

## OLD VESTEY

AT the office old Vestey was considered a bit of a character. He was a simple, good-natured old clerk, who had been out of Paris only once in his life.

It was towards the end of July and every Sunday we all went out into the country round to lie about on the grass or bathe. Asnières, Argenteuil, Chatou, Bougival, Maisons, Poissy, each had its regular visitors, who all swore by their own particular place. The attractions and advantages of all these famous beauty-spots, so beloved of Parisian clerks, were the subject of passionate argument.

Old Vestey was always declaring:

'You fellows follow one another like so many sheep. Wonderful place, your country, I don't think!'

We asked him:

'So, Vestey, you never go out, do you?'

'Excuse me. I do my outings in a bus. After a leisurely lunch in the wine-merchant's shop on the ground floor, I make out my route with a map of Paris and a time-table of the bus routes that gives the connections. Then I climb up on to the top, open my sunshade and off we go. The things I see! Far more than you ever do. I visit different quarters. It's as good as a journey round the world; the inhabitants of one street aren't a bit like those of another. Nobody knows Paris as well as I do. And there's nothing so entertaining as the first-floor windows. The things you see in those rooms, as you pass, you'd never guess. You can imagine the domestic rows just from the look on the face of a man who has raised his voice; you roar with laughter as you drive past, at the sight of barbers gazing out into the street, oblivious of their customer's nose plastered with soap. You return the glad eye of the girls in dress-shops, just for fun, because you don't have time to get off. You see all manner of amusing things!

'It's as good as a play, the simple genuine drama of real life, as you see it from behind a pair of trotting horses. By Jove, I

wouldn't exchange my bus rides for all your stupid walks in the woods!

We suggested:

'Just try it, Vestey; come out for once into the country and see what it's like.'

He replied:

'I did once, twenty years ago, and I'm not going to be caught again.'

'Tell us about it, old man!'

'Right you are! This is what happened. You knew Boivin, the clerk who used to vet all the letters; we called him Boileau?'

'Yes, quite well!'

'He worked in the room with me. The old rascal had a house at Colombes and he was always asking me to come out to his place one Sunday; he used to say:

'Do come, Pantaloon – that was the nickname he gave me as a joke – you'll see what a lovely walk we'll have.'

'Well, like a fool, I fell into the trap and set out one morning by the eight o'clock train. I arrived at a sort of town, a town in the country, where it's impossible to find the way about, and finally I discovered at the end of an alley between two walls an old wooden door with an iron bell.

'I rang; after a long wait the door was opened. What was it that opened the door? At first sight I didn't know whether it was a woman or a monkey. She was old and ugly and her clothes were in rags; she seemed dirty and bad-tempered; there were feathers in her hair and she looked as though she would have liked to eat me.

'She demanded:

'"What do you want?"'

'"M. Boivin."

'"What do you want M. Boivin for?"'

'I felt uncomfortable under the cross-questioning of this fury; I stammered: "But . . . he's expecting me."

'She went on:

'"Oh! you're the bloke who's coming to dinner?"'

'I answered with a hesitant "yes".

'Then, turning round, she shouted into the house in a furious voice:

'"Boivin, here's your guest!"

'This was my friend's wife. Boivin, poor little man, immediately appeared at the door of this lath-and-plaster shack with a corrugated iron roof, which was like a Black Hole. He had on white duck trousers, much stained, and a filthy Panama hat.

'After shaking hands, he took me into what he called his garden; it was at the end of another passage, surrounded by high walls, a little plot about the size of a pocket-handkerchief, shut in by houses so high that the sun only reached it for two or three hours a day. There were pansies, pinks, wallflowers and a few rose-bushes, all struggling to live at the bottom of this airless well, that was like an oven from the heat reflected from the roofs.

'"I've not got any trees," remarked Boivin, "but the walls of the next-door houses do as well; I get as much shade as if I was in a wood."

'He took me by the lapel of my coat and said in a whisper:

'"I want you to do something for me. You've seen my old woman. She's a bit of a Tartar, what! To-day, as you were coming, she's given me clean togs, but, if I get dirty, there'll be the devil to pay. I'm counting on you to water my flowers."

'I agreed, and took off my coat. I turned up my shirt-sleeves and set to work like a black at a kind of pump, which puffed, panted and wheezed like a consumptive and finally only produced a trickle of water like the jet of a drinking fountain. It took ten minutes' hard work to fill a water-can. It made me sweat like a pig. Boivin showed me what to do.

'"Here - this plant - a little more - that's enough; now this one."

'The watering-can had a hole in it and leaked and my feet got more water than the flowers. The bottom of my trouser legs got soaked and plastered with mud. And the process had to be repeated twenty times; I got my feet wet again, I sweated again, as I worked the creaking pump-handle. And, when I was exhausted and wanted to stop, old Boivin pulled me by the arm and begged:

'"One more can - only one more - that'll finish it."

