

A HAPPY WANDERER--1910

Converts are interesting people. Most of us, if you will pardon me for betraying the universal secret, have, at some time or other, discovered in ourselves a readiness to stray far, ever so far, on the wrong road. And what did we do in our pride and our cowardice? Casting fearful glances and waiting for a dark moment, we buried our discovery discreetly, and kept on in the old direction, on that old, beaten track we have not had courage enough to leave, and which we perceive now more clearly than before to be but the arid way of the grave.

The convert, the man capable of grace (I am speaking here in a secular sense), is not discreet. His pride is of another kind; he jumps gladly off the track--the touch of grace is mostly sudden--and facing about in a new direction may even attain the illusion of having turned his back on Death itself.

Some converts have, indeed, earned immortality by their exquisite indiscretion. The most illustrious example of a convert, that Flower of chivalry, Don Quixote de la Mancha, remains for all the world the only genuine immortal hidalgo. The delectable Knight of Spain became converted, as you know, from the ways of a small country squire to an imperative faith in a tender and sublime mission. Forthwith he was beaten with sticks and in due course shut up in a wooden cage by the Barber and the Priest, the fit ministers of a justly shocked social order. I do not know if it has occurred to anybody yet to shut up Mr. Luffmann in a wooden cage. {4} I do not raise the point because I wish him any harm. Quite the contrary. I am a humane person. Let him take it as the highest praise--but I must say that he richly deserves that sort of attention.

On the other hand I would not have him unduly puffed up with the pride of the exalted association. The grave wisdom, the admirable amenity, the serene grace of the secular patron-saint of all mortals converted to noble visions are not his. Mr. Luffmann has no mission. He is no Knight sublimely Errant. But he is an excellent Vagabond. He is full of merit. That peripatetic guide, philosopher and friend of all nations, Mr. Roosevelt, would promptly excommunicate him with a big stick. The truth is that the ex-autocrat of all the States does not like rebels against the sullen order of our universe. Make the best of it or perish--he cries. A sane lineal successor of the Barber and the Priest, and a sagacious political heir of the incomparable Sancho Panza (another great Governor), that distinguished litterateur has no mercy for dreamers. And our author happens to be a man of (you may trace them in his books) some rather fine reveries.

Every convert begins by being a rebel, and I do not see myself how any mercy can

possibly be extended to Mr. Luffmann. He is a convert from the creed of strenuous life. For this renegade the body is of little account; to him work appears criminal when it suppresses the demands of the inner life; while he was young he did grind virtuously at the sacred handle, and now, he says, he has fallen into disgrace with some people because he believes no longer in toil without end. Certain respectable folk hate him--so he says--because he dares to think that "poetry, beauty, and the broad face of the world are the best things to be in love with." He confesses to loving Spain on the ground that she is "the land of tomorrow, and holds the gospel of never-mind." The universal striving to push ahead he considers mere vulgar folly. Didn't I tell you he was a fit subject for the cage?

It is a relief (we are all humane, are we not?) to discover that this desperate character is not altogether an outcast. Little girls seem to like him. One of them, after listening to some of his tales, remarked to her mother, "Wouldn't it be lovely if what he says were true!" Here you have Woman! The charming creatures will neither strain at a camel nor swallow a gnat. Not publicly. These operations, without which the world they have such a large share in could not go on for ten minutes, are left to us--men. And then we are chided for being coarse. This is a refined objection but does not seem fair. Another little girl--or perhaps the same little girl--wrote to him in Cordova, "I hope Poste-Restante is a nice place, and that you are very comfortable." Woman again! I have in my time told some stories which are (I hate false modesty) both true and lovely. Yet no little girl ever wrote to me in kindly terms. And why? Simply because I am not enough of a Vagabond. The dear despots of the fireside have a weakness for lawless characters. This is amiable, but does not seem rational.

Being Quixotic, Mr. Luffmann is no Impressionist. He is far too earnest in his heart, and not half sufficiently precise in his style to be that. But he is an excellent narrator. More than any Vagabond I have ever met, he knows what he is about. There is not one of his quiet days which is dull. You will find in them a love-story not made up, the coup-de-foudre, the lightning-stroke of Spanish love; and you will marvel how a spell so sudden and vehement can be at the same time so tragically delicate. You will find there landladies devoured with jealousy, astute housekeepers, delightful boys, wise peasants, touchy shopkeepers, all the cosas de Espana--and, in addition, the pale girl Rosario. I recommend that pathetic and silent victim of fate to your benevolent compassion. You will find in his pages the humours of starving workers of the soil, the vision among the mountains of an exulting mad spirit in a mighty body, and many other visions worthy of attention. And they are exact visions, for this idealist is no visionary. He is in sympathy with suffering mankind, and has a grasp on real human affairs. I mean the great and pitiful affairs concerned with bread, love, and the obscure, unexpressed needs which drive great crowds to prayer in the holy places

of the earth.

But I like his conception of what a "quiet" life is like! His quiet days require no fewer than forty-two of the forty-nine provinces of Spain to take their ease in. For his unquiet days, I presume, the seven--or is it nine?--crystal spheres of Alexandrian cosmogony would afford, but a wretchedly straitened space. A most unconventional thing is his notion of quietness. One would take it as a joke; only that, perchance, to the author of *Quiet Days in Spain* all days may seem quiet, because, a courageous convert, he is now at peace with himself.

How better can we take leave of this interesting Vagabond than with the road salutation of passing wayfarers: "And on you be peace! . . . You have chosen your ideal, and it is a good choice. There's nothing like giving up one's life to an unselfish passion. Let the rich and the powerful of this globe preach their sound gospel of palpable progress. The part of the ideal you embrace is the better one, if only in its illusions. No great passion can be barren. May a world of gracious and poignant images attend the lofty solitude of your renunciation!"