1. finish love letter.

[19] THE OBITUARY

by Richard G. West

PROFESSOR Charles Townsend Copeland, of Harvard, whose salty comments on life and letters stuck in the heads of generations of students in his English courses, used to remark, in his later years in the lecture room, on the number of his contemporaries who were departing this life.

"They die daily in *The Transcript*," he would observe lugubriously. Yet his audience, knowing Professor Copeland, was sure that he never would skip *The Transcript's* obituary page because he dreaded the news he might find there. That was one page he read thoroughly, if only for the occasional satisfaction of thinking, "Well, that's one I beat."

There is no doubt that the obituary page is one of the best read by thoughtful people who know how to read a newspaper properly. For the death of any person is news: "Any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde," John Donne wrote. It is obviously news of the first order when a man dies who has made his mark on his time, whose passing at a critical moment may affect the lives of millions and the destiny of nations. Such were Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Not so spectacular but still important are the deaths of a teacher like George Washington Carver, a physician like Sir Frederick G. Banting, a musician like Sergei Rachmaninov, a sculptor like Daniel Chester French, a poet like Stephen Vincent Benét, an actress like Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske.

The passing of a baseball player, a prize-fight manager, or a

circus clown will sadden thousands who never heard of Justice Benjamin N. Cardozo. To a discriminating few, who never knew the man except by name, the death of someone who writes letters to the editor about gardening or the stars will bring a sense of loss. And every day some reader will find a paragraph about a hardware merchant or a small-town high-school teacher whom he knew and say to himself, "Why, I saw him only last week!"

On the obituary page may be found the summing up of the glories, the achievements, the mediocrities, and the failures of a life which the rest of the paper chronicled day by day. A few columns on one morning may tell the last of a physician whose researches saved the lives of thousands, of a woman who fought to end the sweatshops, a statesman who sold the Spanish Loyalists down the river, a banker whose one step outside the law was remembered when his years of honor were forgotten, a vaudeville juggler, a missionary in China, an anticigarette crusader, a writer of immortal tales for children, a grower of prize pumpkins, and a conductor who traveled two million miles on the Erie Railroad. In the democracy of the obituary page they lie side by side; the disparate headline sizes do not alter the lead paragraphs of each story. They all died.

This rich content of the stuff of human experience is a challenge to any writer. It should command for the obituary page the best attention of editors and reporters. Yet it is commonly neglected by both. Writing obituaries is regarded too often as a melancholy but necessary chore, to be discharged with a fraction of the effort that would be lavished on a murder. Many editors delegate this chore to the freshmen or the drudges of the staff and squeeze the fruits of their labors into an odd corner of the paper, perhaps around a three-quarter page advertisement or next to some honest reading matter. The most important thing that can happen to a man is to die, but that event often receives more perfunctory news-

paper treatment than much duller matters that involved him years before.

Preparing an obituary is a delicate and exacting task, demanding the utmost diligence, insight, and imagination. His obituary should be, as far as human judgment and ability may create it in the limits of newspaper space, a man's monument. It should be a "Let's look at the record" of a life. Usually an intelligent reporter can assemble the basic facts from several sources and put them on paper without much trouble. But he must go deeper. He must try to appraise the color of mind and character, to determine what made the man tick, and write his story so honestly that it will appear not as a dreary recital of dates and names, but as a portrait of the man as he lived, with lights and shadows.

To accomplish this, the writer need not and should not indulge in amateur psychoanalysis. Neither should he be a critic or defender of his subject. Let him leave that to the editorial writers. But he may achieve his effect by acute synthesis of facts which illuminate character and such judicious appraisal of those facts as might occur to any thoughtful person.

The easiest subject to handle in this fashion is the great world figure, whose life was rich in known or accessible detail. Also, because such a subject's career was familiar to everyone, the writer may be permitted more license—and more space in the paper—for the personal writing which in lesser instances might be ruled out as editorializing. An historic moment deserves more than a chronicle. This is how *The New York Herald Tribune's* writer began his obituary of Adolf Hitler:

"Adolf Hitler sought to enslave the world and almost succeeded in destroying the civilization which it had taken Europe 2,000 years to achieve.

"History can hardly deny him a place alongside Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, and the other great conquerors and scourges of

human freedom, but in all the annals of mankind a stranger or more unsavory figure was never enthroned in their questionable Valhalla.

