

JUNE 3, 1968

NIXSON DENTON

It is a pleasure tonight to face once more, after a lapse of two years, one of the more or less captive audiences that the Literary Club manages to provide for its Mill Creek Valley poets and playwrights, its essayists and its fictioneers. I use the phrase "more or less captive" correctly, I presume, for I suspect that many of you are held in restraint--chained to your chairs--not by shuttered windows or locked doors, but by the no less potent, but gentler, check of social amenity.

You figure, I suppose, that, if you sit relatively subdued and listen to me, I shall, in God's good time, sit relatively subdued and listen to you. That is the way it has always been in Literary Club annals since the founding fathers, touched by genius, saw to it that each member, competing biennially with an Elia or Thornton Wilder, had a guaranteed audience, and, far more important, a practically guaranteed round or two of applause, plus three or four huzzahs.

A member may declaim or spout off each two years, occasionally, it is true, under compulsion, but for the remainder of the two year period he had damned well better unveil his enthusiasm for the club's authors.

If he doesn't unveil his enthusiasm, those authors, when his Gethsemane rolls around on the calendar, can keep their hands in their pockets, I was going to say "like elephants", but you know what I mean.

However, I am not here this evening to discuss the Literary Club's programs. I am here to start my paper, un-factual as it may be, with a couple statements of fact. In the past week---this is Fact No. 1---my voice, once compared by my mother to that of Pol Plancon, a great French basso of her girlhood, and by others, less exubrant, to that of the biblical mount of Balaam, appears to have begun gurgling down the drain.

Regrettably, this does not mean, however, that my audience tonight will start sipping its beer and munching its lunch much before 9:30 p.m.

I have been assured by my personal laryngologist,

who also works on my car, that my tremolos and profundos at least will hold out until 9:10 p.m., so please take off your shoes, if you haven't removed them already, and settle back while "one with a paper" tries to avoid all the mispronunciations he finds possible.

One more explanation before I proceed with this paper. A friend glancing over it, to improve his mind, I trust, complimented me by saying that the paper's title ---"A Last Gasp? --- was ghoulish and macabre. And his criticism would have been correct and it had not been the question mark that brings up the title's rear.

The question mark followed the composition from the maws of my typewriter to the printed announcement of the Literary Club's goings-on, programmed for the more-or-less meretric month of May, and I hope that it carried the message I entrusted to it---nothing macabre in the least.

I have a premonition that I may come with a paper to this podium in 1980 which you may take as a warning.

But this evening I am about to shed myself not of my mortal clay, but of my glory robes, somewhat mothly, for I have ceased to be a professional scribbler, a \$28-a-week, more or less, journalist, and a penny-ante molder of public opinion.

Actually, I have not been a "pro" since January 1, of this year, and, indeed, if you were interested, you might say that I had acquired amateurism simultaneously with acquiring, by means of a New Year's Eve overindulgence, a New Year's Day hangover.

But tonight, here, in the presence of my peers, be they of medical, legal, engineering, or merely literary background, I look back upon sixty years of putting my nose, along with my pencil, into other folks' business.

In that six decades, I have "covered", to use a descriptive of my trade, homicides, a war or two, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth (Queen Elizabeth II and not "Good Queen Bess"), and an audience with Pope Pius XII, which, because of a couple of Methodist

bishops in my family tree, must have taken quite a bit of doing on the part of some good Cincinnati Catholic friends.

My most shining memory of Pope Pius XII was not the profundity of his office, nor the historical backdrop---the Vatican Palace---against which he moved as I saw him.

What I recall most vividly etched in my recollections is the man's utter and splendid simplicity. A group of fifteen or twenty children, probably a communion or confirmation class, had walked to the front of the papal throne, temporary for the occasion, and it was announced that the youngsters had mastered a song for the Holy Father.

I must say that during a six week's stay in Italy, from Florence to Venice and return, I heard no worse singing, but I received no backing for my opinion from the predecessor of Pope John XXIII.

Pope Pius was smiling as he arose to accept the vocal offering of his church's young in heart. He beat out the time for the song and joined in it from beginning to end. And, as the notes echoed away into the ancient walls, so encumbered with western man's memories, the pontiff shouted "Bravo" and pressed close to his heart the heads of half a dozen Roman bambinos, scrubbed spotlessly by their mammas for the unforgettable moment that had come into their lives, never to be placed in the limbo of dimly remembered triumphs of which the average life holds so few.

