continues to annoy me.

While still on the subject of words, I can only express the hope that each of you members among

your friends at least one or two people who are gifted in the way of "malaprops" (or as the ultra-refined call them "malapros"). To me there is nothing in the non-derogative field quite so refreshing as a good old-fashioned "malaprop" delivered with fully serious interest. My wife and I are exceedingly fortunate in having two such gifted friends plus a daughter who on very rare occasions will make a delightful contribution in this quote: "area". The two friends are delightful ladies of about our age, both great reared and well educated but with ears only casually attuned to word differences. Just the other day, one of them was describing her father who had apparently wielded a rather heavy hand where his family was concerned. This yielded a rich double malaprop as follows: "Why Alvina and Bill, the man was completely 'eggnogcentric' - he was a real maisonette". The other friend over the years has contributed such gems as: "The news spread like 'wild flower'; and on viewing a new canary recently delivered to us by Santa Claus: "Oh, it's fine now, but wait 'til it begins to mould" and finally, on the telephone: "I'm sorry, Alvina, I can't talk to you any longer now because I'm in the 'newt'".

In addition to these beautiful little items, I must confess to at least one of my own. Until about a year after our marriage, I had always read to myself the word "misled" as "misseld". One day I confessed to my better half that I had been "misseld" by something. Said she: "Misseld? Misseld? What do you mean?" Said I: "Oh, you know the word to misseld or to confuse". "Oh", said she, "are you possibly thinking of the word 'misled'?" For shame, Ramsey.

One other inheritance comes to me from my father - a slightly vulgar streak which at times I have some difficulty in suppressing. To be sure, the fact that I can still move about freely in decent social circles would indicate that I have been able to exercise reasonable self-control in dealing with this unfortunate affliction but what does a grandfather do when he meets up with a similar strain in a fourteen year old grandson?

It all started harmlessly enough with young Peter Brown, one of my most favorite grandsons. My good wife and I spent the past summer in Burlington, Vermont, where our younger daughter lives with her husband and

five children. One beautiful August day, Pete arrived on our doorstep and found only Grandpa Ramsey at home. After the usual interchange about the weather, the beauty of Vermont and so on, Pete said: "Grandpa, how good are you at pronouncing Scottish names?" "Quite good", said I. "All right, let's try you out", said he. "How do you pronounce MACDONALD?" "Macdonald", and MACLEOD?" "Macleod". "How about MACKAY?" "Mackay". "And MACHINE?" "Machine". "Oh, Grandpa, you've spoiled everything!" "I'm sorry" said I.

There followed a long, ominous pause. Then came the bolt from the blue: "Grandpa, do you know that Uranus is larger than Pluto?"

Now, gentlemen, what would you have done had a fourteen year old grandson posed such a question? I didn't know whether to be more amazed or amused. Since my knowledge of astronomy is strictly limited and my penchant for the coarse or vulgar knows no limits, I was uncertain as to how to proceed. Finally, while I was trying to make up my mind young Pete became impatient: "Don't you get it, Grandpa?" That settled it - I couldn't afford to appear either completely ignorant or ingenuous so I simply said: "O.K., Pete you win". Then, in the spirit of good clean grandparental camaraderie, I recited for him the cleanest coarse limerick I knew and we've been even closer friends ever since.

P.S. The limerick about "a comely young lass" is not being included in this paper for fear of probable censorship. Personal applications for its repetition will be received later.

P.P.S. I have since consulted the dictionary and find that both Uranus and Pluto are very small planets, the former larger than the latter.

Let's push on now to a slight dissertation on family manners. In such research as I have been able to manage on the subject of family genealogies, I have been interested to note that on both the James and Ramsey sides of our family ancestral surnames have all been of British origin mostly English or Scottish, with some Irish and an occasional bit of Welsh thrown in. We seem to abound in Murdocks, Hollingshades, Tuttles, Footes, Middlecoths, McCreevys and the like plus the usual number

of Jameses and Ramseys. None of the excellent European names seems to have been included in our tight, little British family circle.

Therefore, as the present head of our immediate family, I have watched with more than casual interest the progress of my three sisters and our two daughters in affairs of the heart and the selection of husbands. It isn't just a matter of smugness which has encouraged me to hope that these five charming ladies would select mates with names of British origin - it's just a feeling of "why change the pattern now after so many years of this family tradition?"

The only one of my three sisters who threatened a break with this tradition was Christine, the next eldest, who, years ago announced that she was engaged to a young man whom we shall call Oberhelman (I've forgotten his real name). When she announced her happy news to us, I just said: "Oh, that's easy, we'll simply have his name changed to "Overman". The romance petered out, however.

Next, this same sister, Christine, nearly threw us for a loss by overdoing the family tradition of British names. She announced that she had fallen in love with a young Englishman. The second of three brothers whose name was Fritz Middlefart. (Cross my heart and hope to die, that was his real name!) And impeccably English, too! I'm told.

