

## *New Haven, 1920*

THORNTON WILDER

IT WAS widely believed, in my time, that Yale College was attended solely by clear-eyed, clean cut, high-minded, upright, downright, forthright Christian young men; and—give a little, take a little—this was true. Our contemporaries at Harvard College held that we were none too bright, that we were obsessed by athletic victories, and that we were notably deficient in polish. My father and certain friends of his who had graduated at New Haven about thirty years before us somehow managed to believe that Yale was simultaneously the finest university in the world, a hotbed of worldliness, and a den of iniquity. (He sent my brother and myself first to Oberlin College for two years in order to armor us against the temptations that beset Yale men.) There's an element of truth in legend. We began the day with obligatory prayer and we ended it with tankards of substandard prohibition beer in our hands. Clangorous bells awoke us at seven; at eight we attended chapel where undergraduate proctors kept a strict account of the empty seats. We hurried about all day from "The French Revolution" (Wilbur Cortez Abbott) to Biology I (dissecting frogs for Professor Baitzell), from Psychology (Angier) or "The History of Philosophy" (Professor Bakewell, health permitting, or the enthralling Charlie Bennett) to "Elizabethan Literature" (Tucker Brooke), "The Age of Johnson" (C. B. Tinker) and "Tennyson and Browning" (William Lyon Phelps). We had good teachers. We strove variously to edit publications, to captain teams, to get elected to fraternities and societies, to sing in the Glee Club or the Whiffenpoofs, to act in the Dramat under Monty Woolley, to be popular, to be famous, to be "a big man at Yale." Girls, girls descended on New Haven by the hundreds for the proms, hops, and tea-dances. Letters of an assumed composure were written and the answers to them feverishly awaited. As far as I knew there were no nervous breakdowns among us—such as are so frequently reported today in the larger universities—and very few outsiders. I came very near to being an outsider—and a quite cheerful contented one. I have never had any competitive drive or any closely focused ambition. I

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had no faint desire to join a fraternity but somehow my brother and Harry Luce (from Shantung, China) and Robert Maynard Hutchins (of Oberlin, Ohio, my future boss at the University of Chicago) “shoe-horned” me into Alpha Delta Phi. My grades were perilously low, but Dean Jones was an old friend of my father and I graduated. I derived as much stimulation from the courses I flunked as from those I passed. I rejoiced in Chemistry I under Professor Holmes at Oberlin; I’ve drawn on Professor Lull’s “Geology I” all my life. I attended few athletic contests, partly because I had much better things to do with my strictly limited pocket-money.

At this time the Wilders were poor, really poor. My father had received eight thousand dollars a year during his consular service in China. But his health broke down (he who had never been ill a day in his life): he spent a year traveling from hospital to hospital that specialized in tropical diseases. From the little he could spare he had made some unwise investments. He returned to New Haven to represent “Yali”—Yale’s college and hospital in Changsha, China. I was now practically a missionary’s son.

How could my father on that missionary’s salary hope to send his two sons to Yale,—having in addition three daughters: clothes, dentist’s bills, carfare, “extras” . . . ?

To the impassioned will nothing is impossible.

My father was a man of religious conviction. Like most missionary’s sons I had lost my “religion” some time before. It was gone before I missed it, like a coat left in some railway station. Even in my Oberlin days I had formulated for myself the phrase: *religion is the emanation from an extinct star.*

My father was a man of religious conviction. Religion operates in different ways in different persons. It hardens some natures to pride and bigotry; it softens others to sentimentality and a refusal to confront life’s sterner demands. Some it inexorably irradiates; some it brutalizes. Religion may be as Professor Freud said, civilization’s greatest illusion. If that is so, it may be thought of as resembling a sun long extinct whose rays still continue to warm, animate, and inspirit the minds of men. It instilled fear and awe in the cave-dwellers; it offered the image of an overwatching Eye; it became identified with all those dawning ideas of order and morality, of the “good” and

the “bad,” of rewards and penalties. For thousands of years it has played a large part in the public and private life of mankind. Truth or illusion, it is ingrained in the human mind.

There are two characteristics of men and women of religious conviction that have often been remarked. The first is their way of viewing the facts of the daily life—our humble daily life—as freighted with the greatest importance, particularly in relation to the future. Everything is under that overwatching Eye; everything is on a Grand Scale. Such men and women are seldom able to transmit to their children the conviction that illuminates them, but in that charged cell, which is family life—in that enclosed space of finely tuned acoustics—they transmit the concept of scale. Their children learn to think big, to make large demands on life, on themselves, and on others. This “scale” has not necessarily any spiritual qualifications; it’s enough that it’s big, big. Hence the phrase “*Beware of sharks and missionaries’ children.*” The second characteristic is their tendency to invest one or more peculiarly secular interests with a religious “imperative”; so do their children, for this tendency is transmittable in family life. It is transmittable in civilizations,—even in those which have long lost any religious conviction,—so compelling was the long authority of religion on the earth. (Political systems: we are often told that the Russians embrace communism as a religion; patriotism: Americans can be heard to declare that they live in “God’s country”; local affiliations: our college song at Yale ended with the stirring commitment—words and music indicated an ascending order of loyalties—“For God, for country, and for Yale.”)

My father *religionized* (if I may be permitted the term) education,—our education. He not only dreamed big, he demanded complicated refinements of his dream; he made it as hard for himself as possible. We were to attend schools run for the rich and schools run for the poor. This was to ensure that we would never feel awkward among the privileged or even impressed by them, nor would we lose a sense of kinship with hard-working people. Moreover, each of us was to pass a part of our early years in foreign countries, preferably to attend schools abroad for a time. Above all, the teaching was to be first class, tending to develop (it was a favorite phrase of his) “noble Christian men and women.” By God, it would be

impossible to dream more extravagantly than that, on a small salary.

