A New York Bohemia of the Eighties

By WILLIS STEELL.

RODOLPHE and his friends in Henri Murger's famous "La Vie de Boheme" had nothing on us, a group of bachelor tenants of "Red Hook," a tenement in the heart of New York, in that winter after Benjamin Harrison's election to the Presidency. Those Bohemians only laugh in the opera or in that literature which Verlaine affected to despise; we were the flesh and blood article.

A series of chances brought us together, one of them being the mistake in judgment of a builder who could not see around the corner of New York's great growth and put up a flat building on Forty-third street near Broadway for a tenement class who naturally refused to trust themselves in a neighborhood where everything in the market was dear and Lillian Russell lived just opposite. The house stood vacant until he put out a sign, "Bachelor Apartments," when it rapidly filled up in spite of manifest inconveniences. My own tenancy was certainly dictated by chance; I had come back after two years in Europe, where I learned some things not taught in the Sorbonne; I had a meal ticket at the Berkeley, the Hanover and other houses on the avenue where friends of my family lived, but though I used them lavishly I couldn't afford to move in, and the drab gentility of my boarding house on Thirty-fourth street dampened my spirit, just come to man's estate. So when I saw that sign I bought a heroic Venus of Melos in plaster, an ancient red velvet sofa, a rickety camp bed, and with these I furnished my "apartment."

Before the Day of the Kitchenette.

It consisted of three small rooms, the middle one hardly bigger than a closet, the rear one a tiny bedroom, and the living room, somewhat larger, with a cherry mantel over a grate, which I promptly daubed over with white paint, and two windows. There were four similar suites on each floor, and although nothing was furnished but the four walls, neither service, nor heat, nor—awful omission!—bath, before the second Monday in that November when Harrison was elected forty bachelors called the cheerless place home.

Cheerless, I say? It is true enough the house lacked cheer, but we supplied it. There never was a gayer group nor one apparently so congruous. Before Christmas we were a band of brothers who borrowed indiscriminately, sharing breakfasts (cooked for us by the most trustful nest of darkies from the South in the basement—when they had pancakes down there they would send up a plateful from genuine kindness of heart), books, garments, shoes, money, when any of us had it, and chairs when a host had too many guests for his outfit to seat. And when one of us gave a party, which we were always doing, the rest crowded in without waiting for a formal invitation.

Their brains also could always be drawn upon when at irregular intervals some of us had to do a job of work. Ostensibly I was a New York correspondent, having a weekly letter to send to Chicago and another to New Orleans. Both had to be in the mail by Wednesday at midnight at latest, and neither would have been except that the boys never refused to hear my calls for help.

Round the Correspondent's Table.

So at the last minute of Wednesday evening we would wipe up the beer stains on the work table, and with a pad of paper before me and a pencil in my hand I would gather up the contributions of theatrical and "society" gossip and do my best to make homogeneous what the boys remembered or invented of *faits divers* of the week. While I did my utmost to tone down some of the fanciful stuff, at least to a degree of possibility, nevertheless the good people of the windy West and the languorous South were treated to many a taradiddle, especially at such times when New York was dull, as often happened in those Victorian days, or a racket was going on downstairs where we were impatient to add our voices.

We dealt in these mad letters with only the highest personalities; all our women were "Queens of Society" and our men admirals, statesmen, magnates of finance, &c. We made reputations only at the top, and these great people forever confided to us their most intimate secrets, just as they are supposed to do to none but intimate friends. It was invariably the "I" style. As for instance: "The famous French sculptor Bartholdi, who ran over the pond to view the little island where his statue of Liberty will stand, remarked to me as we stood on the sea wall of Battery Park waiting for Pierpont Morgan's yacht to waft us to Bedloe's: 'My dear Weelis, &c., &c.'"

Or Mrs. Astor, mother of John Jacob IV., would consult me on the marriage of her son to Miss Ava, and I would reassure her that despite his wealth the pair should have a chance for happiness. As one of the gang had seen photographs of rooms in the Astor palace on upper Fifth avenue one of them would be carefully described as the scene wherein I delivered myself of the dictum of a man of the world on this delicate subject.

Mrs. Roberts's Imaginary Partner.

And no doubt Mrs. Marshall O. Roberts must have been mystified if she read in the *Times-Democrat* that she had opened a ball of the 400 sponsored by Ward MacAllister at Delmonico's with no less a partner than the paper's correspondent. As I remember, one of the Bohemians had been corraled by his family and carried off to a charity ball in the Metropolitan, where he had seen this lady wearing a broad red sash and all her decorations, and what he remembered of her costume served to dress her at the former imaginary festivity. Following this letter my salary check from the Southern sheet showed a weekly increase of $5, due, I was sure, to my prominence in society.

