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Odd that mankind's benefactors should be amusing people. In America at least this is often the case. Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it. During the Civil War people complained about Lincoln's funny stories. Perhaps he sensed that strict seriousness was far more dangerous than any joke. But critics said that he was frivolous and his own Secretary of War referred to him as an ape.

Among the debunkers and spoofers who formed the tastes and minds of my generation H. L. Mencken was the most prominent. My high school friends, readers of the *American Mercury*, were up on the Scopes trial as Mencken reported it. Mencken was very hard on William Jennings Bryan and the Bible Belt and Boobus Americanus. Clarence Darrow, who defended Scopes, represented science, modernity, and progress. To Darrow and Mencken, Bryan the Special Creationist was a doomed Farm Belt absurdity. In the language of evolutionary theory Bryan was a dead branch of the life-tree. His Free Silver monetary standard was a joke. So was his old-style congressional oratory. So were the huge Nebraska farm dinners he devoured. His meals, Mencken said, were the death of him. His views on Special Creation were subjected to extreme ridicule at the trial, and Bryan went the way of the pterodactyl – the clumsy version of an idea which later succeeded – the gliding reptiles becoming warm-blooded birds that flew and sang.

I filled up a scribbler with quotes from Mencken and later added notes from spoofers or self-spoofers like W. C. Fields or Charlie Chaplin, Mae West, Huey Long, and Senator Dirksen. There was even a page on Machiavelli's sense of humor. But I'm not about to

involve you in my speculations on wit and self-irony in democratic societies. Not to worry. I'm glad my old scribbler has disappeared. I have no wish to see it again. It surfaces briefly as a sort of extended footnote.

I have always had a weakness for footnotes. For me a clever or a wicked footnote has redeemed many a text. And I see that I am now using a long footnote to open a serious subject – shifting in a quick move to Paris, to a penthouse in the Hotel Crillon. Early June. Breakfast time. The host is my good friend Professor Ravelstein, Abe Ravelstein. My wife and I, also staying at the Crillon, have a room below, on the sixth floor. She is still asleep. The entire floor below ours (this is not absolutely relevant but somehow I can't avoid mentioning it) is occupied just now by Michael Jackson and his entourage. He performs nightly in some vast Parisian auditorium. Very soon his French fans will arrive and a crowd of faces will be turned upward, shouting in unison, *Mickell Jack-sown*. A police barrier holds the fans back. Inside, from the sixth floor, when you look down the marble stairwell you see Michael's bodyguards. One of them is doing the crossword puzzle in the *Paris Herald*.

'Terrific, isn't it, having this pop circus?' said Ravelstein. The Professor was very happy this morning. He had leaned on the management to put him into this coveted suite. To be in Paris – at the Crillon. To be here for once with plenty of money. No more of the funky rooms at the Dragon Volant, or whatever they called it, on the rue du Dragon; or in the Hotel de l'Académie on the rue des Saints Pères facing the medical college. Hotels don't come any grander or more luxurious than the Crillon, where the top American brass had been quartered during the peace negotiations after the First World War.

'Great, isn't it?' said Ravelstein, with one of his rapid gestures.

I confirmed that it was. We had the center of Paris right below us – the place de la Concorde with the obelisk, the Orangerie, the Chambre des Députés, the Seine with its pompous bridges, palaces, gardens. Of course these were great things to see, but they were greater today for being shown from the penthouse by Ravelstein, who only last year had been a hundred thousand dollars in debt. Maybe more. He used to joke with me about his 'sinking fund.'

He would say, 'I'm sinking with it – do you know what the term means in financial circles, Chick?'

'Sinking fund? I have a rough idea.'

Nobody in the days before he struck it rich had ever questioned Ravelstein's need for Armani suits or Vuitton luggage, for Cuban cigars, unobtainable in the US, for the Dunhill accessories, for solid-gold Mont Blanc pens or Baccarat or Lalique crystal to serve wine in – or to have it served. Ravelstein was one of those large men – large, not stout – whose hands shake when there are small chores to perform. The cause was not weakness but a tremendous eager energy that shook him when it was discharged.

Well, his friends, colleagues, pupils, and admirers no longer had to ante up in support of his luxurious habits. Thank God, he could now do without the elaborate trades among his academic pals in Jensen silver, or Spode or Quimper. All of that was a thing of the past. He was now very rich. He had gone public with his ideas. He had written a book – difficult but popular – a spirited, intelligent, warlike book, and it had sold and was still selling in both hemispheres and on both sides of the equator. The thing had been done quickly but in real earnest: no cheap concessions, no popularizing, no mental monkey business, no *apologetics*, no patrician airs. He had every right to look as he looked now, while the waiter set up our breakfast. His intellect had made a millionaire of him. It's no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think – to say it in your own words, without compromise.