"He combined the appearance of a low comedian of the music halls with the savagery of a South Sea Island head hunter. Womanish hysteria was as much a part of his character as the ferocity which drove him to start the worst war in history. He could simper over the prettiness of a flaxen-haired Bavarian child in one breath and in the next gloat over the bombing of a hundred British children of equally Aryan blondness.

"His was a character of tortuous complexities and astonishing contradictions. The sufferings of his victims left him unmoved, except by childish glee, but Wagner's music made him weep. . . .

"Hitler restored tyranny to history. He hung chains on a civilization that thought it was finished with slavery. He understood the basest impulses of the human heart and gambled that they governed other men as they governed him. But his bet was wrong—he underestimated, because he could not comprehend, the force of the spirit of men of good will. This spirit baffled him in the small countries which he conquered and defeated him when he met it in the three nations which compassed his downfall."

This obituary ran more than eight columns. About half of it was devoted to a study of Hitler's character as written in the facts of his career and the remainder to a detailed, chronological account of that career. Few obituaries are so long, and few devote such a proportion of their space to generalizations. But Hitler's death was an event which justified—or demanded—treatment in the news columns which actually constituted a biographical essay. And if ever a critical judgment of a man was justified in the news columns, it was in this case. In his closing paragraphs the *Herald Tribune's* writer supplied it, but not in his own words:

"'My whole life from now on belongs to the German people,' he [Hitler] said. 'I now do not want to be anything but the first soldier of the German Reich.'

"From his point of view his words would have made an excellent epitaph for his gravestone. From the world's point of view Winston Churchill enunciated a better one:

"'This evil man,' said Churchill. 'This monstrous abortion of hatred and deceit.'"

The man's monument was constructed in eight thousand words of newspaper type; the superscription in the last sentence.

Another example of swift summing up of a different character, one well known and certainly more affectionately regarded than Hitler, was the *Herald Tribune's* lead on the obituary of James J. Walker, the former mayor of New York:

"James J. Walker, dapper, debonair Jimmy, was late for everything but always had a wisecrack to make the wait worth while. In his slight, laughing person, the sharp crease of his trousers and the sharp flick of his tongue, he symbolized better than any one else the New York of the 1920's, with its dazzle, its Prohibition speakeasies, its Wall Street boom and its old time Tammany Hall. . . .

"When standing in breadlines and selling apples on street corners took the place of big-time speculation, the people's mind turned to serious things. No one ever pictured Jimmy as an ideal companion for a serious chat."

But of the hundreds of obituaries which a newspaper will carry in a year, not many lend themselves to this semieditorial treatment. Few run more than five hundred words; most of them much less. But an anecdote or a sympathetic description of a personal idiosyncrasy may highlight a character. The late George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard was one of the greatest Shakespearean scholars and teachers of his time. In his recital of his academic achievements, the writer of the *Herald Tribune's* obituary could say:

"His sense of academic etiquette was rigid and his manner was that of a top sergeant. Anybody who coughed during his lectures was banished. He told his classes: 'Before the lecture I cough. After the lecture I cough. But during the lecture I do not cough and neither shall you. . . .' He believed that hats should be worn only out of doors and used to lurk behind a pillar in the lobby of Widener Library with his stick and knock them from the heads of the thoughtless.

"In dealing with the world outside the university he was as imperious as in the classroom. When he crossed the street, ignoring traffic lights, the drivers had to beware, not he. He simply raised his hand and walked on, to a chorus of squealing brakes."

Even in a short obituary, such vivid flashes are possible. A brief story in *The New York Times* of the death of a wealthy retired business executive who lived on a Long Island estate included this in a factual account:

"He was known to the village folk as few of the estate colony residents are known. He knew the butcher, the baker, the news dealer, and it was significant that he died in a moving-picture theater surrounded by a fireman, a policeman, and the head usherette."

No platitudes could have rung so true.

Now as a practical matter it is often impossible to obtain such telling material, or the writer can find nothing that is not trite. It is better to say nothing about a man rather than to say something dull. To say that a man was friendly or witty or eccentric is not enough; if a sharp illustration is lacking the facts of his life will be sufficient.

What the writer can say about any man's life is limited by two things: what he can find out and how much space is available in the paper for the story. The first of these depends on the fruitfulness of the sources and the diligence of the writer; the second

upon the judgment of the editor—how much an obituary is "worth" in type, in relation to others and to the rest of the day's news.