It is my opinion, unimportant as it may be, that Pius XII, by his common humanity, by his common touch, so exceptional among the world's powerful and great, revealed---at least indicated that he was in the true line of saintly succession that came to fruition for many of us, regardless of our religious beliefs, with Pope John.

But I did have some newspaper adventures beyond papal audiences, however trivial the part that I played, and the coronation of a young lady, to be weighted down later in these times by responsibilities that Alfred and Richard, of the Lion Heart, never knew,

in England's great Abbey, where, as Macauley put it, all rivalries cease and all hatreds come to an end.

My first contact with homicide, although not as a journalist, came when I was at the ripe old age of 10, and it permitted me to watch a newspaper man, sent out from a daily in Dubuque, Iowa, plying his trade.

The murder, I was to learn somewhat later from small town gossip, which inundated me while I professed total disinterest, certainly in the presence of my elders, must have been even sixty years ago, good for an 8-column headline anywhere.

The victim's head had been blown from his shoulders by a blast from a 10-gauge shotgun; the murderer had then killed himself with a second blast, and there had been, I was to learn much later, the alleged motivation of an illicit romance.

The slayer had been convinced that his victim had been traipsing around with his, the killer's wife, although I never was quite able to accept this theory, for killer and victim were both as old as time itself to me, and the femme fatale of the tragedy, in beauty certainly, was no Iowa prairie rose.

I must say that the murderer had selected one of the most beautiful spots in my home town for his break into print---the front walk along the west side of the high school. The time was mid-evening. Classes for the day had been dismissed for hours, and one would think that the crime would pass unnoticed.

However, with that extrasensory perception that small towns used to seem to boast, the homicide, with its suicide accompaniment, in a half hour's time was the subject of heated discussion in every short order restaurant and billiard parlor in the village, and I can remember arriving at the brain-splattered locus terribilis while Mr. Metz, the school janitor, was swabbing away the last of the crimson clots and just as an undertaker was covering the bodies of killer and victim with neatly laundered sheets.

It was a long time afterward before I revisited the spot, but I had, willy-nilly, received my baptism

of blood and I never again could be shocked by the doing-in of an occasional citizen by a fellow taxpayer irritated to---and beyond---the point of murder.

Now, for a shifting of the scenes. Would I, if I had my life to live over, I have been asked, take up newspaper work?

Regardless of the heady gifts that journalism showered upon me over more than half a century---sometimes three meals a day---I am inclined to doubt whether, even if given the opportunity, I should attempt to become an Ohio Valley Watterson, or a Mill Creek Dana, or an Off-Bay Mencken.

The myriad sound waves of radio and television that blast the area air with worn out, twenty-year-old melodies, while they have brought to journalism a brief respite, have brought the press no renewal of life, no second youth.

There was a time, even in my day, when the demise of even one newspaper appeared to be as unthinkable as the demise of the Free Silver Party once must have seemed to be for that party's stalwarts. But I, myself, regret to say, have participated in the obsequies of a number of daily publications whose bound volumes, once shimmering with the heady pulsations of life itself, are now perhaps to be found by the few who may seek them, in the basement of Ernie Miller's public library.

I enumerate the Cincinnati newspaper casualties that I managed to survive in the Queen City of the west.

First was the Commercial-Tribune, whose columns I once ornamented, and which, I believe, until it was finally smothered under a pillow of pleasant platitudes, was certainly one of the best, if not the best, of newspapers in this area on either or both banks of the Ohio River.

I avoided listening to the death rattle of the Times-Star long afterward much through luck. I had accepted a pension from the Times-Star a couple of weeks before and so was not among those present, or on the recipients' list, when the Western Union sent out its delicately-worded, if not delicately-scented,

messages to the effect that the hired hands were out of work.

Since then, I am happy to say that I have managed to survive, if not on truffles and chicken Marengo, at least on humbler crusts.

My career as an army and navy war correspondent in World War II, plus more of the same during what our politicians termed "the Korean incident", hardly marked me, looking at my Richard Harding Davis days in retrospect, as of the stuff of heroes.

I participated through no fault of my own in a number of fire fights with the First Cavalry Division on its way down the Luzon plains to free the allied prisoners held by the Japanese in Manila's Santo Tomas University. And I was on board the U. S. battleship Nevada when it was smacked by a kamikaze plane off Okinawa. But generally my acceptance of a hero's role was by happenstance, and, in my stories back to the Times-Star, I did not stress my valor.

I realized that my Times-Star colleagues of police court days might have a bit of difficulty translating the Nixson Denton, whom they had known in peace times, into a dashing, debonair trooper, ready, if General MacArthur had hinted at it, to attack and take Tokyo or Corregidor single handed.

