

You never had a chance to meet your paternal great-grandparents, I'm sorry to say. Your father did, but he was only one year old at the time; I'm sure he doesn't remember! And memories of your bewhiskered grandpa who writes this will similarly fade in the coming decades.

But the key to the Library of Time is still yours.

Five-hundred well-chosen volumes. By Victorian standards, it's not a collection about which any duke, earl, viscount, or baron would brag.

In today's digital world? Perhaps.

I'm not quite sure what friends think when they visit us. Usually, we hear, "Where did you get those beautiful floor-to-ceiling bookcases? They fill the wall space nicely!"

Sigh.

What do I mean by "well-chosen," you ask?

Well, pretty much whatever looked interesting at the time of choice.

But Darwin's theory of natural selection applies to books as well as crustaceans. Eventually, when shelf space grows tight, or sometimes after a first read, or even a *boring!* first chapter, the weak are weeded out and donated to the public library, where professionals can decide their ultimate fate.

Yes, I know you may already be at the tipping point with *this* journal. But hear me well: any good collection of books can punch your golden ticket for a journey through time.

Occasionally, curious guests peruse the titles, some of which once belonged to your great-grandparents. And every once in a while, a visitor will select one, pull up the cozy, pillowed rocking chair which once belonged to your great-grandmother, and settle down to business.

Our library holds, among other works, three books authored by yours truly, a complete set of Nevil Shute's novels, Winston Churchill's exhaustive history of the Second World War, Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, all the Jeeves stories and *The Golf Omnibus* by P.G. Wodehouse.

O. Henry's short story anthology rests next to Joseph Mitchell's *Up in the Old Hotel* and above the collected works of Nelson DeMille, William Shakespeare, Isaac Asimov, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Lawrence Sanders, Sir Arthur C. Clarke, Michael Chabon, and Tom Clancy.

Do we have the Austen and Bronte masterpieces? Of course! Plus two shelves of tracts on religion and philosophy by all the greats, including St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Ronald Rolheiser, St. Francis DeSales, C.S. Lewis, Caryl Chessman, and Bill Watterson's *The Essential Calvin & Hobbes*.

A separate cabinet houses choral works by Pergolesi, guitar transcriptions by Segovia, Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag*, piano scores by Mozart, Bach, Brahms, Chopin, Beethoven, and Schubert, and the *Norton Anthology of Western Music*.

Stacked on the floor: picture books of famous baseball stadiums and the world's greatest golf courses, children's books, including *The British Railway Series Books* with Thomas the Tank Engine, and the Mary Stewart *Arthur* series, fit for any age.

Does this eclectic assortment make for a somewhat meandering journey through time? Sure. Doesn't that sound *wonderful*?

My favorite title, you ask?

Van Loon's Lives, by Hendrik Willem Van Loon.

Never heard of it?

You'd like his work; many of his books were aimed at young adults and children, and they often featured his own whimsical illustrations. Our county library carries an unabridged audio version (sans pictures, naturally) of one of his titles: *The Story of Mankind*, narrated by Sneha Mathan. It's worth checking out (with a library card, of course!)

Van Loon's writing style was friendly, informal, and entertaining, devoid of pretentious educational jargon. One stick-in-the-mud critic complained, saying that Van Loon wrote history "as if he enjoyed it."

But Hendrik was a real historian, and he earned his creds in both the classroom and the field. He studied at Harvard and Cornell, received his PhD from the University of Munich, then served as a correspondent for the Associated Press during the Russian Revolution and World War I before returning to the U.S. to lecture at Cornell and Antioch College.

Of his fifty-three books, *Lives* is unique. When I was your age, I found it on my parent's bookshelves, and I've read it two or three times since. Either I learn something new, or I fondly remember something I'd forgotten.

Whatever *your* literary choices may be, just remember: they are the Past, the thoughts of the author at the time they put pen to paper. Even science fiction novels which envision the Future, such as the 1865 Jules Verne classic *From the Earth to the Moon*, are still the Past. They are definitely not the Present.

Except...

What if Past and Present could meet?

What would Thomas Jefferson say if given the chance to opine about Donald Trump on CNN tomorrow morning?

Wouldn't *that* boost ratings!

"Another book? You just finished your last one," Granne said.

"But it's such a great idea!" I replied. "Isn't it?"

No response.

