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THE ART OF BEING A BOHEMIAN

After All, It's Perfectly Easy If You Can Give the Time to It

By Robert C. Benchley

SOME day, when Fate has delayed your laundry and you have only one clean collar left, go down and take a try at being a Bohemian. You can do it. Hundreds of people, with no worse bringing up than you have had, are doing it, and, after it is all over, and you have had a cold shower, you'll feel ever so much better for it. Your own home life will seem cheerier and brighter and you won't mind the hearth and fireside half so much.

All that you have got to do is, after the day's work is done (the day's work may consist in thumbing a wad of clay into futuristic representations, writing liberated verse, or selling life insurance) to gather with the crowd in some so-called restaurant that has boxes for tables in the front parlor and a bunch of gutta-percha grapes suspended from the ceiling. Then you must toast the proprietor in *eau de quinine* and of course call him by his first name. (*Any* first name will do.) That's practically all there is to Bohemia. The distinction lies in the length of time you can stick it out. If you do it for one night only you call it "slumming." If you have a good digestion and stick out a winter at it, you call it living the wild, free life of Bohemia.

THE charm of Bohemia lies, not so much in its delights (as practiced in this country) as in the alluring things which have been said of it in its native climes. From the *Quarter Latin* of Paris we have had wafted to us triolets and sketches, operas and novels, all fragrant with the long-haired, happy abandon of the French artist, who lives in a garret and eats, to all intents and purposes, nothing at all, but who simply can't sing long or hard enough about Love and Mimi, and the Stars, and the pale, gray fountain in the Parc Monceau.

It is a free life, they would have us know, and one filled with incomparably tender memories.

You will notice, though, that most encomiums on Bohemia are "tender memories" and done in the past tenses. "Those were happy, golden days," or "Long ago, when Love and We were young." Seldom do we get a scented iambic about Bohemia to the effect that the writer is going over to Tony's place *to-night* to eat onion soup and spaghetti *au gratin*. Like the measles, which are so delightful in retrospect because we remember only the period of convalescence and its accompanying chicken and jellies, Bohemia seems to be a state which grows dearer the farther away you get from it.

HOWEVER, no one will deny (and even if any one did, it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me, because this is the nub of my whole story, and if I should concede a point here there would be no use sending it to the editor at all) that the lure of New York's Bohemia is an importation from Montmartre, in Paris, and that the unshaven Frenchman in his corduroy jacket and black tam-o'-shanter, is the artist's drawing for those Americans who come to New York from Waterbury, Conn., or from Erie, Pa., resolved to be Bohemians even if they choke in the attempt. Indeed, the Bohemia of New York has the imitative effect of high school theatricals—plenty of grease paint, properties and costumes—plenty of wonderful hand-painted scenery and all that sort of thing, but somehow, it is emotionally a trifle forced.

However, when the desire to be like a French Bohemian begins to form in your heart, you should make your way to Washington Square and pick a path around delightfully Parisian ash-cans and artistically soiled children until you come to any one of those old barracks which manage to elude the tenement-house law because they operate under the name of "studios." If possible there should be a line of washing hung out in a prominent place. A line of washing in Harlem is crass. In West Eighth Street it is the highest form of Art.

For proper Bohemian garb, any one of those books on the *ateliers* of Paris will furnish invaluable suggestions. If the New York clothing stores are not up (or down) to fitting you out, any costumer will be glad to assist you. Then, when you are properly clothed, and as soon as your studio (or store) has closed, or the packing-boxes are all stenciled, you must get the jolly girls and fellows all together, muss up their hair, and bohême. Some folks bohême in studios, and have their food brought in from an unpicturesque but convenient delicatessen shop. In such cases the great thing is to eat it by candle-light. Or it may be that you will want to dine at Musette's or "The Duke's" or "Phillipa's," preferably in some subterranean resort which is a remodeled residence of the Chester A. Arthur era, where a lubricated meal is served with something red in a bottle, as a premium, at a price that would buy a piece of beef-steak and a good glass of milk at Childs'.

DINING ROOM OF THE BLUE RABBIT

Drawn from the gay life by Myrtle Held

No red-wine restaurant picture would be complete, apparently, without Charlie Falls—first packing box on the right. Clara Tice is showing him how she does her sketches for Vanity Fair. Ethel Plummer in her new spring sport suit in which she goes hunting art editors, is leaving the place with an expression of haughty disdain. Names and addresses of the other characters in this tableau will be furnished on request

THEN, if it happens to be the special or gala night of the week at that particular restaurant, the evening is spent about the tables in just as jolly a revel as you can imagine—among young people who really need the sleep. The girls smoke, whether they like it or not, and the care-free lads all sing French songs (almost *in French*) and clink glasses, and play on a variety of instruments until you'd swear they were being paid for it.

So you see how simple it is to be a true Bohemian—if you can only give the time to it. Bohêming is a thing to be taken up seriously, like skating, and with constant practice and a little gritting of the teeth, you can in time come to be as care-free and unconventional as a Naiad in those art-photographs that they *will* insist on publishing in Vanity Fair.

THE only trouble with this pitiless exposé of Bohemia is that I know practically nothing about the subject at all. I have only taken the most superficial glances into New York's Bohemia and for all I know it may be one of the most delightful and beneficial existences imaginable. It merely seemed to me like a good thing to write about, because the editor might, while reading it, think of a dashing illustration that could be made for it. You know the sort of thing. Men and women sitting on boxes, drinking *eau de quinine*, toasting people, and all that sort of thing. Indeed, the whole article might almost be condensed and made into a page of illustrations with only a very few snatches of the text retained as captions for the pictures. And, if I have been entirely in error in my estimate of Bohemia, maybe some *real, genuine* Bohemian will conduct me, some night, where the lights and good-fellowship are mellow and rich and where we may sit about a table and sing songs of Youth and Freedom, and Love, and Girls, like so many Francois Villons.

I think that in a way I'd like it. It would be picturesque, and then, after all, it does permit one to wear those wonderful shirts with soft collars and no cuffs.

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