The next few months I was busy figuring out how I should ever be able to introduce my sister as "Mrs. Middlefart" and still keep a straight face. Fortunately, this romance also faded and Christine ultimately married good old Henry Lyman of the Yale Class of 1929.

The next threat of a break with the family tradition came when our younger daughter began "keeping company" with a very personable young man named Erkins. I merely suggested to our daughter that, while we highly approved her choice of a young man, I should have to ask him to add a P to the front of his name if he wished to marry into the family. She finally married Duncan Fraser Brown, of the Harvard class of 1942. Dunc is an ideal son-in-law if I do have to correct his use of the English language now and then.

My two other sisters presented us problems as far as the family tradition was concerned. Virginia, the youngest is Mrs. C. Kenneth Seymore of Denver, and Harriet, the eldest, is married to Earl Stimson, a first cousin of our George. In fact, Harriet has been doing some genealogical research of her own recently and has discovered that our great-grandmother Tuttle's maiden name was also Stimson. This probably means that George and I are related by blood as well as by marriage.

Finally, there came the great break with the family tradition and what a fortunate break it was for the Ramsey family. Our elder daughter Anne married David Henry Blankenhorn twenty years ago. David is the only son of our late, distinguished and beloved member of the Club, Dr. Marion Arthur Blankenhorn.

The distinguished son of a distinguished doctor and citizen, Dr. David Blankenhorn has followed in his father's footsteps and at the ripe age of forty-three is not only a full professor but is also the head of the Department of Cardiology in the Medical School of the University of Southern California. We old folk derive great pleasure from our four Blankenhorn grandchildren.

Our next stop is a brief one and has to do with the gentle modern art of "status seeking" and "status symbols". I can truthfully say that this is an quote "area" unquote in which my wife and I have practiced with relative modesty. In fact such status as we may have craved has been largely satisfied by dreaming of such achievement. In our dreams, we have lunched or dined not infrequently with presidents of the United States and their wives and with the few crowned heads of Europe not overlooking, of course, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Of course, on occasion, such dreams are not rewarding. For example, the other night my good wife dreamed that she was alone at home when there was a knock at the door. When she answered it she found President Johnson there. Without a word he rushed in and took her in his arms in an amorous embrace. Fighting her way clear of him, she shouted something like: "Who do you think you are, anyway?" Before he could answer her question the dream ended and he had vanished.

At this point I shall confess, however, to one yearning for a status symbol. In my somewhat humble way, I am guessing that to the average status seeker, the most important status symbol is the make and size of one's automobile and the price at which it was bought.

Except on one occasion, neither of us has ever craved or driven anything but a Ford or, occasionally, A Chevrolet. But in the late twenties, an old friend of ours inherited almost simultaneously, two rather large fortunes. With each came an ancient but well kept Pierce-Arrow car - one of the 1910 vintage, the other a later 1912 model.

Our friend offered to sell us either of these ancient cars for \$25.00. How I craved owning one of them even if we only placed it in the middle of the lawn and filled it with colorful petunias! But what with a wife and one small daughter to support, I just couldn't afford the necessary \$25.00 - almost 1% of the family's net income at the time.

How I wish we had time for some good old-fashioned name-dropping tales - stories about well-known personalities whom I have either met or come to know in the show business side of Proctor & Gamble's gigantic operation. Quick example: Do you know what happened to the late John Barrymore when, in his regal, besotted way he refused to recognize any difference between the elevator and themen's washroom at Chicago's Hotel Blackstone? Or, another quickie: Do you know what happens when anyone lifts or sits on the toilet seat in the Powder Room at Rudy Vallee's mansional Hollywood home? Well, I'll tell you. A recording is automatically switched on - Rudy Vallee's singing: "Your Time is My Time".

And now, one final bit of "anecdotage - or garrulous old age". A couple of years ago, a group of my former young associates at P. & G. gave me a birthday luncheon. Among other things I told them about my first cataract operation and explained my reasons for not accepting my eye doctor's recommendation that I wear contact lenses.

One of the young men whom I knew only slightly

spoke up: "I don't blame you, Bill, for not wanting to wear contact lenses - let me tell you about my experience with them".

It seems that the young man had gone to the Metropolitan Opera one evening. Just as the curtain rose on the first act, one of his contact lenses popped out. He felt around on the floor but couldn't find it. When the first act curtain was finally lowered, he did some more hunting. He then noticed that the décolletage of the woman in front of him was quite low. Could the lens have popped into her dress? He began looking cautiously when the woman suddenly turned around and said: "What's the matter with you, young man?" He explained his predicament and, quite politely, she said: "Oh, I'm so sorry. I'll go out to the woman's room and see if I can find it".

She returned shortly and said: "I think your lens is there in the back of my dress but I can't reach it. Would you mind putting your hand in and seeing if you can find it?" This he did, and, sure enough, he found the missing lens.

So, with this final bit of trivia, I thank you all for your endurance and bid you "goodnight and pleasant dreams".

William M. Ramsey

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