

Substantial Disruption



The Whiffenpoof Song

By Mike Tully

The choir assembled when Hell stormed the Lord's Day on December 7th, 1941. It reconvenes every annual remembrance of that first gathering. Every year the choir grows. Those who join these days are gray, bent, proud and too frequently forgotten. But their voices, when mingled with those more ancient, reach the stars. We raise our glasses to the ones who didn't make it through on this day, and they silently return our toast. Silently, that is, but for the echoes of an anthem of the Greatest Generation.

*From the tables down at Mory's, to the place where Louie dwells,
To the dear old Temple bar we love so well.*

I hear it on this day, that strange echoing Kipling parody that Dad would break into three *Cuba Libres* after sunset. The song had the same resonance as his war stories, his matter of fact admission that caves were sealed on his orders, trapping Japanese combatants in a grave of dwindling oxygen. Dad said he never pointed a weapon and killed during the war. He merely gave orders and men died. The only weapon he brought home was a sword taken from the battlefield that hangs in our library. He never brought firearms home. My Dad, who hunted with weapons for sustenance in his childhood and carried weapons in the Pacific Theater, would not have them in the house.

*Sang the whiffenpoofs assembled with their glasses raised on high
And the magic of their singing casts its spell.*

When I was a boy I imagined the whiffenpoofs some manner of secret society that met furtively at Mory's, or the Temple Bar, or wherever Louie dwells. I didn't know the song was a spoof of Kipling's self-indulgent "Gentlemen Rankers." All I knew was that Dad must have emptied glasses while belting its verses in some local iteration of the Temple Bar, maybe in dusty old Tucson, maybe in a jungle best forgotten. Whatever the inspiration, his singing cast a spell.

*Yes the magic of their singing,
Of the songs we love so well:
"Shall I Wasting" and "Mavourneen" and the rest!
We will serenade our Louie,
Til health and voices fail,*

What a *carpe diem* statement! I think that is what grabbed me, young as I was, still unschooled in death and loss. *We will serenade our Louie Til health and voices fail.* Damn! Of course! Why not! Sing it now, sing it loud, sing it proud. We shall never grow old!

(“Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end.” Gene Raskin, recorded by Mary Hopkin, 1970)

The choir sings “the songs we love so well” every December 7th and every succeeding choir is louder and stronger than those that sang before. The Whiffenpoof choir has grown by more than a factor of ten since then and adds members every year.

And we’ll pass and be forgotten with the rest.

There are few of them left now, stragglers on history’s beach, keeping their memories and songs alive until they join the choir. It is fitting, I think, that they revered “The Whiffenpoof Song” and adopted it in tavern lore throughout the land. Fitting, because it is common-man self-deprecating, no longer an ode to the glories of soldierhood, but an ode to time spent with those we love, in whatever Temple Bar we love so well. This is what sanctifies The Greatest Generation: they celebrate their ordinariness. When they saved the world, they didn’t come home to raise hell. They came home to raise kids. They didn’t think of themselves as heroes. The heroes were the ones who didn’t make it back.

*We are poor little lambs
Who have lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
We are little, black sheep
Who have gone astray!
Baa! Baa! Baa!*

The Kipling parody of 1910 had a very different meaning after the two World Wars of the 20th century. War had made “black sheep” of the finest of the Whiffenpoof men. Unlike the regretful supplicants of Kipling’s work, the Whiffenpoof men had not joined military service because they were black sheep. Quite the contrary. They joined because they were Americans, and not all of them joined voluntarily. War made black sheep of all of them.

My Dad sang “The Whiffenpoof Song” and I heard the echoes of regret and mortality in his song. We were all lost sheep, that is what he meant when he sang, and he sometimes seemed the lostest sheep of all.

Once, during one of my visits to the Memorial of the U.S.S. Arizona in Pearl Harbor, I watched an elderly Japanese lady toss a lei made of orchids onto the oily surface of the waters that barely cover the sad old hulk. The flowered lei danced and bobbed in the calm Pacific as the oil from the wreck wrote mute rainbows in the waters around it. I quietly thanked the Japanese lady for sharing her prayer.

If you have not visited the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor I advise you to do so as soon as you can, because the survivors are dwindling in number. They will share the visit with you. They still make the pilgrimage, American, Japanese, and others.

But, the ones who lived it are joining the chorus. Soon, they will all be gone and with them, the memory of what it was like to save the world. The sky will be filled with voices every December 7th but the land will be silent. The Greatest Generation will have passed and been forgotten with the rest.

As long as I have breath I will salute them on this day.

*Gentlemen songsters off on a spree
Damned from here to eternity
Lord have mercy on such as we!
Baa! Baa! Baa!*

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