'To show his gratitude he gave me a rose, a fine bloom, but I had hardly put it in my buttonhole when all the petals dropped, leaving me with nothing in my coat but a small green head as hard as a stone; I was dumbfounded but I said nothing.

'Mme Boivin's voice was audible in the distance:

'“When are you coming in? I've told you dinner's ready.”

'We made our way to the Black Hole.

'If the garden was in the shade, the house on the contrary was in the blazing sun, and the second sweating room in a Turkish bath isn't nearly as hot as my friend's dining-room.

'Three plates, with badly washed white-metal forks by the side, were sticking to a table of grained wood. In the centre stood an earthenware dish containing boiled beef done up with potatoes. We sat down.

'A large jug of water, just coloured with wine, caught my eye. Boivin, in some confusion, said to his wife:

'“Look here, my dear, just for once won't you let us have some wine without water?”

'She glared at him angrily:

'“So that you can both get drunk, I suppose, and stay in my house all day making a nuisance of yourselves. Just for once, indeed!”

'He subsided. After the stew she served another dish of potatoes, this time with bacon. The second course having been eaten in dead silence, she announced:

'“That's all; now clear out!”

'Boivin looked at her in amazement:

'“But the pigeon . . . the pigeon you were plucking this morning?”

'She stood up with arms akimbo:

'“You've not had enough, I suppose. Because you invite people in that's no reason for eating up everything in the house. What am I going to have this evening?”

'We got up and Boivin whispered in my ear:

'“I'll be with you in a moment and we'll get along.”

'He went into the kitchen to which his wife had retired, and I heard the following dialogue:

“Give me a bob, darling.”

“What do you want a bob for?”

“One never knows what may happen; it’s awkward having no money.”

‘She raised her voice, meaning me to hear:

“No, you can’t have any money. You’ve given this fellow dinner; the least he can do is to pay for you the rest of the day.”

‘Old Boivin came back to me. As I wanted to show that I knew my manners, I bowed to my hostess and stammered:

“Thank you, Madame, . . . for your kind hospitality.”

‘She replied:

“That’s all right. But don’t bring him home tight, or I shall want to know the reason why.”

‘We started off.

‘We had to cross a level stretch of country as bare as the back of your hand, without any shade. I tried to pick a plant by the side of the path and uttered a cry of pain; it had stung my hand badly – they call the damned things nettles. And there was a stink of manure everywhere, enough to make you sick.

‘Boivin kept on saying:

“Stick to it! We’ll be at the river in no time.”

‘In fact we did reach the river, where there was a vile smell of mud and dirty water, and the sun was blazing down on the water, till my eyes ached.

‘I begged Boivin to go in somewhere; he took me to a sort of shack, packed with people, a tavern frequented by riverside watermen. He said:

“It’s not much to look at but they do you well here.”

‘I was hungry and ordered an omelette. But, lo and behold! Boivin’s second glass of wine went to his head, silly fool, and I realized why his wife only let him have wine and water.

‘He got up and talked at the top of his voice; he wanted to do conjuring tricks and tried to stop a row between two drunk men who were fighting; we should both have got laid out if the proprietor hadn’t intervened.

‘I dragged him away, holding him up as you do with intoxicated

people, as far as the nearest shade and made him lie down. I lay down beside him and I must have dropped off myself.

'We must have slept a good long time, for it was dark when I woke. Boivin was snoring at my side. I shook him and he got up, but he was still drunk, though not so drunk as before.

'We set off again in the dark across the flat country. Boivin insisted that he knew the way. He made me turn left, then right, then left again. We couldn't see the sky or the ground in front of us, and we got lost in the middle of a forest of poles nose-high; apparently it was a vineyard with the vine-props standing. Not a street-lamp in sight! We walked round in circles, perhaps for an hour or two, turning round, stumbling, feeling our way, at our wits' end, without finding the way out, for we were always having to retrace our steps.

'Finally Boivin fell over a sharp stake, which cut his cheek, and remained, quite contentedly sitting on the ground, giving vent to long loud shouts with all the force of his lungs, while I kept crying "Help!" at the top of my voice and lighting wax vestas to show our rescuers where we were and to keep my pecker up.

'At last a belated peasant heard us and put us on our way. I took Boivin along as far as his house. But, as I was on the point of leaving him at the entrance to his garden, the door burst open and there was his wife, with a candle in her hand. I was terrified.

'As soon as she saw her husband, whom she must have been waiting for since it got dark, she bellowed, making towards me: "You wretched blighter, I knew you'd bring him home tight!"

'You bet I ran for it! And I went on running till I got to the station, where I locked myself in the lavatory, for I thought the fury was after me and there wasn't a train for half an hour.

'That's why I've never married and why I never leave Paris.'