If I had any outbursts of courage on the road to victory in the south Pacific I think that I may claim that I restrained them. I returned to my job on the Times-Star without so much as a good conduct medal. And today, twenty years after the Nips knuckled under on the battleship Missouri, I still tell Queen Cityans, brash enough to bring up the subject of World War II, that I guess MacArthur and General Walter Kruger might, in the pinches, have got along without me.

General Kruger, who had a Cincinnati background-- in his youth had been a student at what was to become the Ohio Mechanics College of Applied Science--turned out to be my favorite World War II soldier, MacArthur's tactician and muscleman when MacArthur wanted the heat turned on.

But my regard for Walter Kruger was almost inherent. I had been a GI in World War I, fought to make the world safe for democracy, and General Kruger had come up to his lofty, three or four-star job from the ranks. And he had never forgotten the enlisted man.

The first night that the Sixth Army pitched its tents beyond Leyte after the return to the Philippines, its commander was in his jeep, touring the Sixth Army's components. And do you think he was conjuring up trouble for Hirohito's soldiers?

Not exactly, I happened to know that General Kruger's first order of business that long night through was to see to it that the Sixth Army's ovens were fired up to the last brick and that the GIs, the morning after the Sixth Army waded ashore, (the enlisted men waded ashore, too), had fresh, almost hot, bread for breakfast.

Long afterward, the men of the Sixth Army may have forgotten their battles down the long and bloody Luzon way, but they never have forgotten General Kruger's bread, a fragrant reminder of home where such reminders were to be few indeed.

But I am reminded that my paper this lovely May evening, with heavy equipment blossoming outside the Literary Club doors, was to be a manner of comparison between the newspapers of yesterday, which tolerated my quirks and whimsies, mostly surviving them, and the molders of public opinion today, which do not seem to mold too well.

I submit that the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Muskogee, Okla., Times-Democrat, two employers of little, old me in my salad days, could have slipped no farther beyond their depth than did two Cincinnati dailies who endorsed Senator Lausche in the primaries recently and, for a while, refused to take no for an answer.

In the good old days such newspaper endorsements were par for the course, but in the last couple of decades they seem to have served as a kiss of death and up-and-coming political candidate has shunned them as much as he could.

It must be said, however, that an occasional endorsement achieved results and a candidate who had gained the approval of the newspaper editor, or, more often, a newspaper publisher, survived the ordeal.

In later years, however, most newspapers are content to print simple death notices, turning their political torches mostly over to out-of-town columnists who can voice the newspaper's political sentiments without seeming to be on its payroll.

Not many of today's public prints are quite so violent politically as their predecessors and not many editors figure that, because a man pays a dime for the morning Whitewash or the evening Mop, he is obligated to follow a newspaper's political fancies.

Newspapers no longer are "traditionally Democratic" or "traditionally Republican". Instead, I suspect, they have become political opportunists, quick to climb on any bandwagon, regardless of political philosophy, if victory looms ahead.

The recent burgeoning of good times has brought to the nation's newspapers, once preoccupied with souffle recipes and minor automobile accidents, a superabundance of paid advertising, better known as "that which makes the mare go."

As a result, a newspaper's advertising executive, even though he ranks no higher than the fellow in charge of the "job wanted" three-liners, rates a Vesuvius higher than the editor who composes column after column on Senator J. William Fulbright's contacts with Stilton cheese as a Rhodes scholar, or Vice-President Hubert Humphrey's use of ammonia in washing the windows of his father's drug store as a boy.

Somehow, the editors seem to be occupying journalism's second violin chairs, a sorry come down from the first violin chairs they occupied when I was rolling my Bull Durham cigarettes and one didn't walk a mile for a Camel because there weren't any camels this side of the Sahara desert.

Radio and television have had their innings in my time, coming up from nothing and, from time to

time, apparently headed back to their source. I was on radio in its great days, sharing a nightly show with Red Barber, but I never could quite adjust my journalistic self to radio's mannerisms and foibles.

For one thing, I was never able to accept radio's double way of producing most of its news shows, a production in the true, theatrical sense, meaning that one man, with a voice like that of a hungry rhinoceros, wrote the script, while a gent with the voice of a Pinza, but unable to tell the difference between a pronoun and the Gettysburg Address, would read the script to the waiting world, so he indicated, through the available microphone.

I have to say along these lines that Mr. Barber wrote his own script as did I, as those readers of mine who listened to the program may have suspected.

Beyond the age of three-score years and ten, I do not think that television has lived up to the dreams of its creators.

