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"THIS IS YOUR HAT, SIR"

by
WILLY

When I came to London a good many years ago, a Swiss colleague, who has long since left the United Kingdom, took it upon himself to "monitor" me a little in the art of behaving like a gentleman in the British Capital. It was he who first drew my attention to the fact that, contrary to habits in Switzerland, it was not possible in England to sign oneself simply with one's main family name, say Smith, as only Lords could do that. It was he who took me to my first round of cocktail parties and he who displayed, in my view, incredible elegance by always wearing a bowler hat and carrying a beautifully rolled umbrella, not forgetting the carnation in his button-hole. It was he, too, who demonstrated to me what purpose a rolled umbrella served: it was not, he explained, to be unfurled in a sudden downpour, but it was used to flag taxis with. He was, it is true, a bit of a snob, who knew exactly what was done and not done, which shops and hairdressers one went to, how one dressed, where one had one's notepaper embossed, and to which Clubs one belonged.

It was this scion of society, this arbiter of elegance, this man who had arrived, who decided I needed taking in hand a little. First I got a hint — a very discreet hint, it is true — that my beautiful new suit, freshly bought at Burton's for fifty shillings, was a fraction too showy. Then I was given an address where I could acquire one of those beautiful umbrellas. Thereafter it was my neckties and shirts. And then, of course, came the inevitable moment for me to become completely "U" by investing in a bowler hat. There was, I was told, really only one hatter where one bought one's bowler. It was in St. James' Street. I went there.

On entering the shop — or perhaps I should say the Establishment — I nearly had an accident by tripping over. The layers of carpet, I do not know how many, were so thick and soft that one of my shoes got caught on one of the outer edges. I was then received by a gentleman who could have stepped straight out of Burke's Peerage. He wore a morning coat and striped trousers of immaculate cut. In his tie he had a fabulous pearl. He looked, I thought, what Dukes must look like. He asked me in an incredibly smooth way what I desired. Not what I wanted. Oh no, what I desired. Well, I desired a bowler hat. The Duke looked at me for a moment and then slowly made his way towards a glass covered cupboard. He returned with a bowler in his hand, gracefully lifted it over to me and said: "Your hat, Sir", while his pearl tie-pin sparkled. I put it on, not without having glanced furtively at the price tag. It fitted. Unfortunately I had the audacity to ask whether, perhaps, I might be permitted to see one or two other models..

The Duke raised his eyebrows a fraction, nodded towards a younger assistant, and said "This Gentleman desires to see one or two more models" and strode away. But how he said this! I was made to feel as crushed as if I had eaten fish with my knife inside Buckingham Palace. I was classified. After this I went through the motions of trying on two other bowlers, finally to declare, with as much dignity as I could muster, that I would, after all, take the first one. The Duke had discreetly observed

all this from a distance. While the assistant did the cashing, the Duke came near once more. He rubbed his hands slightly, like a diplomat about to embark on a tricky speech, smiled benignly, bowed just sufficiently for me to know that I was now dismissed, and said: "As I told you, Sir, this is your hat."

This beautiful piece has been collecting dust in one of my wardrobes for years and years, as I quite soon got out of the habit of wearing it. Year after year my wife has asked me whether she could give it away and year after year I firmly said NO. It then got a cellophane bag for protection and I looked at it occasionally. Then finally I gave way. Thus my bowler has become just a souvenir. It would not happily have mixed company anyway with my newly acquired blue jeans. . . .

THE BELOVED PEAKS

Sudden in the darkness gleam the Dents du Midi
Green light and orange breaking through the dusk
Glistening from the eastward come the rays of morning
Shakes the last pale star in the wide abyss above.

Lamps across the Valais trembling, gliding down the
roadways
Day has followed night in the frozen rifts beyond
Slow is her coming and patient her unfolding
Swift the first bright moment of resplendent dawn.

Crystal clear the air then that floats upon the lake
Cool is the breeze and lithe the winding path
Lithe the winding path that leads upwards to the snows
How longs the heart to speak, the pen to shape in words!

Sudden in its onset comes the tempest from the south
Wild waves and white waves leaping into boat
Howling down the valley drear, foaming through the
Rhône
Man's labour fruitless and lying with the dust.

Grey the first sigh of morning in the wastes of dripping ice
Wreath on wreath of mist lying low on hills
Trailing through the forest, resting on the branch
Hidden in the furling cloud the towering peaks aloft.

Low runs the Thames today, muddy flats unveiling
Wide is the gulf that cleaves the distant scene asunder
Fain would the steps retrace, the eye retrieve its loss
Pluck the wild flower at dawn and view its starry splendour!

E.F.I.

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