"*Van Loon's Lives* was such a quirky *tour de force*," I said. "He magically summoned philosophers and artists, the famous and infamous from a thousand years of human history, to journey through time to the present day for dinner and conversation. He wrote their names on a slip of paper and placed it at his town hall."

"Did anyone RSVP?"

"Erasmus. George Washington. Cervantes, Shakespeare and Moliere. Descartes and Emerson. Robespierre and Torquemada. St. Francis of Assisi, Hans Christian Andersen, and Mozart. Beethoven and Napoleon. Dante and Da Vinci. Plato and Confucius. Emily Dickinson and Chopin."

"And?"

"Think of all the notables who've lived since then!"

She frowned. "So what's your plan?"

"Perhaps it's time to update the guest list."

How to go about it? The question bothered me. Creating interesting dialogue out of thin air is difficult, but many top-selling authors prosper while doing so.

I wanted more. I wanted the real thing.

"*Venti caramel latte*, please."

The drive-thru line at our neighborhood Starbucks stretched around the block, but I was the only customer inside. It was barely seven a.m.

“Anything else? A donut?” the cashier asked me.

“Huh? Oh. No, thanks.”

“Name for your order?” she asked, cup and marker in hand.

But I was already wool-gathering
the conversation with my wife
the day before, and now
busily typing notes
on my phone
about

“Hendrik.”

“That’s a new one.” She smiled. “How do you spell that?”

I settled into a cozy corner chair and powered up my laptop while they made my coffee.

Entered my screen password and
selected the Wi-Fi network and
opened Microsoft Word and
the barista announced
“Hendrik!”

In one ear and out the other.

A few minutes later, I realized my coffee was AWOL. I set my computer aside and got up to fetch it.

“Please, sit. Be comfortable!”

The enjoiner came from a lumpy-looking man who stood before me. He held a *venti caramel latte* in one hand, while the other was outstretched.

I was on caffeine-deprived auto-pilot, so I politely shook his hand.

“Thank you for this delicious beverage, Christopher,” he said as he took a healthy sip. “I never tasted anything quite like it back in Veere. The Dutch were instrumental in the spread of coffee around the world in the 1600s, exporting beans from the colony islands of Indonesia. But we usually drank it black, or as espresso.”

“Sorry—have we met before?”

“My apologies. Hendrik Willem Van Loon, at your service.”

What? “I don’t understand. How...?”

“Why, you invited me, of course. You asked the young woman over there to put my name on this cup. And so, here I am.”

I blinked several times to clear my eyes. He was about sixty years old. Medium height. Rumpled Harris-tweed suit. Oval glasses. Dark hair, with a widow’s peak. The frame of a college professor who spent many more days at his desk or in a comfortable chair at the faculty club than in the gym, but he wore it well enough. Jolly, clean-shaven jowls and a pleasant smile.

“Excuse me; I *really* need some coffee,” I said.

When I returned a minute later with some life-giving elixir, he was ensconced in the seat next to mine.

“So, Professor—uh, sorry—Sir Hendrik! May I ask...”

He stopped me.

“Please call me Hendrik. All my students did. I never stood on formalities. The Dutch are a friendly people; when Queen Wilhelmina knighted me in 1942, we played cards together afterwards and shared a riotous meal of Guelders

sausages and Drie Hoefijzers beer. And, of course, Americans, among whom I now proudly and officially count myself, are famously casual. Even President Roosevelt called me Hendrik.”

“Okay, ‘Hendrik’ it is. Um, if you don’t mind my asking: how did you come to be here? No offense, but didn’t you shuffle off the old mortal coil in 1944?”

“Well, it really is very simple. But sometimes these things are best left unexplained and simply taken on faith.”

“I must still be at home, asleep in bed, dreaming,” I muttered.

“Why would you think so? You summoned me; I am here. You read my book; this is how it’s done. And when you open *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Samuel Clemens comes to life for you, does he not?”

Granne was not home when Van Loon and I arrived after a short walk through the park. Just as well; I needed time to figure out how to explain this to her.

I showed Hendrik to our library and went to check the bedroom, on the off-chance I might actually be there, snoring away. Negative.

Feeling a bit sheepish, I headed to the kitchen to put on a fresh pot of coffee. When I returned to the library, I saw him in the rocking chair with our copy of *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*.

“So whom shall we invite first?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You wished to bring together interesting people for conversation, much as I did long ago, correct? I am here to help you. And I am curious to hear what has changed during

these last eighty years, and whether mankind learned any lessons from the terrible days of the Second World War.”

