

January, 1940.

Vol. 1. No. 2.

The Abinger Chronicle

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Price Sixpence

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TO BERNHARD BERENSON

Abinger, 1939.

Here on this bank, warmed by the gentle autumn sun,
I sit gazing across the woodlands of the weald,
Through miles on miles of silvery haze, to where far off
I see, or fancy that I see, dim ghosts of downs.
So calm the air, so soft and tender is the light,
That easy it seems to half forget the fevered world's
Miseries and fears and broken hopes. And so my thoughts
Take wing and wander to far lands whither I now
May never go. But most I wish myself with you,
Dear friend, amid those cypress-wooded hills that mount
Beyond Vincigliata and quarried Ceceri
To where by San Clemente we so often have seen
Tuscany spread its grave and gracious landscape out
From Vallombrosa to the far Carraran peaks;
A vision of enchantment, a delight more deep
Than ever elsewhere spirit or sense may hope to know.

Near fifty years have passed since I, a youthful pilgrim
From this remote barbarian isle of mists and cloud,
That Horace and Catullus shuddered when they named,
First wandered downward from the Alps and found myself
In Italy; found too that ancient proverb false:
" 'They change their sky who travel far, but not their soul.'"
Nay for me thenceforth changed were mind and spirit; sown
Were golden harvests of delight. Mid terraced hills
I loitered, and through shadowy gardens, by whose streams
The classic Muses yet might haunt, or Faunus lurk
Spying the bare-limbed Dryades. Long time alone,
A restless half-initiated proselyte,
I strayed at happy random on from town to town
And shrine to shrine, till kindly fortune led me at last
To you and to your friendliness; as once perchance
Youthful Odysseus, wandering into Cheiron's cave,
Found there the master he so long had sought in vain,
Whose guiding wisdom might school and enrich his mind
With arts and knowledge unknown in boorish Ithaca,

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not?—all over the padded portions of the globe. The acquaintances gather and goggle, their mouths fall open, food goes into the mouths and noises come out, neither at the call of necessity, and never simultaneously. (Belching is confined to the Tribes without the Law.) Sometimes the mouths open sideways to express deference, benignity, or repletion. Wearing a blue serge suit which had cost, when new, eleven pounds, I performed these antics with my peers, I too simpered pleasantly.

Then came the dish which transformed our lives.

It was a chicken fricassee.

It was a fricassee of the moister persuasion. The birds lay low in the water and the various vegetable adjuncts scarcely broke its steaming surface. The mixture swished and trembled upon an enormous oval platter, which no doubt was of silver, having regard to the status of the house. The house-boy carried it round, inclining towards each guest with deference but without intimacy, and each guest without looking at the house-boy, swayed both hands leftward, and removed a moderate portion to the plate. When he came to me, he tilted the platter a little, to convenience me further. A piece of chicken dragged its moorings and slid to the edge, another followed, and then the gravy gathered in a great tidal wave, gathering strength as it moved, and rolling little onions in its depths. I was busy simpering, and had no conception of what was upon me. Something stung my wrist. The platter had overbalanced, and the entire fricassee poured over me and splashed on to the carpet.

'Sah, sorry sah, sorry' said the house-boy, waving his foot which had been scalded. I answered with a shriek of laughter. Why is laughter so difficult to describe? I hooted, I yelled, I shrieked. I saw a merrythought perching on my waistcoat and went all faint. An onion bumped, I thought I should have died. Up jumped our hostess, flung away her napkin, took hold of me where I was dry, and led me to a suitable apartment. She too was weak with laughter. The guests jumped up, waving their arms and spluttering, more negroes came running to

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the cries, the children's Scotch Nanny appeared with a bottle of ammonia from the nursery. Not a moment was to be lost if I were to be got right for the government reception. 'Sah, sah, sorry,' repeated the house-boy. He had lost his head, but without animation. I gave him my trousers—in some ways our gravest problem. He dropped them, upon the tessellated pavement of the hall, and they were there, a lamentable concertina, when other guests arrived. Our hostess lent me her husband's sky blue Japanese dressing-gown. Though not of the best period, it was a sumptuous garment, and clad in it I hopped round the house like a tropical bird, now taking a sip of coffee in the dining room, now putting in some work at the pantry sink. 'He likes to look like that' she wailed, indicating me to the newer arrivals. 'He always looks like that. He likes to.'

