

“MORITURI——!”

BY ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

AN eternal procession of us is moving outward, sometimes swiftly, oftener with a hesitance that irritates those who tread on our heels. A like procession, springier of step and clearer of eye, presses forward to seize upon our uncooled places. So ever it has been. So ever it must be until the Day when at once both processions shall be swept off the Board.

We oldsters make up the recessant group; we who have passed, or are nearing, the half-century mark. Our glowing successors—Youth—form the on-pressing army. When a class is graduated, one of its members counsels the remaining classes, in a valedictory. When a tenant moves from a house, he tells the newcomer what he can of the house's faults and virtues.

I am appointing myself, herewith, a Valedictorian—a soon-to-be evicted tenant, if you youngsters prefer—and I am going to say a few dull things about your own Youth and of the Youth that was ours.

No, it is not going to be a snarling invective of the Younger Generation. (I am not of the throng that declares we have slumped from the Mid-Victorian to the Mid-Vulgarian Era.)

I

To begin with, you Nineteen-Twenty-Eighters have a host of things which we had not, at your age—things not then invented and other things not then dared. We grant that; we semi-centenarians. But, we had a few things which you have lost or which never have been yours and never can be. Some thirty years ago, we would have gasped incredulously over wonders which are everyday commonplaces to you—the things you have which we hadn't. Take one illustration:

Last evening, you and a patently respectable girl of your ac-

quaintance went to any one of six plays that are current in New York. If you had a car of your own, you went in it. Otherwise, you took a taxi. From the theatre, you and she went to a night club; perhaps a mildly decorous one. There, you ate and drank and danced. You deposited her on her doorstep, sometime after 2 A.M.; perhaps some hours after. Not a thrilling evening in any way; nor out of the usual run. Yet, thirty years ago you could have done not one of the things you did last night. Naturally, you could not have been carried to and fro in your own motor or in a taxi. For there were no such vehicles. You must needs have worn evening clothes and high hat; not a comfortable dinner jacket and soft headgear. You could not have taken the “patently respectable girl” alone to theatre or to supper, if you were not engaged to her. A chaperon—almost as extinct now as the four-wheeler you would have ridden in—would have been as inevitable a feature of the evening as were your trousers. You could not have taken the girl to any of those six most-talked-of plays. For thirty years ago, not one of them would have been permitted to raise its curtain in any American city. No, I don’t mean, of necessity, that you took her to one of the law-banned dramas of the past season; but to some popular production of much lingual frankness.

You would not have taken her to a night club; because there was no such thing as a night club then. Nor would you have danced with her at any after-theatre resort; because at decent after-theatre restaurants the patrons did not dance. As for having a few drinks with her or offering her a cigarette in a public place—you would no more have done either of those things than you would have drawn a pistol on her. In that day, young girls of good families did not drink. If they did, it was in strict privacy and not with men. Some of them smoked. But no restaurant would have tolerated it. You would not have brought her home at 2 A.M. or later; unless from some severely decorous dance; and then only with a sleepy chaperon to see that all was well.

Your Saturday half-holiday—those of you who are at work—is as much of an institution as your workless Sunday. You can spend it in motoring or in golf. There is at least one country club within easy reach of you. Also, somehow or other, most of you

seem able to wrangle a day-off, every now and then, from your offices. Many of you find time to run down to Florida for a month in winter.

The foregoing paragraphs are stuffed full of envy. I envy you from the core of my antique soul. In my own youth, the Saturday half-holiday was a dissolute innovation, frowned on by nine-tenths of the business world. Not one man in thirty knew, from experience, what it could mean. (Nor did we go to pieces from overwork, any oftener than do you.) There was not one country club where now there are a hundred; and there was none which did not involve a somewhat long train ride to and fro. Golf was in its American infancy. Few and oft-ridiculed were its devotees. Motoring was unborn. As for days off, they were pitifully few and hard to win. Florida was a name, to most of us; not a resort. A month's vacation in winter? No excuse short of tuberculosis availed to secure such a divine loafing-spell.