This morning Ravelstein wore a blue-and-white kimono. It had been presented to him in Japan when he lectured there last year. He had been asked what would particularly please him and he said he would like a kimono. This one, fit for a shogun, must have been a special order. He was very tall. He was not particularly graceful. The great garment was loosely belted and more than half open. His legs were unusually long, not shapely. His underpants were not securely pulled up.

'The waiter tells me that Michael Jackson won't eat the Crillon's food,' he said. 'His cook flies everywhere with him in the private jet. Anyhow, the Crillon chef's nose is out of joint. His cookery was

good enough for Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, he says, and also a whole slew of shahs, kings, generals, and prime ministers. But this little glamour monkey refuses it. Isn't there something in the Bible about crippled kings living under the table of their conqueror – feeding on what falls to the floor?'

'I think there is. I recall that their thumbs had been cut off. But what's that got to do with the Crillon or Michael Jackson?'

Abe laughed and said he wasn't sure. It was only something that went through his head. Up here, the treble voices of the fans, Parisian adolescents – boys and girls shouting in unison – were added to the noises of buses, trucks, and taxis.

This historic show was our background. We were having a good time over our coffee. Ravelstein was in high spirits. Nevertheless, we kept our voices low because Nikki, Abe's companion, was still sleeping. It was Nikki's habit, back in the US, to watch kung fu films from his native Singapore until four o'clock in the morning. Here too he was up most of the night. The waiter had rolled shut the sliding doors so that Nikki's silken sleep should not be disturbed. I glanced through the window from time to time at his round arms and the long shifting layers of black hair reaching his glossy shoulders. In his early thirties, handsome Nikki was boyish still.

The waiter had entered with wild strawberries, *brioche*s, jam jars, and small pots of what I had been brought up to call hotel silver. Ravelstein scribbled his name wildly on the check while bringing a bun to his mouth. I was the neater eater. Ravelstein when he was feeding and speaking made you feel that something biological was going on, that he was stoking his system and nourishing his ideas.

This morning he was again urging me to go more public, to get away from the private life, to take an interest in 'public life, in politics,' to use his own words. He wanted me to try my hand at biography, and I had agreed to do it. At his request, I had written a short account of J. M. Keynes's description of the arguments over German reparations and the lifting of the Allied blockade in 1919. Ravelstein was pleased with what I had done but not quite satisfied as yet. He thought I had a rhetorical problem. I said that too much emphasis on the literal facts narrowed the wider interest of the enterprise.

I may as well come out with it: I had a high school English teacher named Morford ('Crazy Morford' we called him) who had us reading Macaulay's essay on Boswell's *Johnson*. Whether this was Morford's own idea or an item in the curriculum set by the Board of Education, I can't say. Macaulay's essay, commissioned in the nineteenth century by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was published in an American textbook edition by the Riverside Press. Reading it put me into a purple fever. Macaulay exhilarated me with *his* version of the *Life*, with the 'anfractuosity' of Johnson's mind. I have since read many sober criticisms of Macaulay's Victorian excesses. But I have never been cured – I never wanted to be cured of my weakness for Macaulay. Thanks to him I still see poor convulsive Johnson touching every lamppost on the street and eating spoiled meat and rancid puddings.

What line to take in writing a biography became the problem. There was Johnson's own example in the memoir of his friend Richard Savage. There was Plutarch, of course. When I mentioned Plutarch to a Greek scholar, he put him down as 'a mere litterateur.' But without Plutarch could *Antony and Cleopatra* have been written?

Next I considered Aubrey's *Brief Lives*.

But I shan't go through the whole list.

I had tried to describe Mr Morford to Ravelstein: Crazy Morford was never downright drunk in class, but he obviously was a lush – he had a drunkard's red face. He wore the same fire-sale suit every day. He didn't want to know you, he didn't want to be known by you. His blue abstract alcoholic look was never directed at anyone. Under his disorderly brow he fixed his stare only at the walls, through the windows, into the book he was reading. Macaulay's *Johnson* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* were the two works we studied with him that term. Johnson, despite his scrofula, his raggedness, his dropsy, had his friendships, wrote his books just as Morford met his classes, listened to us as we recited from memory the lines 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world.' His grim cropped head, his fiery face, his hand clasped behind his back. Altogether flat and unprofitable.