These ingenuous stories were, however, subsidiary to the main budget which clung persistently to the theater where, indeed, we were all at home. There were among us actually two or three aspiring actors, persistently "at liberty," and they could sometimes add 'true' news to the gossip the girls we knew in the theaters were kind enough to provide. Altogether I feel that I can boast (since the letters were a collaboration) that this correspondent is *sui generis*, and like Crabbe Robinson deserves republication.

About this time, I think, although it may have been a little later, Mrs. Potter and Kyrle Bellew were preparing to launch a revival of "Antony and Cleopatra," and in this wonderful drama I made my first and thus far my only appearance on the stage. I had a speaking part, too, which makes it all the more astounding. Yes, I was cast for the *Messenger from Sicyon*. My part consisted of but ten words, nevertheless for speaking them at Wallack's I enjoyed the envy of every resident of Red Hook.

It happened in this way: While the cast was being gathered I met on Broadway one day a youth who had been on the loose in Paris when I was. Although his family had recalled him to go into the real estate business in Los Angeles, their home, he had broken away and joined a road theatrical company, which after many hardships finally got back to New York. He was down and down far, yet not without prospects, for an hour before I met him he had been engaged for *Agrippa* in the Potter-Bellew production.

"I'll be all right," said he, "if I can hold out till the opening. I've got enough chicken feed to buy a meal a day, but I don't know where I am to sleep."

"Come on up to Red Hook with me," said I, generously; "no friend of mine shall walk the streets while I have a camp bed and a red velvet sofa to choose between."

The Animated Red Velvet Sofa.

He accepted, of course, and he chose, as I had hoped he would, the red velvet sofa. It had a broken leg, reinforced by Webster's unabridged, and while the sofa had seen its best days before it saw me, still there was a good deal of life in the old thing yet. Too much life for comfort, it seemed to me, when the grate drew well and warmed the room to summer heat, at the same time stirring to liveliness atoms most comfortable to live with when dormant. Need I explain further?

Through his influence with the management I got the part and then began a kind of opium dream which lasted till the opening night. When I got a chance—which was seldom—I intoned my ten words loud enough to get by, and at rehearsals the deficiencies of my figure for wearing of a toga were not too noticeable. But I had no misgivings and, as I said, went about in a dream, heedless of my weekly letter, of everything except the stage, where I made the acquaintance of some charming women, the *Iras*, the *Charmian*. . . . They were all perfectly sweet to me, and wherever they are, Miss Suydam, Helen Tracy and the rest, I kiss their hands in gratitude.

Our costumes were made at last, and I viewed with a faint heart the tights and curly wig and the short, belted garment that only reached my middle. *Agrippa* was a swarthy Western giant and could undress without humiliation. I, on the contrary, blushed with shame when I thought how Helen would have a chance to look me over!

She it was who arranged a little party of selected spirits from the company who were to come over to our "apartment" and teach us to make up. They came, and it was a jolly party indeed, wetted lightly with potations, while *Agrippa* insisted on brewing chocolate as he said (no one believed him) he had seen it brewed in Spain. His method was to heat the poker, a short one, in the coals of the grate and with it stir the melted cakes of chocolate. The two or three "extra" ladies, who "made their bends adornings," refused to taste his mixture.

Meanwhile in my self-revealing clothes I practiced over and over my set speech. The ladies were audience and I entered from the right of the grate when the actor who for the moment assumed Kyrle Bellew's role of *Antony* (he was my rival for the affections of *Iras*) bellowed:

"What ho! the messenger from Sicyon!"

I entered, as I said, and dropping on one knee bawled:

"*Fulvia*, thy wife, is dead!"

Antony gasps and inquires, "Where died she?"

Then, still on one knee, I gave him a scroll with the words, which never seemed to satisfy him in their delivery:

"Her length of sickness and what else betides, this bears."

Well, my rival so fruitfully used his opportunity to make me appear more than naturally ridiculous that when I saw *Iras* smile I lost all sense of hostship and coming in again past the grate I seized the hot poker, wrapped the scroll about and handed it to him, the hot end.

We Break Into Official Circles.

