

A Bohemian in Exile

A REMINISCENCE



WHEN, many years ago now, the once potent and extensive kingdom of Bohemia gradually dissolved and passed away, not a few historians were found to chronicle its past glories; and some have gone on to tell the fate of this or that once powerful chieftain who either donned the swallow-tail and conformed or, proudly self-exiled, sought some quiet retreat and died as he had lived, a Bohemian. But these were of the princes of the land. To the people, the villeins, the common rank and file, does no interest attach? Did they waste and pine, anæmic, in thin, strange, unwonted air? Or sit at the table of the scornful and learn, with Dante, how salt was alien bread? It is of one of those faithful commons I would speak, narrating only 'the short and simple annals of the poor.'

It is to be noted that the kingdom aforesaid was not so much a kingdom as a United States – a collection of self-ruling guilds, municipalities, or republics, bound together by a common method of viewing life. 'There *once* was a king of Bohemia' – but that was a long time ago, and even Corporal Trim was not certain in whose reign it was. These small free States, then, broke up gradually, from various causes and with varying speed; and I think ours was one of the last to go.

With us, as with many others, it was a case of lost leaders. 'Just for a handful of silver he left us'; though it was not

PAGAN PAPERS

exactly that, but rather that, having got the handful of silver, they wanted a wider horizon to fling it about under than Bloomsbury afforded.

So they left us for their pleasure; and in due time,
one by one –

But I will not be morose about them; they had honestly earned their success, and we all honestly rejoiced at it, and do so still.

When old Pan was dead and Apollo's bow broken, there were many faithful pagans who would worship at no new shrines, but went out to the hills and caves, truer to the old gods in their discrowned desolation than in their pomp and power. Even so were we left behind, a remnant of the faithful. We had never expected to become great in art or song; it was the life itself that we loved; that was our end – not, as with them, the means to an end.

We aimed at no glory, no lovers of glory we;
Give us the glory of going on and still to be.

Unfortunately, going on was no longer possible; the old order had changed, and we could only patch up our broken lives as best might be.

Fothergill said that he, for one, would have no more of it. The past was dead, and he wasn't going to try to revive it. Henceforth he, too, would be dead to Bloomsbury. Our forefathers, speaking of a man's death, said 'he changed his life.' This is how Fothergill changed his life and died to Bloomsbury. One morning he made his way

A Bohemian in Exile

to the Whitechapel Road, and there he bought a barrow. The Whitechapel barrows are of all sizes, from the barrow wheeled about by a boy with half a dozen heads of cabbages to barrows drawn by a tall pony, such as on Sundays take the members of a club to Epping Forest. They are all precisely the same in plan and construction, only in the larger sizes the handles develop or evolve into shafts; and they are equally suitable, according to size, for the vending of whelks, for a hot-potato can, a piano organ, or for the conveyance of a cheery and numerous party to the Derby. Fothergill bought a medium sized 'developed' one, and also a donkey to fit; he had it painted white, picked out with green – the barrow, not the donkey – and when his arrangements were complete, stabled the whole for the night in Bloomsbury. The following morning, before the early red had quite faded from the sky, the exodus took place, those of us who were left being assembled to drink a parting whisky-and-milk in sad and solemn silence. Fothergill turned down Oxford Street, sitting on the shaft with a short clay in his mouth, and disappeared from our sight, heading west at a leisurely pace. So he passed out of our lives by way of the Bayswater Road.

They must have wandered far and seen many things, he and his donkey, from the fitful fragments of news that now and again reached us. It seems that eventually, his style of living being economical, he was enabled to put down his donkey and barrow, and set up a cart and a mare – no fashionable gipsy-cart, a sort of houseboat on wheels, but a light and serviceable cart, with a moveable tilt, constructed on his own designs. This allowed him to take along with him a few canvases and other artists' materials; soda-water,

whisky, and such like necessaries; and even to ask a friend from town for a day or two, if he wanted to.