Circumstances favored him; luck played a part; above all old friends (“treasure more precious than gold,” as the poet says) were eager to assist him. Amos and I went to the Thacher School in Southern California (we were “scholarship” boys; Mr. Thacher was a classmate of our father; every student had to have a horse of his own; students “dressed” for dinner two nights a week). Isabel went to Miss Master’s School in Dobbs Ferry, New York (a “scholarship” girl among heiresses; my mother was the daughter of the Scotch Presbyterian minister there and the school’s pastor). We all went to a variety of public schools; my sisters went to Northfield School, founded by Dwight L. Moody, the evangelist. My brother and I worked farms, hoeing and haying and milking, from California to Vermont, waited on tables in hotels (educative, every moment of it). Amos and I went to Oberlin College, teeming with missionaries’ children; there I listened to three teachers better than any—save two—that I was to hear in Yale or Princeton’s Graduate School. Father’s greatest success was in getting us out of the country. By twos or threes we attended German schools in Hongkong and Shanghai (*Die Kaiser Wilhelm Schule sogar*) and the Chefoo Schools. Our mother returned to America from China with Isabel and Janet by several stages: Isabel went to schools in Florence, Vevey, and Oxford. Charlotte crossed the sea to assist our Aunt Charlotte in the running of a girls’ hotel in Milan. Amos after serving in the artillery during the First World War stayed on to study at the universities of Montauban, Louvain, and Oxford. Myself—as will presently be shown—went to the American Academy in Rome for a year. Father lived long enough to see all his five children *teaching* in some school or other.

Anyway, Amos and I got to Yale. I have long suspected—but not at the time—that we were “scholarship” students, subsidized from funds accumulated in my father’s Senior society for members of his descendants.

The herd instinct plays a large part in men’s minds; it was largely left out of mine. The fraternities and Senior societies were attended on one night of the week. A dinner was served, for there was no shortage of servants in those days. After dinner

the brothers adjourned to the windowless "chapter rooms" where initiations and rituals and solemnizing hocus-pocus took place. There was a degree of prestige in belonging to them; there was an equal satisfaction in keeping others out or in feeling superior to those who may not have wanted to get in. (There is a considerable element of fear in the herd instinct.)

In the fraternities and in the drinking clubs at the end of the day we were convivial,—that is, everyone strove to be witty. But here also the herd instinct imposed its laws and limitations. Sharp malice was frowned upon; any spirit of revolt was bad form: "Yale was all right." Ten years later Robert Maynard Hutchins (Class of 1921), Dean of the Yale Law School, was to accept the call to the presidency of the University of Chicago and there to institute reforms that have influenced the structure and procedures of higher education in America ever since. He derived his insights from living under the conditions I have described; all he had to do was to turn them upside down. He said that Yale College combined the less attractive aspects of a Kindergarten and of Sing Sing; I think it was he who said that it was dedicated to "the flattery of arrested adolescence." We dimly felt this: obligatory chapel, required classroom attendance, weekly examinations, week-end restrictions; we rather liked it. It mitigated some responsibility on our part. Whatever unrest we expressed was limited to persiflage. But the most sensitive effect of herd authority was evident in the area of sex.

In this realm we were shielded to an extent unbelievable today. In "Chaucer" we were told that certain of the *Tales* were not required reading; "questions on them will not be asked in the weekly or term-end examinations." In "Shakespeare and Marlowe" many salient passages were passed over without clarification; we were given to understand that they were interpolations by tasteless hacks. But it was not necessary for the college to be so nervous about our purity. The herd instinct took care of that also. A high moral tone was prescribed by the students themselves. In the center of the campus stood a solid edifice called Dwight Hall. It was a center of elevating "discussion groups," prayer meetings, and social service programs. The members of the *most* sought after (that is, most exclusive) Senior society were all drawn from the leaders of Dwight Hall. They were ponderous, humorless, unctuous—but they were

the "big men," the biggest in college. They pretty well ran Yale, and in their free time they coached basketball teams in the city slums, they appointed one of their number to rebuke—in high brotherly fashion—any student from a good background who had fallen short of the behavior expected of a "man at New Haven." They leaned down from Olympus to say a friendly word to the outsiders. Dwight Hall ruled that there was a considerable area of a young man's life which was to be discussed seldom and then only in terms of evasive solemnity. Young men tend to be either rebels or very conformist. To us—living in a forcibly delayed maturity—sex is fascinating, of course, but also discomfiting and a little frightening. But that is what it had been to most of the citizens in the United States for over a century.

Striking evidence of this unhappy condition was afforded by our behavior in the motion-picture theaters. As all who lived in college towns in those days will remember a visit to the evening showings of the "flickers" was a nightmare. It was the custom of the undergraduates to greet any tender passage with whistles, howls, and stampings; a kiss evoked ear-splitting pandemonium. Two years later when I was teaching near Princeton University and was able occasionally to go to the theater on Nassau Street, the din was even more violent and continuous since the audience in that village consisted almost entirely of students. The students attended the pictures primarily to make the noise,—that is to say, to find a vent for their confusion and humiliation and anguish. They even started their noise early in the film—to the accompaniment of street scenes, desert vistas, ships at sea—because they knew that their torment lay ahead. The sharp point of those demonstrations was that they believed that they were giving evidence of their superiority to childish representations of romance, they were offering testimony of what they called their "sophistication."

That is what the Puritan dispensation had bequeathed to us.