Came a letter from my friend's mother in Los Angeles which definitely instructed him, under pain of her displeasure, to call on Mrs. Benjamin Harrison and her daughter, Mrs. McKee, who, the public prints informed us, had arrived at the Gilsey House to make their wardrobe purchases for the coming inaugural. He tore the letter up with some frightful language.

"What's the use of getting red headed?" asked I, "there's nothing to it. All you've got to do is to leave a couple of cards with your address—that is, my address—and turn up the bottom left hand corner. That means you left them personally. It's providential that you have a mentor who knows the usages of good society."

Well, he did it; the chump did it and returned to tell me that he ran out of the Gilsey before the clerk had time to find out if our grand friends were *chez elles*. With coats off and smoking in the face of the Venus who wore several dirty collars and other discarded apparel about her neck and at the point where her own garment is falling off, for we had long used the goddess as a sort of clothes tree, we laughed at the joke my friend had played on his mother. I even smacked the immobile Venus, dripping with disorder, because she wouldn't crack a smile.

There came a thunderous knock at the door. I opened it. There stood a gigantic flunky, all frogs and metal buttons, who shouted:

"Mrs. Harrison. Mrs. McKee."

And behind him, out of breath from climbing the stairs, stood those ladies. We had forgotten that it was official etiquette for the President's family to return a call on the day it was made.

They came in. They sat on the red velvet sofa. They stayed five minutes or so, talking polite nothings and never seeming to see our Venus and her strange equipment. Then the flunky, who had guarded our portal during the time they honored us, escorted the wife and daughter of our President-elect out of Red Hook.

Agrippa looked at me and I returned the look. We didn't know whether to chuckle or to sob. Finally we laughed.

All, all are gone, the old familiar faces. Where Red Hook itself stood now stands a great playhouse. Agrippa is in real estate in Los Angeles, without hair and with nine children. The only one of the born New Yorkers who giggled with us and made giggle, Cowper fashion, lay for several years in a hospital, paralyzed and with an aneurism. Regularly every month he would send me a postal card, reading: "I am dying. Come. Your last chance. Horace." Then, suddenly and, no doubt, greatly to his surprise, he did die. Ah! well, most of the Bohemians of the vanished eighties preceded him.

The Subway Sandwich

MOST folk who take bourgeois conveyances when going to the ball make the greatest efforts to hide their sartorial splendor. The average man who goes by subway arrayed for a formal function muffles up the magnificence of his boiled shirt as if he feared the detection of stolen property or as if the beautiful white expanse were far too sacred to be gazed on by unwashed straphangers.

Not so the gent seated opposite me in the train last night. . . . .

He was unashamed about the whole business. He wore his topcoat wide open; his muffler fluttered loosely in the breeze of the electric fans. Together with his lovely evening gowned partner, he was the cynosure of all eyes.

But for more than their attire were they the observed of all observers. The gentleman had not seated himself beside his lady more than two minutes when, to the great amazement of the passengers, he placed a small handbag on his knees, unhasped it and, from its depths, extracted a lunchbox.

A lunchbox in a subway car—and on the lap of a gent in a full dress suit! What could it mean? The passengers dropped their papers to their knees and stared devouringly.

Very deliberately the gent drew from the box a sandwich and offered it to the lady. Unprotestingly she took it between her jeweled fingers. Whereupon he dug into the box and brought up a sandwich for himself. Very deliberately they took off the paraffin paper jackets; then simultaneously the pair began to eat.

The train stopped, but not a soul got off. In sheer wonderment at the outrageous novelty of the thing, the passengers sat riveted to their places. What was the idea?

Was this sandwich-eating in evening attire the mystic rite of some new fanatical cult? Were these two bizarre lunchers the initiates of some frolicsome fraternity? Or where they psychologists experimenting with the curiosity of the mob? . . . A passenger of a literary turn of mind immediately remembered Stevenson's "Story of the Young Man with the Cream Tarts." Aha, possibly a suicide pact!

When the gent in the full dress suit and the lady in the evening gown had finished, they both took out embroidered napkins and daintily brushed the last semblance of this light refection from their lips. Then, producing from the little black bag several more lunch boxes, the gent handed some of them to his lady. The covers of the boxes were removed and the pair went about the car depositing a sandwich in the lap of each passenger. When the last passenger had been supplied, the gent in the full dress suit took up his place in the middle of the car. With a bland smile and in a loud voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "why fuss making sandwiches at home? Buy Rollo's Ready Mades, the sandwiches of gentility, a dozen for a dollar; a dozen in a box!"