**A Little Local Colour**

O. Henry

I mentioned to Rivington that I was in search of characteristic New York scenes and incidents — something typical, I told him, without necessarily having to spell the first syllable with an “i.”

“Oh, for your writing business,” said Rivington; “you couldn’t have applied to a better shop. What I don’t know about little old New York wouldn’t make a sonnet to a sunbonnet. I’ll put you right in the middle of so much local colour that you won’t know whether you are a magazine cover or in the erysipelas ward. When do you want to begin?”

Rivington is a young-man-about-town and a New Yorker by birth, preference and incommutability.

I told him that I would be glad to accept his escort and guardianship so that I might take notes of Manhattan’s grand, gloomy and peculiar idiosyncrasies, and that the time of so doing would be at his own convenience.

“We’ll begin this very evening,” said Rivington, himself interested, like a good fellow. “Dine with me at seven, and then I’ll steer ‘you up against metropolitan phases so thick you’ll have to have a kinetoscope to record ’em.”

So I dined with Rivington pleasantly at his club, in Forty-eleventh street, and then we set forth in pursuit of the elusive tincture of affairs.

As we came out of the club there stood two men on the sidewalk near the steps in earnest conversation.

“And by what process of ratiocination,” said one of them, “do you arrive at the conclusion that the division of society into producing and non-possessing classes predicates failure when compared with competitive systems that are monopolizing in tendency and result inimically to industrial evolution?”

“Oh, come off your perch!” said the other man, who wore glasses. “Your premises won’t come out in the wash. You wind-jammers who apply bandy-legged theories to concrete categorical syllogisms send logical conclusions skallybootin’ into the infinitesimal ragbag. You can’t pull my leg with an old sophism with whiskers on it. You quote Marx and Hyndman and Kautsky what are they? — shines! Tolstoi? — his garret is full of rats. I put it to you over the home-plate that the idea of a cooperative commonwealth and an abolishment of competitive systems simply takes the rag off the bush and gives me hyperesthesia of the roopteetoop! The skookum house for yours!

I stopped a few yards away and took out my little notebook.

“Oh, come ahead,” said Rivington, somewhat nervously; “you don’t want to listen to that.”

“Why man,” I whispered, “this is just what I do want to hear. These slang types are among your city’s most distinguishing features. Is this the Bowery variety? I really must hear more of it.”

“If I follow you,” said the man who had spoken flrst, “you do not believe it possible to reorganize society on the basis of common interest?”

“Shinny on your own side!” said the man with glasses. “You never heard any such music from my foghorn. What I said was that I did not believe it practicable just now. The guys with wads are not in the frame of mind to slack up on the mazuma, and the man with the portable tin banqueting canister isn’t exactly ready to join the Bible class. You can bet your variegated socks that the situation is all spifflicated up from the Battery to breakfast! What the country needs is for some bully old bloke like Cobden or some wise guy like old Ben Franklin to sashay up to the front and biff the nigger’s head with the baseball. Do you catch my smoke? What?”

Rivington pulled me by the arm impatiently.

“Please come on,” he said. “Let’s go see something. This isn’t what you want.”

“Indeed, it is,” I said resisting. “This tough talk is the very stuff that counts. There is a picturesqueness about the speech of the lower order of people that is quite unique. Did you say that this is the Bowery variety of slang?”

“Oh, well,” said Rivington, giving it up, “I’ll tell you straight. That’s one of our college professors talking. He ran down for a day or two at the club. It’s a sort of fad with him lately to use slang in his conversation. He thinks it improves language. The man he is talking to is one of New York’s famous social economists. Now will you come on. You can’t use that, you know.”

“No,” I agreed; “I can’t use that. Would you call that typical of New York?”

“Of course not,” said Rivington, with a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you see the difference. But if you want to hear the real old tough Bowery slang I’ll take you down where you’ll get your fill of it.”

“I would like it,” I said; “that is, if it’s the real thing. I’ve often read it in books, but I never heard it. Do you think it will be dangerous to go unprotected among those characters?

“Oh, no,” said Rivington; “not at this time of night. To tell the truth, I haven’t been along the Bowery in a long time, but I know it as well as I do Broadway. We’ll look up some of the typical Bowery boys and get them to talk. It’ll be worth your while. They talk a peculiar dialect that you won’t hear any-where else on earth.”

Rivington and I went east in a Forty-second street car and then south on the Third avenue line.

At Houston street we got off and walked.

“We are now on the famous Bowery,” said Rivington; “the Bowery celebrated in song and story.”

We passed block after block of “gents’” furnishing stores — the windows full of shirts with prices attached and cuffs inside. In other windows were neckties and no shirts. People walked up and down the sidewalks.

“In some ways,” said I, “this reminds me of Kokomono, Ind., during the peach-crating season.”

Rivington was nettled.

“Step into one of these saloons or vaudeville shows,” said he, “with a large roll of money, and see how quickly the Bowery will sustain its reputation.”

“You make impossible conditions,” said I, coldly.

