

THE COMPLETIST



2003–2004

IT WAS ON A SHIP in the mid-Atlantic in the summer of 1948 that we met the completist—that's what he called himself.

He was a lawyer from Schenectady, well dressed, and he insisted on paying for the drinks when we met by accident before supper, and then made sure that we were seated with him at dinner, rather than at our regular table.

He talked and kept on talking during dinner with wonderful stories, grand jokes, and with an air about him that was convivial and worldly and wise.

At no time did he allow us to speak, and my wife and I were entertained, intrigued, and willing to silence ourselves to let this amusing man describe the world he traveled, from

continent to continent, from country to country, and from city to city, collecting books, building libraries, and entertaining his soul.

He told us how he had heard of a fabulous collection in Prague and had spent the better part of a month crossing the world by ship and by train to find and purchase the collection and return it to his vast home in Schenectady.

He had spent time in Paris, Rome, London, and Moscow and had shipped home tens of thousands of rare volumes, which his law practice allowed him to buy.

When he spoke of these things his eyes glowed and his face was suffused with a color that no liquor could induce.

There was no air of braggadocio about this lawyer—he was simply describing, as a cartographer describes a chart—a map of places and events and times he could not help but relate.

While he did all this he did not order any meal that would have to take his attention. He gave little mind to the immense salad before him, which allowed him to keep talking as, on occasion, he devoured a mouthful and then ran on with his descriptions of places and collections all over the world.

Each time my wife and I tried to intrude upon his exclamations, he waved his fork at us and shut his eyes to silence us as his mouth proclaimed yet another wonder.

“Do you know the work of Sir John Soane, the great English architect?” he asked.

Before we could answer he rushed on.

“He rebuilt all of London in his mind and in the drawings made according to his specifications by his artist-friend, Mr. Ginty. Some of his dreams of London were actually built, others were built and destroyed, and yet others remained only figments of his incredible imagination.

“I have found some of his library dreams and worked with the grandsons of his architectural engineers to build on my estate what you would call a steeplechase university. From building to building on this great acreage outside of Schenectady I have placed grand lanterns of education.

“By strolling across my meadows, or better yet—and how romantic—to visit on horseback, from yard to yard, you can find yourself in the grandest library of medical knowledge in the world. I say this because I have found this library in Yorkshire and bought its ten thousand volumes and shipped them home to be safely kept under my hand and eye. Great physicians and surgeons come to visit me and live in the library for days or weeks or months.

“Beyond that, in other locales around my estate, there are small lighthouse libraries of the greatest novels from every country in the world.

“And beyond that, an Italian environment that would have caused Bernard Berenson, the great Italian Renaissance art historian, to go sleepless with envy.

“My estate then, this university, is a series of buildings spread over one hundred acres where you could spend a lifetime without ever leaving my environment.

"On any single weekend, the heads of colleges, universities, and schools in Prague, Florence, Glasgow, and Vancouver collect to enjoy my chef's meals and drink my wines and love my books."

He went on to describe the leather many of the books were bound in, the superb quality of the bindings, the paper used within, and the typefaces.

Beyond that he described how wonderful it was that you could visit his multitudinous centers of learning and walk out in the meadows and seat yourself, to read in an environment that was conducive to vast learning.

"There you almost have it. I'm on my way now to Paris, whence I train south and ship out through the Suez Canal to India, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. Another twenty thousand volumes of art history, philosophy, and world travel await me in these far places. I am like a schoolchild, nervous, awaiting tomorrow, when I will get my hands on these further treasures."

At long last our lawyer friend seemed finished.

The salad was gone, the dessert was finished, and the last of the wine had been drunk.

He gazed into our faces, as if wondering if we had anything to say.

Indeed, there was much we had gathered up and we awaited a chance to speak.

But before we could open our mouths, the lawyer had summoned our waiter again and ordered three double brandies.

My wife and I demurred, but he waved us aside. The brandies were placed before us.

He arose, studied the bill, paid it, and stood for a long while as the color drained from his face.

"There is only one last thing I'd like to know," he said finally.

He shut his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them the light was gone; he seemed to be gazing at a place a million miles off in his imagination.

He picked up his double brandy, held it in his hands, and at last said, "Tell me one last thing."

He paused and then continued.

"Why did my thirty-five-year-old son kill his wife, destroy his daughter, and hang himself?"

He drank the brandy, turned, and without a word, left the ship's dining room.

My wife and I sat there for a long time, eyes shut, and then, without thinking, felt our hands move out and touch the brandy that awaited us.