At the beginning of TV's summer doldrums, with its repeats of ancient shows, to use TV's own vernacular, and its mildewed motion pictures, dug from the dank cellars of Paramount, Universal, etc., TV appears to me to be somewhat more of a wasteland than an up-to-snuff Opera Comique, but I am prejudiced, I confess. I do not think because a man has been on TV fifteen or twenty years, he becomes a Junius Brutus Booth, or that a young lady who has sung "These Boots Were Made for Travelling" from the back of her tonsils since 1964, becomes an Adelina Patti or a Luisa Tetrazzini.

Television, I regret to remark, seems to have come upon rough times, permitting its feet to drag. Certainly the United States, which has produced its share, both of great tragedians and great comics, should not have to continue to look into the TUBE night after night, month after month and year after year, at second raters and superannuated has-beens, long beyond their pseudo-artistic youth.

I shall pass over, if not entirely, Cincinnati's most recent gift to the palpitating world of radio and television---the miraculously-named "Wind Chill Factor",

a mysterious thermometer reading which, its creators claim, makes 20 degrees above zero sound like a night spent in shorts in winter along the Yukon.

I do not know what kind of thermometers the boys use for their readings, or where they stick them, but I rate the "Wind Chill Factor" along with Fahrenheit and Centigrade as among the great meteorological discoveries of the Christian era.

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I trust that no member of my captive audience has been led astray by my remarks on the nation's untrammelled press, its television stars, its far-out lady vocalists, or its wind chill factor, and have begun to believe that I am a cynical fellow, addicted to sarcasm and irony.

Perish the thought! In reality, I am the most amiable of citizens, always at hand when ground is broken for a new jail and always among the loudest cheerers when the flag passes by, even if it's a Confederate flag in a George Wallace parade.

I was raised on Clement Moore's "The Night Before Christmas," and was weaned, I am happy to state, on that immortal song of the Spanish-American War, "Tell Mother I'll Be There."

I defy anyone inside the Literary Club walls tonight to prove that I am anything more or less than a hundred percent American, or that my criticisms of the intellectual status quo---the press and the like---are anything but well-intentioned, aimed at a comeback as far as possible, on the part of Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Pulitzer, and a half dozen or so others, who molded public opinion as best they could.

I have been asked by a colleague, a member of the Literary Club, what I consider my best pieces of writing during my long, even if not particularly spectacular newspaper career.

That career extends too far for an honest count probably, and I dashed off both poems (my word for my rhymes) and sixty years of not-always immortal prose,

including sixty years as a columnist, a trade that I started before I was quite dry behind the ears.

Of the verse, I like well enough that which I wrote about victory gardens, brought to light by Bob Jones, of Kaleidoscope fame, on WKRC, in a series of articles he has written about me.

It was printed originally in the Times-Star on June 12, 1943, and I am ready to fight anyone who dares to assert that the rhymes don't rhyme. It goes this way:

"In Spring a rationed people thought,  
With cupboards empty, that they ought  
To plant in yards where they were able  
Things to put upon the table.

They dug up trees and ancient sod  
And flowers brought to bloom by God;  
The honeysuckle's drowsy scent,  
More ardor to their digging lent,  
And where the bittersweet climbed high  
Now lima beans surmount the sky.

The rambler rose, outside the gate,  
It met a most unhappy fate;  
No bee its lavish nectar sips,  
No girl its bud holds to her lips;  
Where in the dusk its dreams were shed  
Rutabagas grow instead.

The columbine you need not seek,  
The garbageman took that last week;  
And mother, with a facile hoe,  
The vagrant hollyhocks laid low.  
Papa, he chopped down the pear,  
He's got spinach over there.

The iris by the hidden pool,  
Have left their habitation cool;  
The valley-lilies, ghostly white,  
Put on their angel robes last night;  
Sister felt a little sad,  
But gave them everything she had.

Down in back, along the fence,

My, the onions are immense;  
See the carrots, how they sway,  
Carrots being built that way.  
All the peonies are ruind,  
Beauty has become a truint.

I haven't much hope that my poem on victory gardens will take a place alongside Shakespeare's sonnets, Dante's "Divine Comedy," or some of the more profound works of John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but it is mine and, as fathers will, I like it.

As for my favorite bit of prose I like best, so far as my memory across a sixty year span serves me, a preference for my column, Second Thoughts, in the Times-Star of August 28, 1952, in which I touched upon the passing of a long-time friend, Jean ten Have, a member of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and a splendid musician, who, tolerant beyond his personal feelings surely, had long tolerated my maladroit rendition of the violoncello parts of Haydn, Schubert and Brahms trios.