By and by Rivington stopped and said we were in the heart of the Bowery. There was a policeman on the corner whom Rivington knew.

“Hallo, Donahue!” said my guide. “How goes it? My friend and I are down this way looking up a bit of local colour. He’s anxious to meet one of the Bowery types. Can’t you put us on to something genuine in that line — something that’s got the colour, you know?”

Policeman Donahue turned himself about ponderously, his florid face full of good-nature. He pointed with his club down the street.

“Sure!” he said huskily. “Here comes a lad now that was born on the Bowery and knows every inch of it. If he’s ever been above Bleecker street he’s kept it to himself.”

A man about twenty-eight or twenty-nine, with a smooth face, was sauntering toward us with his hands in his coat pockets. Policeman Donahue stopped him with a courteous wave of his club.

“Evening, Kerry,” he said. “Here’s a couple of gents, friends of mine, that want to hear you spiel something about the Bowery. Can you reel ’em off a few yards?”

“Certainly, Donahue,” said the young man, pleasantly. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he said to us, with a pleasant smile. Donahue walked off on his beat.

“This is the goods,” whispered Rivington, nudging me with his elbow. “Look at his jaw!”

“Say, cull,” said Rivington, pushing back his hat, wot’s doin’? Me and my friend’s taking a look down de old line — see? De copper tipped us off dat you was wise to de bowery. Is dat right?”

I could not help admiring Rivington’s power of adapting himself to his surroundings.

“Donahue was right,” said the young man, frankly; “I was brought up on the Bowery. I have been newsboy, teamster, pugilist, member of an organized band of ‘toughs,’ bartender, and a ’sport’ in various meanings of the word. The experience certainly warrants the supposition that I have at least a passing acquaintance with a few phases of Bowery life. I will be pleased to place whatever knowledge and experience I have at the service of my friend Donahue’s friends.”

Rivington seemed ill at ease.

“I say,” he said — somewhat entreatingly, “I thought — you’re not stringing us, are you? It isn’t just the kind of talk we expected. You haven’t even said ‘Hully gee!’ once. Do you really belong on the Bowery?”

“I am afraid,” said the Bowery boy, smilingly, “that at some time you have been enticed into one of the dives of literature and had the counterfeit coin of the Bowery passed upon you. The ‘argot’ to which you doubtless refer was the invention of certain of your literary ’discoverers’ who invaded the unknown wilds below Third avenue and put strange sounds into the mouths of the inhabitants. Safe in their homes far to the north and west, the credulous readers who were beguiled by this new ’dialect’ perused and believed. Like Marco Polo and Mungo Park — pioneers indeed, but ambitious souls who could not draw the line of demarcation between discovery and invention — the literary bones of these explorers are dotting the trackless wastes of the subway. While it is true that after the publication of the mythical language attributed to the dwellers along the Bowery certain of its pat phrases and apt metaphors were adopted and, to a limited extent, used in this locality, it was because our people are prompt in assimilating whatever is to their commercial advantage. To the tourists who visited our newly discovered clime, and who expected a realization of their literary guide books, they supplied the demands of the market.

“But perhaps I am wandering from the question. In what way can I assist you, gentlemen? I beg you will believe that the hospitality of the street is extended to all. There are, I regret to say, many catchpenny places of entertainment, but I cannot conceive that they would entice you.”

I felt Rivington lean somewhat heavily against me. “Say!” he remarked, with uncertain utterance; “come and have a drink with us.”

“Thank you, but I never drink. I find that alcohol, even in the smallest quantities, alters the perspective. And I must preserve my perspective, for I am studyinc, the Bowery. I have lived in it nearly thirty years, and I am just beginning to understand its heartbeats. It is like a great river fed by a hundred alien streams. Each influx brings strange seeds on its flood, strange silt and weeds, and now and then a flower of rare promise. To construe this river requires a man who can build dykes against the overflow, who is a naturalist, a geologist, a humanitarian, a diver and a strong swimmer. I love my Bowery. It was my cradle and is my inspiration. I have published one book. The critics have been kind. I put my heart in it. I am writing another, into which I hope to put both heart and brain. Consider me your guide, gentlemen. Is there arything I can take you to see, any place to which I can conduct you?”

I was afraid to look at Rivington except with one eye.

“Thanks,” said Rivington. “We were looking up . . . that is . . . my friend . . . confound it; it’s against all precedent, you know . . . awfully obliged . . . just the same.”

“In case,” said our friend, “you would like to meet some of our Bowery young men I would be pleased to have you visit the quarters of our East Side Kappa Delta Phi Society, only two blocks east of here.”

“Awfully sorry,” said Rivington, “but my friend’s got me on the jump to-nioht. He’s a terror when he’s out after local colour. Now, there’s nothing I would like better than to drop in at the Kappa Delta Phi, but — some other time!”

We said our farewells and boarded a home-bound car. We had a rabbit on upper Broadway, and then I parted with Rivington on a street corner.

“Well, anyhow,” said he, braced and recovered, “it couldn’t have happened anywhere but in little old New York.”

Which to say the least, was typical of Rivington.