Ravelstein wasn't much interested in my description of him.

Why did I invite him to see the Morford I remembered? But Abe was right to put me onto the Keynes essay. Keynes, the powerful economist-statesman whom everybody knows for *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, sent letters and memoranda to his Bloomsbury friends reporting on his postwar experiences, in particular the reparations debates between the defeated Germans and the Allied leaders – Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and the Americans. Ravelstein, a man not free with his praises, said that this time I had written a first-class account of Keynes's notes to his friends. Ravelstein rated Hayek higher than Keynes as an economist. Keynes, he said, had exaggerated the harshness of the Allies and played into the hands of the German generals and eventually of the Nazis. The Peace of Versailles was far less punitive than it ought to have been. The war aims of Hitler in 1939 were no different from those of the Kaiser in 1914. But setting this serious error aside, Keynes had a great many personal attractions. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, he was polished socially and culturally by the Bloomsbury group. The Great Politics of his day had developed and perfected him. I suppose in his personal life he considered himself a Uranian – a British euphemism for homosexual. Ravelstein mentioned that Keynes had married a Russian ballerina. He also explained to me that Uranus had fathered Aphrodite but that she had had no mother. She was conceived by the sea foam. He would say such things not because he thought I was ignorant of them but because he judged that I needed at a given moment to have my thoughts directed toward them. So he reminded me that when Uranus was killed by the Titan Cronus, his seed spilled into the sea. And this somehow had to do with reparations, or with the fact that the still blockaded Germans just then were starving.

Ravelstein, who for reasons of his own put me on to Keynes's paper, best remembered the passages describing the German bankers' inability to meet the demands of France and England. The French were after the Kaiser's gold reserves; they said the gold must be handed over at once. The English said they would settle for hard currencies. One of the German negotiators was a Jew. Lloyd George, losing his temper, turned on this man; he did an astonishing kike number on him, crouching, hunching, limping, spitting, zizzing his

esses, sticking out his backside, doing a splayfoot parody of a Jew-walk. All this was described by Keynes to his Bloomsbury friends. Ravelstein didn't think well of the Bloomsbury intellectuals. He disliked their high camp, he disapproved of queer antics and of what he called 'faggot behavior.' He couldn't and didn't fault them for gossiping. He himself loved gossip too well to do that. But he said they were not thinkers but snobs, and their influence was pernicious. The spies later recruited in England by the GPU or the NKVD in the thirties were nurtured by Bloomsbury.

'But you did that well, Chick, about Lloyd George's nasty *youpin* parody.'

*Youpin* is the French for 'kike.'

'Thank you,' I said.

'I wouldn't dream of meddling,' said Ravelstein. 'But I think you'd agree that I'm trying to do you some good.'

Of course I understood his motive. He wanted me to write his biography and at the same time he wanted to rescue me from my pernicious habits. He thought I was stuck in privacy and should be restored to community. 'Too many years of inwardness!' he used to say. I badly needed to be in touch with politics – not local or machine politics, nor even national politics, but politics as Aristotle or Plato understood the term, rooted in our nature. You can't turn your back on your nature. I admitted to Ravelstein that reading those Keynes documents and writing the piece had been something like a holiday. Rejoining humankind, taking a humanity bath. There are times when I need to ride in the subway at rush hour or sit in a crowded movie house – that's what I mean by a humanity bath. As cattle must have salt to lick, I sometimes crave physical contact.

'I have some unclassified notions about Keynes and the World Bank, his Bretton Woods agreement, and also his attack on the Treaty of Versailles. I know just enough about Keynes to fit his name into a crossword puzzle,' I said. 'I'm glad you brought his private memoranda to my attention. His Bloomsbury friends must have been dying to have his impressions of the Peace Conference. Thanks to him they had world-historical-ringside seats. And I suppose Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf absolutely had to have the inside dope.'



They represented the higher interests of British society. They had a duty to know – an artist's duty.'

'And what about the Jewish side of the thing?' said Ravelstein.

'Keynes didn't like it much. You may remember that the only friendship he made at the Peace Conference was with a Jewish member of the German delegation.'

'No, they wouldn't really have cared for a man as common as Lloyd George, those Bloomsburies.'