Afterwards, rationalising the incident, she praised me without stint, she interpreted my hysteria as a deliberate piece of good manners, designed to save her lunch party. It is true that most bankers would not have laughed. Their sense of values is too sound. And King Edward VII is said to have ill-brooked the arrival of a tureen of anchovy sauce upon his shirt front, at a moment when he was cementing the entente cordiale. But it was not true that I had behaved well. I could not help myself; except in the severely scientific sense, I was not behaving at all. 'You were wonderful, quite marvellous' she insisted. Pleasant it was to walk by her side into Union Buildings, and in my blue serge suit too. Miracles had been wrought upon it by the Nanny and negroes, and for a short time I did not look so bad. Towards the end of the reception some ominous clouds appeared, and the drive back to Jo'burg was altogether too searching. I arrived with every grease-spot stencilled in African dust.

So next day it went to the cleaners, and was back in time to be packed for my journey northward. It came out for a mayoral tea at Rhodesia. The noted pattern reappeared, faint at first, then unmistakable. I had it seen to again on the boat, and wore it for a lunch at Mombasa.

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Three days of the red soil of Uganda finished it off, and by Egypt it was clear that it could not be worn again. So when I got home, I claimed from the insurance people and told them the whole story. They forked out four pounds, but not graciously. They said that the underwriters had expressed surprise.

E. M. FORSTER.

THE UNIVERSAL SUBSTANCE

This was invented by a friend of mine, a book-binder, who worked in a cellar in John Street, Golden Square. It could be made into furniture, (his bed and table were both constructed of it); it could be sliced thin and written or printed on like paper; a sheet of it warmed becomes almost as transparent as glass—two of the panes in his window were glazed with it; it can be beaten hard and used for tools, rails, wheels, castors, etc; soaked in water it makes a nourishing and not unpleasant food. He had in his workshop a bookcase made of it (nails and all) in which all the books were printed on it and bound with it.

But though it answers all these purposes, there is in each case some material which answers it better; the furniture made of it is as strong as that made of wood, but it is dearer and more difficult to work; it is edible but probably less nourishing than bread, and certainly less pleasant to taste. It is, in fact, universally second-rate.

So that in hitting every target at once its inventor seems to have missed each particular bullseye, and capital has refused to look at him. He is its only user on any scale, and he lives by book-binding, and in a cellar.

OLIVER W. F. LODGE.

THE OLD

Like beacons on my wild and stormy heath,
 the Old have lit up paths long overgrown.
 There is a comfort in their searching beams
 illumining what they have loved and known.

Long usage sealed their manner into form—
 Much knowledge could give quiet tolerance . . .
 But all the air they wear commemorates
 what they have garnered in life's slow advance!

God maybe spares the Old to comfort youth,
 like beacons giving clue towards an aim.
 I often find the light I have to tend
 has warmed and lit itself at their own flame.

S.S.

Story for Children

THE BURGLAR

Once upon a time there was a man named Bill, who was a burglar. So he got his jemmy and said are there any nice houses in your town, so they told him that an old lady lived in one with her two nieces.

Then Bill took his bag and told his mate Dick about this house. When it was night Bill and Dick went to the house: it had four windows and a door in the middle and it was a very nice house,

The Burglar

So they borrowed the ladder out of the hen-shed and went in. They put the booty into their bag and then they went upstairs again.

First they looked in the old lady's room, she was very ugly and snored, and Dick said we've had enough of this.

Then they went into the eldest niece's room, she was extremely middling and they crept out again so as not to waken her.

Then they went into the youngest niece's room, she had golden hair and was as pretty as could be. And Bill said don't she look lovely, my God why was I born a burglar.

So they crept down as softly as they could and Dick trod on the cat that was asleep in the kitchen, so they put her in the bag too. Then they went home.

Bill's wife was dressing the children and she said here comes Papa so he kissed them each one and told them a tale about a little boy that was turned into a frog.

They called the cat Chilly and she *was* a beauty.

OLIVER W. F. LODGE.



The Abinger Chronicle appears monthly.
The chief contributors are Max Beerbohm, E. M.
Forster, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Desmond
MacCarthy, Oliver W. F. Lodge, Robert Trevelyan
and others.

The annual subscription is 6/- post free, 3/-
for six months post free.

Subscriptions are received at

THE ABINGER CHRONICLE,
CHERRY COTTAGE,
ABINGER COMMON,
DORKING,
SURREY.

(Cheques if used should be made out to
Sylvia Sprigge, no stamps please.)

The first number, Christmas 1939, is sold out.