But all these blessings which are yours and which never were ours, are as nothing compared to a Something that has come into the world for you alone, since our time. I am speaking of a queer new Freedom, which three decades ago would have been branded as delirious license, if indeed it had existed then; a Freedom which is your own and never was ours.

Take clothes, for one illustration; clothes, both men's and women's. Men are spared the tombstone-slabbed stiff white shirt for everyday wear, with its horrible detachable stiff cuffs and its vexation of studs. The first shirts which unbuttoned, coatlike, instead of coming off and on, scratchily, over the owner's head, were just creeping shyly into favor in 1900. Nor need men wear heavy and hard derby hats for weekdays and shinily uncomfortable silk hats for Sundays and for evenings, as did we. Soft collars and soft shirts were unknown, for city use, when we were young.

Girls, too, have no idea of their own sartorial good luck; in going corsetless and in wearing skirts short enough and wide enough for free strides. Women, of my own youth, were frowned on for suggesting daringly that an ankle-length skirt be worn in rainy weather. A band of brave spirits banded together in the late 'Nineties, and formed a "Rainy Day Club", for the wearing of this brazen type of skirt. But nothing came of it, ex-

cept a little frowning and much derision. Yes, in clothes, your freedom is sublime. That is not irony, but honest approval.

You have also a frankness of language which, in my day, was heard oftener in barroom than in drawing room. Some of your physical poses and some of your wholly unashamed actions would have banned you forever, then. Where, for one instance, is the 1928 maiden whose cheeks would flame in dire humiliation for the sins of her skirts, if the latter were whisked so high by a vagrant gale that a whole inch of the leg, north of the kneecap, were visible? In her calm disregard for such a zephyric mishap, Kay 1928 is far sensibler and no less modest than was the painfully embarrassed Kathryn 1898.

II

And now that I have cited a smattering of the myriad points wherein you excel us, let me play for the attention of my fellow oldsters by telling you about some of the very few things we ancients had which you have not and which never can you hope to have.

First, and most carnal, comes eating. You present day lads and lasses don't know how to eat. At least, you don't know how to *dine*. There was a dignified and dilatory epicurean enjoyment about the nine-course to eleven-course dinner party of thirty-odd years ago that is forever dead. The feast was not gross, nor was it haphazard. It was planned as a symphony is planned. It worked up to its climax and then down to its “walnuts and wine” with unflawed artistry. It was something to look forward to and to remember for weeks. Hostess after hostess won immortality because of her inspired chef and because of her own genius for food-marshaling. It was a beautiful art, this dinner-giving.

You, of today, bolt a bobtailed and garbled evening meal, at smart pace, in order to get to the theatre or the opera in time to disturb those who were there at the rise of the curtain. Or, you plow through a little more leisurely and better-appointed dinner, with an eye to getting away from the dining-table and to the card table or to the dance floor. In other words, dinner is but a detail of your evening; not its chief end.

I wonder how many of you moderns could sketch a correct (not necessarily genius-directed) dinner of ten courses; working up to the needful crescendo and down. How many of you could tell, offhand, precisely which wine goes, gastronomically, with which course; the exact temperature for the burgundy; why pale sherry should be served instead of sweet, and at what particular stage of the dinner; the scientific reason for a mid-meal sherbet, and why sherbet always should be served between which two other courses; what forms of game should be blood-rare and what well done?

Your ideal dinner-party, now, as a rule, is preceded by enough crude cocktails to scourge tired brains into activity. The food courses are whittled down to five or six, at most; and are eaten dry or with incongruous and off-key accompaniment of too much low-grade liquor.