But Ravelstein knew the value of a set. He had a set of his own. Its members were students he had trained in political philosophy and longtime friends. Most of them were trained as Ravelstein himself had been trained, under Professor Davarr, and used his esoteric vocabulary. Some of Ravelstein's older pupils now held positions of importance on national newspapers. Quite a number served in the State Department. Some lectured in the War College or worked on the staff of the National Security Adviser. One was a protégé of Paul Nitze. Another, a maverick, published a column in the *Washington Times*. Some were influential, all were well informed; they were a close group, a community. From them Ravelstein had frequent reports, and when he was at home he spent hours on the telephone with his disciples. After a fashion, he kept their secrets. At least he didn't quote them by name. Even in the Crillon penthouse today the mobile telephone was held between his bare knees. The Japanese kimono fell away from legs paler than milk. He had the calves of a sedentary man – the shinbone long and the calf muscle abrupt, without roundness. Some years back, after his heart attack, the doctors told him he must exercise, so he bought an expensive sweat suit and elegant gym shoes. He shuffled around the track for several days and then gave it up. Fitness was not his cup of tea. He treated his body like a vehicle – a motorbike that he raced at top speed along the rim of the Grand Canyon.

'I'm not too surprised at Lloyd George,' Ravelstein said. 'He was a contentious little fucker. He visited Hitler in the thirties and came away with a high opinion of him. Hitler was a dream of political leaders. Whatever he wanted done was done, and quickly. No muss, no fuss. Very different from parliamentary government.' It was

enjoyable to hear Ravelstein on what he called Great Politics. He speculated often on Roosevelt and Churchill. He had a great respect for de Gaulle. From time to time he got carried away. Today, for instance, he spoke of Lloyd George's 'pungency.'

'Pungency is good,' I said.

'In the matter of language the Brits had it all over us. Especially when their strength began to bleed away and language became one of their important resources.'

'Like Hamlet's whore who must unpack her heart with words.'

Ravelstein, with his bald powerful head, was at ease with large statements, big issues, and famous men, with decades, eras, centuries. He was, however, just as familiar with entertainers like Mel Brooks as with the classics and could go from Thucydides' huge tragedy to Moses as played by Brooks. 'He comes down from Mount Sinai with the commandments. God had handed down twenty but ten fall from Mel Brooks's arms when he sees the children of Israel rioting around the Golden Calf.' Ravelstein loved these Catskill entertainments; he had a natural gift for them.

He was very pleased with my Keynes sketch. He remembered that Churchill had called Keynes a man of clairvoyant intelligence – Abe loved Churchill. As an economist, Milton Friedman had it over most others, but Friedman was a free-market fanatic and had no use for culture, whereas Keynes had a cultivated intelligence. He was, however, wrong about the Versailles Treaty and deficient in politics, a subject of which Ravelstein had a very special understanding.

Abe's 'people' in Washington kept his telephone line so busy that I said he must be masterminding a shadow government. He accepted this, smiling as though the oddity were not his but mine. He said, 'All these students I've trained in the last thirty years still turn to me, and in a way the telephone makes possible an ongoing seminar in which the policy questions they deal with in day-to-day Washington are aligned with the Plato they studied two or three decades ago, or Locke, or Rousseau, or even Nietzsche.'

It was very pleasant to win Ravelstein's approval, and his students kept coming back to him – men now in their forties, some of whom had figured significantly in running the Gulf War, spoke to him by

the hour. 'These special relationships are important to me – top priority.' It was as natural that Ravelstein should need to know what went on in Downing Street or the Kremlin as it had been for Virginia Woolf to read Keynes's private report on German reparations. Possibly Ravelstein's views or opinions sometimes worked their way into policy decisions, but that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was that he should remain in charge somehow of the ongoing political education of his old boys. In Paris too he had a following. People who had taken his courses at the *École des Hautes Études*, just back from a mission to Moscow, also rang him up.

There were sexual friendships and intimate confidences as well. Beside the wide black leather sofa back home where he took the calls was an electronic panel of which he made expert use. I couldn't have operated it. I had no high-tech skills. But Ravelstein, though his hands were unsteady, controlled his instruments like a Prospero.

In any case he didn't have to worry now about the telephone bills.

But we are still atop the Hotel Crillon.