He was in this state of comparative luxury when at last, by the merest accident, I foregathered with him once more. I had pulled up to Streatley one afternoon, and, leaving my boat, had gone for a long ramble on the glorious North Berkshire Downs to stretch my legs before dinner. Somewhere over on Cuckhamsley Hill, by the side of the Ridgeway, remote from the habitable world, I found him, smoking his vesper pipe on the shaft of his cart, the mare cropping the short grass beside him. He greeted me without surprise or effusion, as if we had only parted yesterday, and without a hint of an allusion to past times, but drifted quietly into rambling talk of his last three years, and, without ever telling his story right out, left a strange picturesque impression of a nomadic life which struck one as separated by fifty years from modern conventional existence. The old road-life still lingered on in places, it seemed, once one got well away from the railway: there were two Englands existing together, the one fringing the great iron highways wherever they might go – the England under the eyes of most of us. The other, unguessed at by many, in whatever places were still vacant of shriek and rattle, drowsed on as of old: the England of heath and common and windy sheep down, of by-lanes and village-greens – the England of Parson Adams and Laven-gro. The spell of the free untrammelled life came over me as I listened, till I was fain to accept of his hospitality and a horse-blanket for the night, oblivious of civilised comforts down at the Bull. On the downs where Alfred fought we lay and smoked, gazing up at the quiet stars that had shone on many a Dane lying stark and still a thousand years ago;

A Bohemian in Exile

and in the silence of the lone tract that enfolded us we seemed nearer to those old times than to these I had left that afternoon, in the now hushed and sleeping valley of the Thames.

When the news reached me, some time later, that Fothergill's aunt had died and left him her house near town and the little all she had possessed, I heard it with misgivings, not to say forebodings. For the house had been his grandfather's, and he had spent much of his boyhood there; it had been a dream of his early days to possess it in some happy future, and I knew he could never bear to sell or let it. On the other hand, can you stall the wild ass of the desert? And will not the caged eagle mope and pine?

However, possession was entered into, and all seemed to go well for the time. The cart was honourably installed in the coach-house, the mare turned out to grass. Fothergill lived idly and happily, to all seeming, with 'a book of verses underneath the bough,' and a bottle of old claret for the friend who might chance to drop in. But as the year wore on small signs began to appear that he who had always 'rather hear the lark sing than the mouse squeak' was beginning to feel himself caged, though his bars were gilded.

I was talking one day to his coachman (he now kept three men-servants), and he told me that of a Sunday morning when the household had gone to church and everything was quiet, Mr Fothergill would go into the coach-house and light his pipe, and sit on the step of the brougham (he had a brougham now), and gaze at the old cart, and smoke and say nothing; and smoke and say nothing again. He didn't like it, the coachman confessed; and to me it seemed ominous.

One morning late in March, at the end of a long hard winter, I was wakened by a flood of sunshine. The early air came warm and soft through the open window; the first magic suggestion of spring was abroad, with its whispered hints of daffodils and budding hawthorns; and one's blood danced to imagined pipings of Pan from happy fields far distant. At once I thought of Fothergill, and, with a certain foreboding of ill, made my way down to Holly Lodge as soon as possible. It was with no surprise at all that I heard that the master was missing. In the very first of the morning, it seemed, or ever the earliest under-housemaid had begun to set man-traps on the stairs and along the passages, he must have quietly left the house. The servants were cheerful enough, nevertheless, and thought the master must only have 'gone for a nice long walk,' and so on, after the manner of their kind. Without a word I turned my steps to the coach-house. Sure enough, the old cart was missing; the mare was gone from the paddock. It was no good my saying anything; pursuit of this wild haunter of tracks and by-paths would have been futile indeed. So I kept my own counsel. Fothergill never returned to Holly Lodge, and has been more secret and evasive since his last flight, rarely venturing on old camping grounds near home, like to a bird scared by the fowler's gun.

Once indeed, since then, while engaged in pursuit of the shy quarry known as the Early Perp., late Dec., E. Eng., and the like, specimens of which I was tracking down in the west, I hit upon him by accident; hearing in an old village rumours concerning a strange man in a cart who neither carried samples nor pushed the brewing interest by other means than average personal consumption – tales already

A Bohemian in Exile

beginning to be distorted into material for the myth of the future. I found him friendly as ever, equally ready to spin his yarns. As the evening wore on, I ventured upon an allusion to past times and Holly Lodge; but his air of puzzled politeness convinced me that the whole thing had passed out of his mind, as a slight but disagreeable incident in the even tenor of his nomadic existence.

After all, his gains may have outbalanced his losses. Had he cared, he might, with his conversational gifts, have been a social success; certainly, I think, an artistic one. He had great powers, had any impulse been present to urge him to execution and achievement. But he was for none of these things. Contemplative, receptive, with a keen sense of certain sub-tones and side aspects of life unseen by most, he doubtless chose wisely to enjoy life his own way, and to gather from the fleeting days what bliss they had to give, nor spend them in toiling for a harvest to be reaped when he was dust.

Some for the glories of this life, and some
Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come:
Ah, take the cash and let the credit go,
Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum.