## The Country of Elusion

O. Henry

The cunning writer will choose an indefinable subject, for he can then set down his theory of what it is; and next, at length, his conception of what it is not—and lo! his paper is covered. Therefore let us follow the prolix and unmapable trail into that mooted country, Bohemia.

Grainger, sub-editor of Doc’s Magazine, closed his roll-top desk, put on his hat, walked into the hall, punched the “down” button, and waited for the elevator.

Grainger’s day had been trying. The chief had tried to ruin the magazine a dozen times by going against Grainger’s ideas for running it. A lady whose grandfather had fought with McClellan had brought a portfolio of poems in person.

Grainger was curator of the Lion’s House of the magazine. That day he had “lunched” an Arctic explorer, a short-story writer, and the famous conductor of a slaughter-house exposé. Consequently his mind was in a whirl of icebergs, Maupassant, and trichinosis.

But there was a surcease and a recourse; there was Bohemia. He would seek distraction there; and, let’s see—he would call by for Mary Adrian.

Half an hour later he threaded his way like a Brazilian orchid-hunter through the palm forest in the tiled entrance hall of the “Idealia” apartment-house. One day the christeners of apartment-houses and the cognominators of sleeping-cars will meet, and there will be some jealous and sanguinary knifing.

The clerk breathed Grainger’s name so languidly into the house telephone that it seemed it must surely drop, from sheer inertia, down to the janitor’s regions. But, at length, it soared dilatorily up to Miss Adrian’s ear. Certainly, Mr. Grainger was to come up immediately.

A colored maid with an Eliza-crossing-the-ice expression opened the door of the apartment for him. Grainger walked sideways down the narrow hall. A bunch of burnt umber hair and a sea-green eye appeared in the crack of a door. A long, white, undraped arm came out, barring the way.

“So glad you came, Ricky, instead of any of the others,” said the eye. “Light a cigarette and give it to me. Going to take me to dinner? Fine. Go into the front room till I finish dressing. But don’t sit in your usual chair. There’s pie in it—Meringue. Kappelman threw it at Reeves last evening while he was reciting. Sophy has just come to straighten up. Is it lit? Thanks. There’s Scotch on the mantel—oh, no, it isn’t,—that’s chartreuse. Ask Sophy to find you some. I won’t be long.”

Grainger escaped the meringue. As he waited his spirits sank still lower. The atmosphere of the room was as vapid as a zephyr wandering over a Vesuvian lava-bed. Relics of some feast lay about the room, scattered in places where even a prowling cat would have been surprised to find them. A straggling cluster of deep red roses in a marmalade jar bowed their heads over tobacco ashes and unwashed goblets. A chafing-dish stood on the piano; a leaf of sheet music supported a stack of sandwiches in a chair.

Mary came in, dressed and radiant. Her gown was of that thin, black fabric whose name through the change of a single vowel seems to summon visions ranging between the extremes of man’s experience. Spelled with an “ê” it belongs to Gallic witchery and diaphanous dreams; with an “a” it drapes lamentation and woe.

That evening they went to the Café André. And, as people would confide to you in a whisper that André’s was the only truly Bohemian restaurant in town, it may be well to follow them.

André began his professional career as a waiter in a Bowery ten-cent eating-house. Had you seen him there you would have called him tough—to yourself. Not aloud, for he would have “soaked” you as quickly as he would have soaked his thumb in your coffee. He saved money and started a basement table d’hôte in Eighth (or Ninth) Street. One afternoon André drank too much absinthe. He announced to his startled family that he was the Grand Llama of Thibet, therefore requiring an empty audience hall in which to be worshiped. He moved all the tables and chairs from the restaurant into the back yard, wrapped a red table-cloth around himself, and sat on a step-ladder for a throne. When the diners began to arrive, madame, in a flurry of despair, laid cloths and ushered them, trembling, outside. Between the tables clothes-lines were stretched, bearing the family wash. A party of Bohemia hunters greeted the artistic innovation with shrieks and acclamations of delight. That week’s washing was not taken in for two years. When André came to his senses he had the menu printed on stiffly starched cuffs, and served the ices in little wooden tubs. Next he took down his sign and darkened the front of the house. When you went there to dine you fumbled for an electric button and pressed it. A lookout slid open a panel in the door, looked at you suspiciously, and asked if you were acquainted with Senator Herodotus Q. McMilligan, of the Chickasaw Nation. If you were, you were admitted and allowed to dine. If you were not, you were admitted and allowed to dine. There you have one of the abiding principles of Bohemia. When André had accumulated $20,000 he moved up-town, near Broadway, in the fierce light that beats upon the thrown-down. There we find him and leave him, with customers in pearls and automobile veils, striving to catch his excellently graduated nod of recognition.

There is a large round table in the northeast corner of André’s at which six can sit. To this table Grainger and Mary Adrian made their way. Kappelman and Reeves were already there. And Miss Tooker, who designed the May cover for the Ladies’ Notathome Magazine. And Mrs. Pothunter, who never drank anything but black and white highballs, being in mourning for her husband, who—oh, I’ve forgotten what he did—died, like as not.

