

The Quest of the English Mutton Chop

By WELFORD BEATON, in the "Seattle Town Crier"

NO matter where I take up the chronicle of the Quest of the English Mutton Chop I can start with an incident, for the event was rich with them. We motored across London from the West End, passing Buckingham palace as the king and queen drove out the great gates in all their regal splendor to visit some hospital. Within fifteen minutes we were delayed by traffic and the engine of our motor stopped. While we were standing a girl of twelve or thirteen passed. She was carrying a baby—a poor, starved, pale and wide-eyed baby. The morning was sloppy and raw. On one foot of the tired little nurse was an almost new, tanned, high-buttoned shoe; on the other nothing but the toe of a slipper, the heel, bare and purple, pressing the wet pavement at every step. Her dress was but one large rag of indefinite color and definite dirt. We told the chauffeur to wait and we watched her enter a store a little farther up the street. Two of us followed her. She was offering a penny for a herring. She was badly frightened when we spoke to her but finally, with the assistance of the grocer, we learned that the penny was all the money they had at home and four of them would have to make their breakfast from the herring. We bought quite a supply of groceries and some candies and took her next door and bought her a pair of shoes. We sent the children and their new possessions home in the grocer's cart.

I am quite sure the grocer thought we were crazy. We got neither a smile nor a word of thanks from the girl; she was apparently starved, physically and mentally, beyond the power of expressing emotion.

And a quarter of an hour before we had seen her king and queen and their brilliant troop of guards clatter out of the palace yard and swing around a monument that cost a million dollars.

At noon we lunched in a quaint little restaurant that reposed in the shade of the great walls that surround Windsor Castle. We were cold and a stew was ready, so we did not ask for the mutton chop. And what a heavenly stew!

Eighty miles across England by the Bath road, built by Julius Caesar to prove that Sam Hill's contentions are right, brought us to that city of a thousand romances, the playground of the early Romans, the parade ground of Beau Brummel, the resting place of kings and queens, the scene of the triumph of Monsieur Beaucaire—Bath itself.

Dinner at the Poulteney hotel was such a tremendously swagger event that we did not dare ask for mutton chops and after seeing the abbey by moonlight we went to bed still wondering if there was really such a thing as an English mutton chop.

Even if there was, it would be too great an undertaking for breakfast, so we did not ask for it. We chart-

ered an ancient hack and drove about the city to see the sights. The driver would turn on his seat at every corner and tell us the names of the street we were approaching.

"What we want to see," I said to him at last, "are the houses where Queen Anne, Sir Walter Scott, Bacon, Charles Dickens, and such people lived."

A long pause.

"They must have been here before my time sir."

We gave it up, but I have been wondering ever since why that fellow did not starve to death in trying to make a living driving visitors about Bath.

We had decided to run the English mutton chop to its lair at lunch, but we spent so much time at the old Roman baths, entering, by mistake, by a workmen's door and finally having to pay to get out, that we ate a hurry-up meal and again took the road.

We were bound for Cheltenham, which a friend in London told us was the most beautiful city in the world. We departed from the main road in order to pass Badminton, the famous estate of the Duke of Beaufort, who must be a very decent sort for he has men stationed at his numerous gates to open them for touring Americans who motor across his broad acres by the tens of thousands. We saw his great pack of hounds returning from a hunt and in one of his parks were so many deer that we nearly ran over some of them.

Leaving Badminton, we bumped into a little town, like a hundred others we saw each day, that looked as they must have looked a thousand years ago, and asked a constable if we were on the right road to Cheltenham. We weren't.

"Where will this road take us?" I asked.

"To Oxford, sir," he replied. (They never forget the "sir" over there.)

"On to Oxford," we agreed and we never saw Cheltenham.

The Oxford hotel is also too swagger. One would never mention mutton chops in such an atmosphere at dinner time.

A side light on the perfection of the English postoffice system can be given here. It has nothing to do with mutton chops, but is interesting.

We had stopped at Fairford for tea and to see the most perfect set of stained glass windows in the world. One of the party remembered she had a friend at Oxford and she wired him to meet us. I took the telegraph to the postoffice—every postoffice is a telegraph office in England—and one hour later when we pulled up at the curb in front of the Oxford hotel the friend forestalled the porter and opened the door of our car. The telegram had been addressed simply to Oxford university, where there are many colleges and something like six thousand students.

I am getting nearer to the mutton chop.

A book could be written on what

we saw in Oxford during a couple of hours next morning—in fact, many have been.

"This pool, ladies and gentlemen, is where the students throw their friends when they get a bit 'squiffy,'" said the old man whom we employed to dash through Christ Church college ahead of us. The pool is in the center of the quadrangle and young fellows who lived to be kings and prime ministers have been chucked into it with their clothes and a jag on, for "squiffy" is Oxonian for "bun" and its infinitesimal.

We were to lunch at Stratford-On-Avon.

"What is the best hotel there?" I asked the porter at the Oxford hotel. "It's the—the I've forgotten the name, sir, but it's the best."

There was an hotel directory on his desk and I found Stratford.

"The Avon?" I asked, starting at the head of the list.

"No, sir."

"The White Hart?"

"That's not the name sir."

"The Shakespeare?"

"That's it, sir, the name escaped me."

I don't suppose you will believe that, but it is the truth. The porter saved his face somewhat by smiling.

"It that the best?" I asked him when he became conscious he was smiling and stopped.

"I don't know, sir. It's the one we always recommend."

We covered the thirty-seven miles in an hour and arrived at The Shakespeare firmly resolved to clear up the mystery of the English mutton chop.

We engaged four rooms and were considerably startled when a bell "boy" about sixty years of age was told to show the ladies of our party up to Richard the Third and Macbeth. I drew Ophelia and my friend Portia. In a daze we mounted the winding stairs to discover that the rooms bear the names of the great bard's characters instead of numbers. We were told our rooms were in the "new" wing. After I had looked at it inside and out I enquired when the new wing was built. The little old lady who seemed to own the place did some dainty figuring on a blotter and told me it had been added 286 years ago. The original building had been erected five centuries before Shakespeare was born.

I decided that this was the place to be firm about the chops.

"We would like a special luncheon,"

I said, "four English mutton chops, with rashers of bacon, baked potatoes, baked tomatoes, and deep apple pie."

"English mutton chops?" asked the little old lady. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Can't we get English mutton chops at such an old English hotel as this?" I asked with simulated surprise.

"I never heard of them, sir."

"Then give us anything you like. We'll be back at half past one."

My friends, divested of their motor wraps, had come down and we left the hotel to visit the house in which Shakespeare was born. When we had reached the sidewalk I broke to them the news about the English mutton chop. Then I had an inspiration.

"Wait here a minute," I said and went back to the hotel.

"Just fix up a lunch with plain mutton chops," I told the little old lady, and when we had visited the room that first sheltered the wee brain that became the greatest of any age, and wandered really awed, through the quaint house that was the home of Shakespeare for the first seventeen years of his life, trod the paths of the garden where, as a boy, he grew the flowers he subsequently wrote about, saw his will with his signature attached, added our names to the seventy-five thousand other ones, representing fifty-five nationalities, that that year had been inscribed in the visitors' register—truly a most marvellous tribute to the memory of any man—we returned to the little old lady.

The chops were almost three inches thick and broiled to a— but I'm late for lunch now and, good lord, how hungry!

The only difference is that they are several million times better and they don't call them "English" mutton chops.

So the story of their quest isn't so much of a one after all.

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