On most newspapers the obituary news is handled by the city editor and his assistants or, in a few cases, by a special editor. The word of a death may come to the editor's desk in a number of ways. A telephone call or telegram from a friend or member of the family is a common source. Another is the duplicate copies of paid death notices for the classified advertising columns, which the advertising department supplies to the editor. From distant points the news-service wires or the paper's own correspondents will bring the news. The editor will give each obituary, from whatever source, to a reporter or rewrite man, who is expected to discover in the paper's library all available information on the dead person in clippings or reference books, and to verify and expand that information by a check with the family, friends, or business associates. If there is no record of the dead person in the library, the reporter must assemble his information as he can. He reports his findings to the editor and is told how much to write.

The editor, in judging the proper length of an obituary, and the writer, in preparing it, must consider how much information there is and how reliable it may be. Assembling facts for such stories is exacting and often trying work. The reporter must be accurate and painstaking in the face of scanty records or no records at all, of faulty memories, indifference, and occasional spite or hostility. And he must always remember that, more than in most news stories, his topic touches profound human experience and requires all his tact and patience.

Speaking to a reporter, a bereaved family may be too shocked and grief-stricken to recall exact facts and even less able to supply the side lights which might lift the story above the mediocre. Sometimes they are reluctant to talk at all, and sometimes they declare that they wish no obituary to be printed. In this last event,

it is courteous to defer to their wishes, but if the death is important news the reporter must explain tactfully that the paper has no choice but to print it and that he is interested only in the accuracy of his facts.

Information in a newspaper library about a dead person may be more tantalizing than helpful. Reference books rarely offer more than a framework of names and dates. A file of clippings may be meager or full of inconsistencies, contradictions, and obvious errors. Sometimes a press agent or a secretary has contributed an "approved" version of a man's life, but these are of doubtful value.

From these diverse sources, this welter of fact, half fact, and gossip, the reporter must prepare his obituary simply, honestly, and truly. The lead, the first paragraph, should present no difficulty. The straightforward statement of fact is the only one possible. It should begin with the dead person's name, his age, an identifying phrase, say that he died and when and where. There is no place for purple prose. You cannot dramatize death beyond the fact.

Beyond this, there are no rigid rules for organizing an obituary. Clear, orderly thinking, simple writing, accuracy and honesty will create a good obituary as they will any news story. The problem concerns as much what to leave out as what to put in. The first rule is: If you are not certain of a fact, leave it out. Don't jump at a conclusion. Another rule is: Leave out the dull stuff. A great many obituaries are inflated by lists of clubs and associations and by forgotten facts long out of date, better unremembered. No one cares what minor encounters a man may have had forty years ago. If he ever amounted to anything, he had done much more important things since.

What about omitting the scandal in a man's life? Pressure is often brought on the writer to do so. In this, above all, the writer

must be honest, but he must obey the promptings of good taste and common sense.

Obviously, if a man was involved in a gigantic fraud and did little else in his life, the story of the fraud will be the story of the obituary. But many men who have led useful lives have gone wrong once. If the misstep was important news when it occurred, known generally to the public, it cannot be overlooked and should be mentioned but not dwelt upon. But there is no justice in raking up the record of a disorderly-conduct arrest or a breach-of-promise suit which was thrown out of court.

The complaint is heard frequently that newspapers do not give the cause of death. Very often this is difficult for a reporter to learn. Members of the family do not know or prefer not to say. Reporters are reluctant to press the question. The only certain source is the attending physician, and if he is available he is apt to refuse to answer or to say simply, "Heart disease." He knows that the phrase covers many forms of disease, but he hesitates to be specific, because ill-informed reporters often misquote physicians and make them appear absurd.

For some reason, many people regard cancer as a disgraceful disease to die of. Sometimes a reporter is told that a person died of cancer and is requested not to mention it. The family's wishes are usually respected in this matter. Lacking an exact diagnosis of the cause, a reporter may write that a person died of "heart failure." This means nothing, because the immediate cause of any death is failure of the heart.

Also, it is commonly written that a person dies "suddenly." Of course he does. Any death is sudden. The man is alive one second and dead the next. In an immeasurable fraction of time the clock has ceased to tick, the machine has ceased to function, and the man is physically dead. Nothing can be more sudden. It does not matter if he has been ill for months or is struck down by angina pectoris.

What the writer usually means by "suddenly" is that the death was unexpected—a surprise. After a long illness no death, perhaps, is unexpected. But a fatal stroke or complications in an apparently trivial illness might be so described.

How long should an obituary be? Each must be judged by the values which any news story must meet—importance, timeliness, and space available in the paper. The question of importance must remain debatable; one man's importance is another's indifference, but editors and newspaper readers know intuitively who is worth reading most about. A man who dies at the peak of his powers will be worth more space than one who lingers.

Likewise it is a tragic truth that news values change with the volume of news and the size of the paper. A fascinating game which newspaper men occasionally indulge in is to guess how much space their own obituaries will be worth. Most editors and reporters are pretty objective. They have handled too many obituaries; they know that on a dull Sunday night their death might rate thirty lines, on a busy Wednesday, ten. The same shifting scale is valid for anyone.

It is curious how obituaries date. Most newspapers keep in their files copies of prepared obituaries—"wait obits" they are called sometimes. These are biographies of prominent persons which are prepared perhaps when there is no prospect of the subject dying. This may appear a gruesome practice, but editors must remember that if the President of the United States or any public figure should die late at night, it would be impossible to write an adequate obituary in a hurry. They will have these obituaries written and brought up to date from time to time, so that in an emergency a competent story will be ready.

Often these prepared stories, because they are written without the pressure of time and space, are fairer and finer reading than what appears in the paper. But such a prepared story goes bad after lying in the files. Time diminishes its values; the subject

grows older, and so do the readers. In 1935 the *Herald Tribune* had ready almost ten columns on the Kaiser—Emperor William II of Germany, the villain of World War I. When he died, on June 4, 1941, another world war was raging, and the Kaiser was worth less than half of that.

A man needn't be the Kaiser to live too long or die on the wrong day. Elmer Davis once wrote a piece of fiction about a smalltime citizen who became obit-conscious after he was erroneously reported dead. The obituary which was printed repeated a ridiculous quotation which he had thoughtlessly given an inquiring reporter years before. From then on, the resurrected gentleman made it his business to amass a stack of newspaper clippings by delivering sage remarks to reporters at the proper time, and after years of endeavor he was sure that he had accumulated a backlog of wisdom from which any rewrite man could make something. And he had; but the night he died an ex-President of the United States and a glamor girl of the movies died, too; there was no space in the paper and he got a paragraph.

No obituary can do justice to a man. Closing an account is a solemn business, and the best newspapermen will be thoughtful when that account is of a life. They may remember the judgment of one of the finest editors, who knew that pride of achievement dwindled to nothing before a fact. He was Charles A. Dana, editor of *The Sun* of New York for thirty years. He died on October 17, 1897. In those days newspapers were intensely personal organs. Everyone knew Dana and *The Sun*. He had made it. *The Sun*, its staff, and its readers were as proud of him as he was of the paper. If ever there was a chance and an excuse for a fulsome obit, here it was.

Dana had played the game of guessing obituaries, too. Once he told one of his editorial writers, "For you, two sticks; for me, two lines."

And that is what he got. The day after he died every newspaper

in New York carried columns on Dana's life and achievements. *The Sun* printed ten words at the head of the first column on the editorial page, without a heading:

"Charles Anderson Dana, editor of *The Sun*, died yesterday afternoon."

No more can be said truly about anyone.

MARY WHITE

May 17, 1921

The Associated Press reports carrying the news of Mary White's death declared that it came as the result of a fall from a horse. How she would have hooted at that! She never fell from a horse in her life. Horses have fallen on her and with her—"I'm always trying to hold 'em in my lap," she used to say. . . . Her death resulted not from a fall but from a blow on the head which fractured her skull, and the blow came from the limb of an overhanging tree on the parking.

The last hour of her life was typical of its happiness. She came home from a day's work at school, topped off by a hard grind with the copy on the High School Annual, and felt that a ride would refresh her. She climbed into her khakis, chattering to her mother about the work she was doing, and hurried to get her horse and be out on the dirt roads for the country air and the radiant green fields of the spring. As she rode through the town on an easy gallop, she kept waving at passers-by. She knew everyone in town. For a decade the little figure in the long pigtail and the red hair ribbon has been familiar on the streets of Emporia, and she got in the way of speaking to those who nodded at her. She passed the Kerrs, walking the horse in front of the Normal Library, and waved at them; passed another friend a few hundred feet farther on, and waved at her.