Spaghetti-weary reader, wouldst take one penny-in-the-slot peep into the fair land of Bohemia? Then look; and when you think you have seen it you have not. And it is neither thimbleriggery nor astigmatism.

The walls of the Café André were covered with original sketches by the artists who furnished much of the color and sound of the place. Fair woman furnished the theme for the bulk of the drawings. When you say “sirens and siphons” you come near to estimating the alliterative atmosphere of André’s.

First, I want you to meet my friend, Miss Adrian. Miss Tooker and Mrs. Pothunter you already know. While she tucks in the fingers of her elbow gloves you shall have her daguerreotype. So faint and uncertain shall the portrait be:

Age, somewhere between twenty-seven and highneck evening dresses. Camaraderie in large bunches—whatever the fearful word may mean. Habitat—anywhere from Seattle to Tierra del Fuego. Temperament uncharted—she let Reeves squeeze her hand after he recited one of his poems; but she counted the change after sending him out with a dollar to buy some pickled pig’s feet. Deportment 75 out of a possible 100. Morals 100.

Mary was one of the princesses of Bohemia. In the first place, it was a royal and a daring thing to have been named Mary. There are twenty Fifines and Heloises to one Mary in the Country of Elusion.

Now her gloves are tucked in. Miss Tooker has assumed a June poster pose; Mrs. Pothunter has bitten her lips to make the red show; Reeves has several times felt his coat to make sure that his latest poem is in the pocket. (It had been neatly typewritten; but he has copied it on the backs of letters with a pencil.) Kappelman is underhandedly watching the clock. It is ten minutes to nine. When the hour comes it is to remind him of a story. Synopsis: A French girl says to her suitor: “Did you ask my father for my hand at nine o’clock this morning, as you said you would?” “I did not,” he replies. “At nine o’clock I was fighting a duel with swords in the Bois de Boulogne.” “Coward!” she hisses.

The dinner was ordered. You know how the Bohemian feast of reason keeps up with the courses. Humor with the oysters; wit with the soup; repartee with the entrée; brag with the roast; knocks for Whistler and Kipling with the salad; songs with the coffee; the slapsticks with the cordials.

Between Miss Adrian’s eyebrows was the pucker that shows the intense strain it requires to be at ease in Bohemia. Pat must come each sally, mot, and epigram. Every second of deliberation upon a reply costs you a bay leaf. Fine as a hair, a line began to curve from her nostrils to her mouth. To hold her own not a chance must be missed. A sentence addressed to her must be as a piccolo, each word of it a stop, which she must be prepared to seize upon and play. And she must always be quicker than a Micmac Indian to paddle the light canoe of conversation away from the rocks in the rapids that flow from the Pierian spring. For, plodding reader, the handwriting on the wall in the banquet hall of Bohemia is “Laisser faire.” The gray ghost that sometimes peeps through the rings of smoke is that of slain old King Convention. Freedom is the tyrant that holds them in slavery.

As the dinner waned, hands reached for the pepper cruet rather than for the shaker of Attic salt. Miss Tooker, with an elbow to business, leaned across the table toward Grainger, upsetting her glass of wine.

“Now while you are fed and in good humor,” she said, “I want to make a suggestion to you about a new cover.”

“A good idea,” said Grainger, mopping the tablecloth with his napkin. “I’ll speak to the waiter about it.”

Kappelman, the painter, was the cut-up. As a piece of delicate Athenian wit he got up from his chair and waltzed down the room with a waiter. That dependent, no doubt an honest, pachydermatous, worthy, tax-paying, art-despising biped, released himself from the unequal encounter, carried his professional smile back to the dumb-waiter and dropped it down the shaft to eternal oblivion. Reeves began to make Keats turn in his grave. Mrs. Pothunter told the story of the man who met the widow on the train. Miss Adrian hummed what is still called a chanson in the cafés of Bridgeport. Grainger edited each individual effort with his assistant editor’s smile, which meant: “Great! but you’ll have to send them in through the regular channels. If I were the chief now—but you know how it is.”

And soon the head waiter bowed before them, desolated to relate that the closing hour had already become chronologically historical; so out all trooped into the starry midnight, filling the street with gay laughter, to be barked at by hopeful cabmen and enviously eyed by the dull inhabitants of an uninspired world.

Grainger left Mary at the elevator in the trackless palm forest of the Idealia. After he had gone she came down again carrying a small hand-bag, ’phoned for a cab, drove to the Grand Central Station, boarded a 12.55 commuter’s train, rode four hours with her burnt-umber head bobbing against the red-plush back of the seat, and landed during a fresh, stinging, glorious sunrise at a deserted station, the size of a peach crate, called Crocusville.

She walked a mile and clicked the latch of a gate. A bare, brown cottage stood twenty yards back; an old man with a pearl-white, Calvinistic face and clothes dyed blacker than a raven in a coal-mine was washing his hands in a tin basin on the front porch.

“How are you, father?” said Mary timidly.

“I am as well as Providence permits, Mary Ann. You will find your mother in the kitchen.”