Eating and drinking are the more tangible, but otherwise the least important, of the few things we had and that you have not. There was an indefinable Manner—a something bred of fine reticences and of innate courtesy—that lent beauty to much of the social intercourse between men and women, and which in its olden form I can find no longer. I can no more put it into actual words than I can verbalize the dawn-wind. But many another man or woman of my day will recall it and will feel an odd little heart-constriction at the sweet memory. Perhaps you have something better in its stead. Assuredly you have not the quality itself. It was bred of Leisure—for ours was a leisurely age, though we called ourselves hustlers. It was born, too, of a somewhat shopworn remnant of ancient Chivalry. Some of us did not possess it. But it was the attribute of many folk of breeding.

I have said ours was a leisurely age. Perforce, it was so. Speed does not beget the instruments of speed; but is begotten of them. Speed did not devise the motor. But, as soon as the instrument was at hand, the joggingly pleasant Sunday afternoon drives or strolls through shade-flecked country roads gave frightened place to a mile-a-minute roaring progress over concrete highways and between tourist-desecrated wildwoods. With the invention of the various instruments for speed—real and figurative—the Speed Age dawned. It is a right marvelous era. I admit that. But among the things it has slain were a few which

could not be spared. One of them was a greater leisure for certain fine things of life; such as the best manners of the late Nineteenth Century.

Perhaps Chivalry is well dead. I cannot argue the precise value of its ghost that walked wistfully through the 'Nineties. But I refuse to grant that Leisure is well dead. We had it, in fair quantity; though by no means to the degree that was our fathers', in the stagecoach and sailing-ship age. You have practically none of it; in spite of your Saturday half-holidays and your long vacations. They are not periods of true Leisure, those absences from work. For the most part, they are but a breathless form of one or another kind of hustling activity.

You may know how to *loaf*; you don't know how to *loiter*. Loitering was wellnigh as fine an art as eating. It went out when Home ceased to be the center of life's chiefest importance and happiness.

We who are about to die away from the coveted spotlight into the murk of later years, salute you. I have tried to voice this salutation; if stammeringly; and to show you what you have that we had not and the little handful of wondrous things we had which you can never have. To you those relics of ours may seem to have been ridiculous, rather than precious, and to merit a grin, rather than a sigh, in their recounting. You may be right. But let your grin be kindly and fraught with much gentle tolerance. Let it be not derisive. This for your own sakes, not for ours. Because in another thirty years you will be trying, just as ineffectually, to act as Valedictorian to grinning 1958. If you desire tolerance for your own middle-age preachment, accord it to mine.

MAKING THINGS OVER

BY MITCHELL BRONK

THE city is being made over, and from a sky-scraping office window I am seeing it done. This city of Philadelphia has for a long time, in fact ever since "Mannahatta" passed her in the population steeplechase, been taunted in innumerable squibs with somnolence. Be that as it may, if she now slumbers, she snores, outrageously. Or she is waking up, and making a good deal of noise about it.

The Quakers should by all natural rights be Conservatives; but they are not; they never have been; they are worse than Conservative; or worse than Liberal, shall we say? They are Iconoclastic. George Fox and his compeers smashed many things that Seventeenth Century England revered. Nor are my fellow citizens of this Quaker City today at all regardful of the building that has gained a right to occupy its little piece of God's sunlit earth by the tenancy of many years. One sometimes even hears it intimated that we would not hesitate to sacrifice venerable and hallowed Independence Hall, if it were made worth our while to do so. Presumably that building is safe; because it is a paying proposition—from the tourist aspect! But little else is being spared. Up and down these tree-labeled thoroughfares by day and by night there is a great ado of tearing down and building up: destruction, construction, reconstruction; what you will. If Benjamin Franklin has any idea of ever paying his home town a Rip Van Winkle visit, he had better hurry up about it, or such visit will give him little satisfaction. But I set out to moralize.

We do this same thing in political and social ways; in letters; even in religion. Old forms of government, and *mores* that were built a hundred or ten hundred years ago, were all right, and are now sentimentally attractive, but we want something roomier and more convenient. The twenty-story building, Twentieth Century plumbing and heating, high speed elevators, for example,