The horse was walking, and as she turned into North Merchant Street she took off her cowboy hat, and the horse swung into a lope. She passed the Tripletts and waved her cowboy hat at them, still moving gayly north on Merchant Street. A Gazette carrier passed—a High School boy friend—and she waved at him, but with her bridle hand: the horse veered quickly, plunged into the parking where the low-hanging limb faced her and, while she still looked back waving, the blow came. But she did not fall from the horse; she slipped off, dazed a bit, staggered, and fell in a faint. She never quite recovered consciousness.

But she did not fall from the horse, neither was she riding fast. A year or so ago she used to go like the wind. But that habit was broken, and she used the horse to get into the open, to get fresh, hard exercise, and to work off a certain surplus energy that welled up in her and needed a physical outlet. The need has been in her heart for years. It was back of the impulse that kept the dauntless little brown-clad figure on the streets and country roads of the community and built into a strong, muscular body what had been a frail and sickly frame during the first years of her life. But the riding gave her more than a body. It released a gay and hardy soul. She was the happiest thing in the world. And she was happy because she was enlarging her horizon. She came to know all sorts and conditions of men. . . . And she brought home riotous stories of her adventures. She loved to rollick; persiflage was her natural expression at home. Her humor was a continual bubble of joy. She seemed to think in hyperbole and metaphor. She was mischievous without malice, as full of faults as an old shoe. No angel was Mary White, but an easy girl to live with for she never nursed a grouch five minutes in her life.

With all her eagerness for the out-of-doors, she loved books. On her table when she left her room were a book by Conrad, one by Galsworthy, "Creative Chemistry" by E. E. Slosson, and a Kipling book. She read Mark Twain, Dickens and Kipling before she was ten—all of their writings. Wells and Arnold Bennett particularly amused and diverted her. She was entered as a student in Wellesley for 1922; was assistant editor of the High School Annual this year, and in line for election to the editorship next year. . . . In her glory, she almost forgot her horse—but never her car.

For she used the car as a jitney bus. It was her social life. She never had a "party" in all her nearly seventeen years—wouldn't have one; but she never drove a block in her life that she didn't begin to fill the car with pick-ups! Everybody rode with Mary White—white and black, old and young, rich and poor, men and women. She liked nothing better than to fill the car with long-legged High School boys and an occasional girl, and parade the town. She never had a "date," nor went to a dance, except once with her brother Bill, and the "boy proposition" didn't interest her—yet. But young people—great spring-breaking, varnish-cracking, fender-bending, door-sagging carloads of "kids"—gave her great pleasure. Her zests were keen. . . . She joined the church without consulting her parents, not particularly for her soul's good. She never had a thrill of piety in her life, and would have hooted at a "testimony." But even as a little child, she felt the church was an agency for helping people to more of life's abundance, and she wanted to help. She never wanted help for herself. Clothes meant little to her. It was a fight to get a new rig on her; but eventually a harder fight to get it off. She never wore a jewel and had no ring but her High School class ring and never asked for anything but a wrist watch. . . . The tomboy in her, which was big, seemed loath to be put away forever in skirts. She was a Peter Pan who refused to grow up.

Her funeral yesterday at the Congregational Church was as she would have wished it: no singing, no flowers except the big bunch of red roses from her brother Bill's Harvard classmen—heavens, how proud that would have made her!—and the red roses from the Gazette forces, in vases, at her head and feet. A short prayer: Paul's beautiful essay on "Love" from the Thirteenth Chapter of First Corinthians; some remarks about her democratic spirit by her friend, John H. J. Rice, pastor and police judge, which she would have deprecated if she could; a prayer sent down for her by her friend, Carl Nau; and, opening the service, the slow, poignant movement from Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, which she loved; and closing the service a cutting from the joyously melancholy first movement of Tchaikovsky's Pathetic Symphony, which she liked to hear, in certain moods, on the phonograph, then the Lord's Prayer by her friends in High School.

. . . . It would have made her smile to know that her friend, Charley O'Brien, the traffic cop, had been transferred from Sixth and Commercial to the corner near the church to direct her friends who came to bid her good-by.

A rift in the clouds in a gray day threw a shaft of sunlight upon her coffin as her nervous, energetic little body sank to its last sleep. But the soul of her, the glowing, gorgeous, fervent soul of her, surely was flaming in eager joy upon some other dawn.

—W. A. W.