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George Dession

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BUFFALO LAW REVIEW

help them. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to see another man making a contribution to the study to which his own contribution had been so valuable.

It was my privilege to enjoy his hospitality at Yale and to reciprocate it at Cambridge. His simplicity and informality made him one of the most delightful companions and his death has bereaved me, and many others, of a very dear friend.

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GEORGE DESSION

Some people you remember best for the brilliance or profundity of the work they did. Some you remember in a more personal but still intellectual way for their off-the-top charm or their wit or their wisdom. But some you remember for their sheer human-ness as human beings—and of such was George Dession.

I knew George for more than a quarter-century—first as a fellow student, then as a faculty colleague, always as a friend. He was always shy and hated being shy and tried to hide it. The deliberately slow, studied speech, the deliberately long, loping stride, the uncontrollably quick smile of a kindly Satan—these gave him away. It was not his mental sparkle that won people to him. It was not even his uncommonly courteous and genuine concern with what others had to say. It was rather the vastly appealing just-below-the-surface vulnerability, that made him seem a sort of Peck's Bad Boy, out of France by way of Brooklyn, play-acting at being a brain.

For years around Yale, George's absent-mindedness—which is a synonym for single-minded concentration on the important—was so legendary that it became impossible to tell the true from the apocryphal. There was the time when he finished his criminal law lectures for the term, waited with hesitant expectation for the student applause that comes (whether spontaneously or merely politely) at the end of every course, and then walked sadly out of a silent room, wondering if he was really that bad—only to learn later that the course had another day to go. There was the time when he bought an attractive lady a drink in the club-car of the train to New York and hoped, before he loped off in Grand Central, that he might some day run into her again—only to be told that she was the wife of a new colleague, at whose home George had had dinner a couple of evenings before. There are scores of such tales.

IN MEMORIAM GEORGE H. DESSION

My own favorite, perhaps because I invented it—to introduce George once at a banquet—is the story of how “Peyl” Gulliver was chosen Dean of the Yale Law School after Dean Clark was named to the federal bench. As the yarn goes, faculty meetings went on for months, with no decisive action taken. This was because, on ballot after ballot, each faculty member received one vote. Then at one meeting, late at night, the tie was broken; Gulliver got two votes and became Dean; what had happened was that George couldn’t remember his own name, looked at what the man next to him (who happened to be Gulliver) was writing, and wrote “Gulliver” on his own ballot rather than leave it blank. So firmly fixed at Yale is the Dession absent-minded-professor saga that I have since heard this story told several times by students as true.

In my memory-book of the mind, one picture of George stands out over all the rest. This really happened. One Christmas vacation, he and I were both guests at Abe Fortas’s home in Washington. The morning after a late, gay party, I wandered downstairs to the living-room. There, alone in the middle of a big couch, sat George still in his dinner coat. In his hands was a smallish silver trumpet which he kept putting to his mouth and trying to blow. “You see,” he said eventually, taking a rest, with those thick, black brows knitted to seriousness, “I’ve always wanted to play a B-flat cornet. Last night I went out for a breath of air and was walking by a hock-shop and I saw this beauty in the window. So I got the proprietor out of bed and bought it and here it is.” Then came one of those quick, friendly smiles—and back he went to his blowing. This time a note, as from a dying cow, emerged. George put down the cornet and gave me a grin as nakedly beatific as I have ever seen on a human face. The memory is still vivid of that little-boy look of pride unconcealed and pleasure unalloyed.

That was George Dession. Others can tell far more ably and knowledgeably than I of his great professional achievements and contributions. I shall always remember him first and best as one of the most thoroughly *human* human beings I have ever known. Perhaps I can sum part of it up by saying that in twenty-seven years, I never saw him angry, I never saw him bored, and I never saw him unkind. Who among us can come close to matching such a testament to life and to his fellow-men?

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