I had a deep affection for Jean ten Have and I suppose that my choice of his eulogy may have had a sentimental basis. But here the column is, as I wrote it on that 1952 day when I had heard that another of my dearer friends had sought the answerings to those questions that had seemed to be, in this life, at least, without answers.

"He was eighty-two, the records state, but they must have been in error, for those of us who had walked part of the way with him, who had known his warm kindness and gentle laughter, never thought of him as old.

"But we were aware, indeed, that a very lovable part of a great musical tradition had passed on into silence when we heard late Wednesday that Jean ten Have was dead at Saranac Lake, in New York.

"He had been my good friend for more than two decades, my companion of a life far removed from the life that was mine every day, and there was, always, of course, a disparity in our ages.

"At the end, however, after I had heard the bitter news, after I had thumbed through the Haydn Trios we had played so often, it was I who was remembering fiddlers gone and tunes that had echoed away.

"M. ten Have, I knew, had become the boy who was the violin soloist at Notre Dame, whose accompanist had been Cesar Franck; the youngster whose father had studied under de Beriot, and had been one of the shining virtuosi of France.

"It was de Beriot's Guarneri, which long ago had sung the obbligatos to the songs of Jenny Lind, which had taken the first performance of the Schumann Quintet in its stride, that M. ten Have was wont to leave in Paris taxicabs or Vienna railroad stations, although, like the bad penny, it always turned up, as if a Guarneri, after all, was small potatoes, not worth a thief's care.

"My first brush with Col. ten Have, whose military rank I was to obtain for him afterward from a Kentucky governor, involved the Schumann Quintet, but not as much as the Schumann Quintet involved me.

"It was on Sunday morning, not long after the end of the first World War, at Garner Rowell's in Mt. Auburn, and I, alas, had stepped into something entirely over my head.

"The late Dr. Phillip Ogden, of the faculty of the University of Cincinnati, was there to play the piano part of the quintet, and a string quartet mostly of somewhat more than amateur status had been assembled to follow Dr. Ogden on his adventure as best it could.

"I was invited to sit in, as a cello supernumerary, but the real cello work, of which there was plenty, was a task for my teacher, Leonard Watson.

"I had but recently learned to be nonchalant in the fourth position on the instrument, and, if the truth could have been known (and it soon was) I would have been a good deal more useful washing up the breakfast dishes.

"M. ten Have, obviously, unconcerned by the

technical difficulties lurking in the score, was occupying the first violin chair; a very charming young woman, who was to become Mrs. Rowell, had the second violin part staring her in the face, and Mr. Rowell, a violinist in his own right, was slumming with the viola.

"Like the tortoise in the early stages of his historically famous race with the hare, I was soon outdistanced, baffled completely by a large number of small notes.

"Mr. Watson, fortunately, was able to carry on, burdened though he must have been by the intimation that his star (and only) pupil wasn't revealing too much native or acquired skill.

"I have never forgotten M. ten Have's gentle comment after the conclusion of the quintet, which found Dr. Ogden stroking his limp fingers with a handkerchief and none of his associates eager to try the number again.

"I think I remember when you decided to take a breathing spell," M. ten Have said.

"M. ten Have's forte was teaching and those who studied under him were blessed. He had the finished violin technique of the French School, of course; he had the patience of one of the more patient saints; and both, he had a great love for youth, an affection that was returned lavishly.

"No one could study the violin, or ensemble, with the Colonel without being the richer for the experience. Nature may not have fashioned you to succeed Kreisler, but you emerged from M. ten Have's classes with an appreciation of fine music you would never forget.

"The kids at the conservatory worshipped M. ten Have for, with all of eighty-two years, he was a kid with them.

"He knew last year that he should go to Paris, that he was taking a chance by remaining in his adopted country, but he explained his reasons when I summoned the courage to remonstrate for his continued absence

from his family.

"'Ah,' he said, 'But they, too, are old. My family of pupils in Cincinnati is forever changing and forever children. They see to it that I remain a child. It is the warm wine I most need.'

"Well, I guess that is the way friendships end and the way we all come to the coda.

"It will be a long time until the original Neville Trio and Birdwatcher's Society meets again and never on this side of eternity.

"Longfellow, in his 'Golden Legend,' was not thinking of Guarneri or Strads, but a phrase seems to be Jean ten Have's requiem:

'Time had laid his hand  
Upon his heart, gently, not smiting it,  
But as a harper lays his open palm  
Upon his harp to deaden its vibrations.'

Nixson Denton