'You have good instincts, Chick,' he said. 'Too bad you didn't have more nihilism in your makeup. You should have been more like Céline with his nihilistic comedy, or farce. The scorned woman saying to her boyfriend, Robinson, "Why can't you say 'I love you'?" What's so special about *you*? You get a hard-on like anybody else. *Quoi! Tu ne bandes pas?*" A hard-on to her is the same as love. But Robinson the nihilist is high-principled about one thing only, not to lie about the very, very few things that really matter. He'll try any kind of obscenity but he draws the line at last, and this tramp woman, deeply insulted, shoots him dead because he won't say "I love you."'

'Does Céline mean that this makes him authentic?'

'It means that writers are supposed to make you laugh and cry. That's what mankind is looking for. The situation of this Robinson is a replay of the drama of the Middle Ages in which the most vicious, abandoned criminals turn again to the Blessed Virgin. But there's no disagreement here. I want you to do me as you did Keynes, but on a bigger scale. And also you were too kind to him. I don't want that. Be as hard on me as you like. You aren't the darling doll

you seem to be, and by describing me maybe you'll emancipate yourself.'

'From what, exactly?'

'Whatever it is that controls you – some sword of Damocles hanging over you.'

'No,' I said. 'It's the sword of Dimwitoclese.'

The conversation, if it had taken place in a restaurant, would have made the other diners think that we were telling sexy jokes, having a rollicking time. 'Dimwitoclese' was Ravelstein's kind of gag, and he laughed like Picasso's wounded horse in *Guernica*, rearing back.

Ravelstein's legacy to me was a subject – he thought he was giving me a subject, perhaps the best one I ever had, perhaps the only really important one. But what such a legacy signified was that he would die before me. If I were to predecease him he would certainly not write a memoir of me. Anything beyond a single page to be read at a memorial service would have been unthinkable. Yet we were close friends, none closer. What we were laughing about was death, and of course death does sharpen the comic sense. But the fact that we laughed together didn't mean that we were laughing for the same reasons. That Ravelstein's most serious ideas, put into his book, should have made him a millionaire certainly was funny. It took the genius of capitalism to make a valuable commodity out of thoughts, opinions, *teachings*. Bear in mind that Ravelstein was a teacher. He was not one of those conservatives who idolize the free market. He had views of his own on political and moral matters. But I am not interested in presenting his ideas. More than anything else, just now, I want to avoid them. I want to be brief, here. He was an educator. Put together in a book his ideas made him absurdly rich. He was spending the dollars almost as fast as they came in. Just now he was considering a new \$5 million book contract. He could also command big fees on the lecture circuit. And he was a learned man after all. Nobody disputed that. You have to be learned to capture modernity in its full complexity and to assess its human cost. On social occasions he might be freaky, but on the platform you could see how well grounded his arguments were. It became only too

clear what he was talking about. The public saw a higher education as a right. The White House affirmed it. Students were like 'the mackerel-crowded seas.' Thirty thousand dollars was the average annual college tuition. But what were students learning? The universities were permissive, lax. The Puritanism of an earlier time was gone. Relativism held that what was right in San Domingo was wrong in Pago Pago and that moral standards were therefore anything but absolute.

Now Ravelstein was no enemy of pleasure or opposed to love. On the contrary he saw love as possibly the highest blessing of mankind. A human soul devoid of longing was a soul deformed, deprived of its highest good, sick unto death. We were offered a biological model that dismissed the soul and stressed the importance of orgasmic relief from tension (biostatics and biodynamics). I don't intend to explain here the erotic teachings of Aristophanes and Socrates or of the Bible. For that you must go to Ravelstein himself. For him Jerusalem and Athens were the twin sources of civilization. Jerusalem and Athens are not my dish. I wish you well with them. But I was too old to become Ravelstein's disciple. All I need to say now is that he was taken very seriously even in the White House and on Downing Street. He was Mrs Thatcher's weekend guest at Chequers. Nor did the President neglect him. Reagan invited him to dinner, and Ravelstein spent a fortune on formal attire, cummerbund, diamond studs, patent leather shoes. A columnist on the *Daily News* said that to Ravelstein money was something you threw from the rear platform of speeding trains. Ravelstein with shouts of laughter showed me the clipping. Through it all he was deeply amused. And of course I didn't have the same reasons for amusement. The vast hydraulic forces of the country had not picked me up, as they had him.

Although I was Ravelstein's senior by a good many years, we were close friends. There were sophomoric elements in my character as there were in his, and these leveled the ground and evened things up. A man who knew me well said that I was more innocent than any adult had the right to be. As if I had chosen to be naïve. Besides, the fact is that even extremely naïve people know their own interests.