

A TOUCH OF CLASS

We all like a “touch of class” -- including those who won’t admit it. It’s not always the same class, of course. Some may get their “touch of class” by belonging to “Hell’s Angels,” -- and some by belonging to the Duke “Class of 1985.” Some may get it from “name brands” -- everything from a Tiffany” diamond to “Calvin Klein” jeans. And some from the fact that they only buy bargains and save at “K-Mart.” I don’t know where you get your “touch of class” -- dressing “preppy?” -- “Tastefully tacky?” -- or you are “old school tie” and a distant cousin of the aristocratic “family of VanRenudears” -- as a matter of fact, the British have a system of making a person “Lord only for his lifetime -- “Lord for life,” -- “Lord for a day,” so to say. That one’s descendents will not be inflicted with a title they may neither want nor quite likely deserve. And there is, of course, a legal way in Great Britain of tendering one’s resignation as a peer, in order to serve more democratically in the House of Commons, as plain Mr. Somebody-on-his own and not Mr. Somebody-for-his-inheritance. After all, the power now is with the common man -- so one might as well play down one’s ancestry and join the century. It’s the day of the Sepios -- not the _____ ... and has been for some time, I understand. Let’s see ... when was the French Revolution?

And yet, and yet -- nobility is not dead. Not even in Durham. After all one probably never could inherit it anyway -- except by contagion (a “touch of class” really comes by contagion): one catches it, so to say, from one’s forebears. Examples: because the mean and vulgar, the narrow-minded and _____ were offensive to you father and your mother -- they become, by a goodly contagion, offensive to you. Because your parents had a sense of what was good, what was proper and becoming, because they had a right sense of bearing and _____ -- by contagion -- so do you. Because they took joy in the great “out-of-doors” -- in sports -- or was it arts and sciences? Because their hearts were warm toward family and cordial toward friends, because they knew how to be good parents, good companions, courteous, calm of temper, able to forgive an injury, because they could not hate, except what was false and cheap, because they were not pleased with idleness or too much rushing, because your father was a plain and honorable man, because your mother was a true aristocrat and because, in a word, they had a touch of class -- you caught it from them by contagion. Or, may be your father was a bumpkin and your father’s father was a bumpkin. Maybe you came from a long line of bumpkins -- so

may be you had to wait and catch your sense of nobility from a teacher, a friend. May you married into it – or as a Broadway musical of the 60's put it, "Maybe, honey, you just plumb missed it altogether." I do not know.

All I know is, it is not altogether a manner of money. It isn't that one despises money, goodness knows. It's still a necessary as it ever was for the necessities – maybe more so. And the luxuries are getting more necessary every day. As Sir William said (in D.H. Lawrence, Aaron's Rod, Ch. 12): "I have every belief in Providence, plus a [substantial] banking account. Providence and no banking account I have observed to be almost invariable fatal." "I ... believe in a little hard cash," says Sir William, "in my own ability to earn a little hard cash."

But money, though it makes quite a difference, doesn't make an aristocrat. In Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (Act 1) – Biff says: "Are you content, Hap? You're a success, aren't you? Are you content?" And old Happy replies: "Hell, no!" "Why?" says Biff, "you're making money aren't you?"

And it's true, he is. But he can't somehow enjoy it. He's got this expensive car, and this expensive place, and these expensive friends, and plenty of(you know) whatever you want. And still and all ... he feels ... well... cheap and common and –oh, he doesn't know – it's as though he longs for "a touch of class," some nobility, something fine that has nothing to do with fine possessions, "with toys and furnishings, games, stone jewelry," that has nothing to do with listening to _____ music, looking at fake art, nothing to do with expensive something, expensive touching, expensive tasting, nothing to do with all the things that have kept him from asking what it was all about in the first place, that have staved off introspection for a lifetime, until he's safely laid out in that expensive casket at his expensive funeral that his expensive insurance will some day take care of. Happy, good old Hap, doesn't know why, but the older he gets, the more he feels his soul (quaint old word, isn't it) or the more he feels his soul, feels he has one after all, and feels it needs a bath.

So I suppose real class has something to do with the soul. It is not altogether a matter of money – obviously. In the second place, it is not altogether a matter of manners either. Did you grow up in the deep South? Or did you have a grandmother there? Do you remember your grandmother, a bit miffed perhaps at the bottom rail once again scrambling to the top the way bottom rails are wont to, saying, "Humph – a goose-girl ermined is a goose-girl still? And she

was probably wrong, but she was probably right, too – put ermine on a goose-girl and what have you got? Mostly, just what you had. The same goosey old girl all gussied up in ermine.

(I probably shouldn't tell you this, but you may not catch on anyway unless you're about 40 – but once in South Georgia, was it? I arrive at the hospital just in time to keep a family from giving their new-born daughter a name they thought so musical, so euphonious, so like a movie star, so in keeping with their improved station in life, so right somehow, you know ... this type of family that gives exotic names to the children. Do you know what they were going to call that baby girl because they like the sound of it? They were going to call her – “Cuspidor” – It took all the tact I had to get that child re-named Isabel after her grandmother.)

Well, back to the point – cultivated good manners, like cultivated good money – do, indeed, soften us to the harsh realities of life, but a bit more is needed. You don't make a man noble by giving him money and manners. It helps, but not enough. As we said a moment ago, it isn't even a matter of your bloodlines. No –it isn't your bloodlines. For aristocracy has a way of showing up in very strange places – I remember an Arab – face burned black by the sun, no education – none of the things we count on – yet obviously a noble man: in bearing, in speech, in his sense of self-possession, in warmth of heart, in kindness. It's the way you soul lines up – with other noble souls.

Maybe this is a small part of what St. Paul mean when he said, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.” Everything in the “flesh and blood” line is, indeed, as he said, too “corruptible” for that (I Cor. 15)

When he called Christians – “Heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ,” he did not mean a moneyed and mannered class. What he meant was – Yeah, what did he mean? He meant that for those who have confronted the living Christ – made a life commitment to him – there takes place a noble contagion – a changing of the heart – a touch of new class – a gentle, giving concern for all men and women in spite of _____ prejudice – a courage to do the right gladly, though all hell prevail – a good cheer even in worst pain. So that life becomes lyrical and compassionate – with a purity and goodness not of the Pharisees – but of the poets and prophets – unaffected, unexplained. How do you explain a noble heart? Except to say it has caught a bit of God's glory?