“The latter is debatable, I’m afraid. Let’s see: the Cold War, Korean War, Vietnam War, two Gulf Wars, wars in Afghanistan and Ukraine... and those were just the major conflicts.”

He shuddered. “When I campaigned for FDR and called on Americans to fight totalitarianism, I did not envision endless bloodshed.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say the world was consumed by it; there were some positive developments as well. Solar energy. Powerful computing devices one can wear on the wrist or carry in a pocket. Mankind even walked on the moon in 1968.”

“Wonderful! I wonder what Jules Verne would think.”

Aha. As the Bard once wrote, there’s the rub.

“Is it really possible?” I asked. “To bring luminaries from the Past here to the Present for dinner and conversation, regardless of when or where they lived?”

“I was just as skeptical at the outset, but it turned out to be quite easy.”

What did I have to lose? “Okay. Let’s give it a try. We’ll make up a guest list. Will you be our co-host?”

“Gladly. Don’t forget the menus and music for each dinner party!”

The excitement was contagious and the Future—or should I say the Past?—unfolded before us. Then good sense finally made an appearance.

“Well... perhaps we should wait for my wife to return; she will have the final say. You’ll stay for lunch?”

So, over fresh bagels, cream cheese, and thin slices of smoked salmon which brought tears of joy to the old Dutchman's eyes, Hendrik, Granne and I agreed on the plan which we carried out over the following eighteen months:

- Menus with recipes familiar and palatable to guests from diverse geographies and historical periods.
- Civil discourse among luminaries who would collectively render Stockholm's Nobel Prize stage SRO.
- Music to inspire and, as Hans Christian Andersen once said, to speak when words fail.

Who were our guests? It was fairly easy for us to agree on several dozen names. Interestingly, Hendrik recognized the world of 2023 was very different from 1940, and he asked whether we intended to include more women and people of color as guests. An easy answer: Yes!

Below is a summary of our Journey through Time; who would *you* have chosen as guests?

CHAPTER I: Our evening with JOHN F. KENNEDY and DOROTHY DAY begins awkwardly, but ends surprisingly well.

CHAPTER II: Lord of the Admiralty and Prime Minister of Great Britain, SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, suffices as our only guest.

CHAPTER III: Discord ensues when ARNOLD SCHOENBERG and IGOR STRAVINSKY find only one piano in our house.

CHAPTER IV: A harmonious improvement, as we greet two gentle souls, DIETRICH BONHOEFFER and CARYL HOUSLANDER, who have much in common.

CHAPTER V: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. and HENRY DAVID THOREAU trade notes; MAHATMA GHANDI was not invited, but he is a welcome guest, anyway.

CHAPTER VI: A somber evening with FRANCIS POLENC and HENRI NOWEN is transformed when G.K. CHESTERTON arrives.

CHAPTER VII: ISAAC ASIMOV and DR. MICHAEL DEBAKEY take us on a tour of the future.

CHAPTER VIII: THE MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE has it out with SENATOR JOE MCCARTHY.

CHAPTER IX: ORVILLE and WILBUR WRIGHT commiserate with ROSALIND FRANKLIN.

CHAPTER X: We learn about the frailty of human existence from MADAME MARIE CURIE and RACHEL CARSON.

CHAPTER XI: MARY LEAKEY and NEIL ARMSTRONG introduce us to some famous footsteps.

CHAPTER XII: RONALD REAGAN and MIKHAIL GORBACHEV square off again, and this time SERGEI RACHMANINOFF serves as referee.

CHAPTER XIII: MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE and MOTHER THERESA send their regrets.

CHAPTER XIV: An evening of artistry with HENRY OSSAWA TANNER and LOUIS ARMSTRONG.

CHAPTER XV: In which we engage JOHN ADAMS to represent HENRIETTA LACKS in a matter of legal redress.

CHAPTER XVI: HENDRIK VAN LOON must return home, and so ABRAHAM LINCOLN is the last and most honored of our guests.

Details, you ask?

A recap of the conversations?

Background history lessons on each guest?

What music and food did we select for each dinner?

Great questions!

Unfortunately, this *hors d'oeuvre* is limited to the Present –and two thousand five hundred words.

Another one hundred thousand words into the Future, I will be able to give you the answer.

But until then, remember: there are many other interesting journeys in the *Bibliotheca Temporis* to which you hold the key.

The Library of Time,
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