In the kitchen a cryptic, gray woman kissed her glacially on the forehead, and pointed out the potatoes which were not yet peeled for breakfast. Mary sat in a wooden chair and decorticated spuds, with a thrill in her heart.

For breakfast there were grace, cold bread, potatoes, bacon, and tea.

“You are pursuing the same avocation in the city concerning which you have advised us from time to time by letter, I trust,” said her father.

“Yes,” said Mary, “I am still reviewing books for the same publication.”

After breakfast she helped wash the dishes, and then all three sat in straight-back chairs in the bare-floored parlor.

“It is my custom,” said the old man, “on the Sabbath day to read aloud from the great work entitled the ‘Apology for Authorized and Set Forms of Liturgy,’ by the ecclesiastical philosopher and revered theologian, Jeremy Taylor.”

“I know it,” said Mary blissfully, folding her hands.

For two hours the numbers of the great Jeremy rolled forth like the notes of an oratorio played on the violoncello. Mary sat gloating in the new sensation of racking physical discomfort that the wooden chair brought her. Perhaps there is no happiness in life so perfect as the martyr’s. Jeremy’s minor chords soothed her like the music of a tom-tom. “Why, oh why,” she said to herself, “does some one not write words to it?”

At eleven they went to church in Crocusville. The back of the pine bench on which she sat had a penitential forward tilt that would have brought St. Simeon down, in jealousy, from his pillar. The preacher singled her out, and thundered upon her vicarious head the damnation of the world. At each side of her an adamant parent held her rigidly to the bar of judgment. An ant crawled upon her neck, but she dared not move. She lowered her eyes before the congregation—a hundred-eyed Cerberus that watched the gates through which her sins were fast thrusting her. Her soul was filled with a delirious, almost a fanatic joy. For she was out of the clutch of the tyrant, Freedom. Dogma and creed pinioned her with beneficent cruelty, as steel braces bind the feet of a crippled child. She was hedged, adjured, shackled, shored up, strait-jacketed, silenced, ordered. When they came out the minister stopped to greet them. Mary could only hang her head and answer “Yes, sir,” and “No, sir,” to his questions. When she saw that the other women carried their hymn-books at their waists with their left hands, she blushed and moved hers there, too, from her right.

She took the three-o’clock train back to the city. At nine she sat at the round table for dinner in the Café André. Nearly the same crowd was there.

“Where have you been to-day?” asked Mrs. Pothunter. “I ’phoned to you at twelve.”

“I have been away in Bohemia,” answered Mary, with a mystic smile.

There! Mary has given it away. She has spoiled my climax. For I was to have told you that Bohemia is nothing more than the little country in which you do not live. If you try to obtain citizenship in it, at once the court and retinue pack the royal archives and treasure and move away beyond the hills. It is a hillside that you turn your head to peer at from the windows of the Through Express.

At exactly half past eleven Kappelman, deceived by a new softness and slowness of riposte and parry in Mary Adrian, tried to kiss her. Instantly she slapped his face with such strength and cold fury that he shrank down, sobered, with the flaming red print of a hand across his leering features. And all sounds ceased, as when the shadows of great wings come upon a flock of chattering sparrows. One had broken the paramount law of sham-Bohemia—the law of “Laisser faire.” The shock came not from the blow delivered, but from the blow received. With the effect of a schoolmaster entering the play-room of his pupils was that blow administered. Women pulled down their sleeves and laid prim hands against their ruffled side locks. Men looked at their watches. There was nothing of the effect of a brawl about it; it was purely the still panic produced by the sound of the ax of the fly cop, Conscience hammering at the gambling-house doors of the Heart.

With their punctilious putting on of cloaks, with their exaggerated pretense of not having seen or heard, with their stammering exchange of unaccustomed formalities, with their false show of a light-hearted exit I must take leave of my Bohemian party. Mary has robbed me of my climax; and she may go.

But I am not defeated. Somewhere there exists a great vault miles broad and miles long—more capacious than the champagne caves of France. In that vault are stored the anticlimaxes that should have been tagged to all the stories that have been told in the world. I shall cheat that vault of one deposit.

Minnie Brown, with her aunt, came from Crocusville down to the city to see the sights. And because she had escorted me to fishless trout streams and exhibited to me open-plumbed waterfalls and broken my camera while I Julyed in her village, I must escort her to the hives containing the synthetic clover honey of town.

Especially did the custom-made Bohemia charm her. The spaghetti wound its tendrils about her heart; the free red wine drowned her belief in the existence of commercialism in the world; she was dared and enchanted by the rugose wit that can be churned out of California claret.

But one evening I got her away from the smell of halibut and linoleum long enough to read to her the manuscript of this story, which then ended before her entrance into it. I read it to her because I knew that all the printing-presses in the world were running to try to please her and some others. And I asked her about it.

“I didn’t quite catch the trains,” said she. “How long was Mary in Crocusville?”

“Ten hours and five minutes,” I replied.

“Well, then, the story may do,” said Minnie. “But if she had stayed there a week Kappelman would have got his kiss.”