Three Prose Fancies

By Richard Le Gallienne

I—A Poet in the City

"In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray."

I (and when I say I, I must be understood to be speaking dramatically) I only venture into the City once a year, for the very pleasant purpose of drawing that twelve-pound-ten by which the English nation, ever so generously sensitive to the necessities, not to say luxuries, of the artist, endeavours to express its pride and delight in me. It would be a very graceful exercise of gratitude for me here to stop and parenthesise the reader on the subject of all that twelve-pound-ten has been to me, how it has quite changed the course of my life, given me that long-desired opportunity of doing my best work in peace, for which so often I vainly sighed in Fleet Street, and even allowed me an indulgence in minor luxuries which I could not have dreamed of enjoying before the days of that twelve-pound-ten. Now not only peace and plenty, but leisure and luxury are mine. There is nothing goes so far as—Government money.

Usually on these literally State occasions, I drive up in state, that is in a hansom. There is only one other day in the year in which I am so splendid, but that is another beautiful story. It, too, is a day and an hour too joyous to be approached otherwise than on winged wheels, too stately to be approached in merely pedestrian fashion. To go on foot to draw one's pension seems a sort of slight on the great nation that does one honour, as though a Lord Mayor should make his appearance in the procession in his office coat.

So I say it is my custom to go gaily, and withal stately, to meet my twelve-pound-ten in a hansom. For many reasons the occasion always seems something of an adventure, and I confess I always feel a little excited about it, indeed, to tell the truth, a little nervous As I glide along in my state barge (which seems a much more proper and impressive image for a hansom than "gondola," with its reminiscences of Earl's Court) I feel like some fragile country flower torn from its roots, and bewilderingly hurried along upon the turbid, swollen stream of London life.

The stream glides sweetly with a pleasant trotting tinkle of bells by the green park-side of Piccadilly, and sweet is it to hear the sirens singing and to see them combing their gilded locks on the yellow sands of Piccadilly Circus—so called, no doubt, from the number of horses and the skill of their drivers. Here are the whirling pools of pleasure, merry wheels of laughing waters, where your hansom glides along with a golden ease—it is only when you enter the First Cataract of the Strand that you become aware of the far-distant terrible roar of the Falls! They are yet nearly two miles away, but already, like Niagara, thou hearest the sound thereof—the fateful sound of that human Niagara, where all the great rivers of London converge: the dark, strong floods surging out from the gloomy fastnesses of the East End, the quick-running streams from the palaces of the West, the East with its waggons, the West with its hansoms, the four winds with their omnibusses, the horses and carriages under the earth jetting up their companies of grimy passengers, the very air busy with a million errands.

You are in the rapids, metaphorically speaking, as you crawl down Cheapside, and there where the Bank of England and the Mansion House rise sheer and awful from, shall we say, this boiling cauldron, this "hell" of angry meeting waters—Threadneedle Street and Cornhill, Queen Victoria Street and Cheapside, each "running," again metaphorically, "like a mill race"—here in this wild maelstrœm of human life and human conveyances, here is the true "Niagara in London," here are the most wonderful falls in the world—the London Falls.

"Yes!" I said softly to myself, and I could see the sly, sad smile on the face of the dead poet, at the thought of whose serene wisdom a silence like snow seemed momentarily to cover up the turmoil—"Yes!" I said softly, "there is still the same old crush at the corner of Fenchurch Street!"

By this time I had disbursed one of my two annual cab fares, and was standing a little forlorn at that very corner. It was a March afternoon, bitter and gloomy; lamps were already popping alight in a desolate way, and the east wind whistled mournfully through the ribs of the passers-by. A very unflower-like man was dejectedly calling out "daffodowndillies" close by. The sound of the pretty old word thus quaintly spoken, brightened the air better than the electric lights which suddenly shot rows of wintry moonlight along the streets. I bought a bunch of the poor, pinched flowers, and asked the man how he came to call them "daffodowndillies."

"D'vunshire," he said, in anything but a Devonshire accent, and then the east wind took him and he was gone—doubtless to a neighbouring tavern; and no wonder, poor soul. Flowers certainly fall into strange hands here in London.

Well, it was nearing four, and if I wanted a grateful country's twelve-pound-ten, I must make haste—so presently I found myself in a great hall, of which I have no clearer impression than that there were soft little lights all about me, and a soft chime of falling gold, like the rippling of Pactolus. I have a sort of idea, too, of a great number of young men with most beautiful moustaches, playing with golden shovels—and as I thus stood among the soft lights and listened to the most beautiful sound in the world, I thought that thus must Danae have felt as she stood amid the falling shower. But I took care to see that my twelve sovereigns and a half were right number and weight for all that.

Once more in the street, I lingered awhile to take a last look at the Falls. What a masterful, alien life it all seemed to me. No single personality could hope to stand alone amid all that stress of ponderous, bullying forces. Only public companies and such great impersonalities could hope to hold their own, to swim in such a whirlpool—and even they, I had heard whisper, far away in my quiet starlit garret, sometimes went down. "How," I cried, "would—

> ". . . my tiny spark of being wholly vanish in your
> deeps and heights . . .
> Rush of suns, and roll of systems, and your fiery
> clash of meteorites,"

again quoting poetry. I always quote poetry in the City, as a protest—moreover, it clears the air.

The more people buffeted against me the more I felt this crushing sense of almost cosmic forces. Everybody was so plainly an atom in a public company, a drop of water in a tyrannous stream of human energy—companies that cared nothing for their individual atoms, streams that cared nothing for their component drops; such atoms and drops, for the most part to be had for thirty shillings a week. These people about me seemed no more like individual men and women than individual puffs in a mighty rushing wind, or the notes in a great scheme of music, are men and women—to the banker so many pens with ears whereon to perch them, to the capitalist so many " hands," and to the City man generally so many " helpless pieces of the game he plays " up there in spidery nooks and corners of the City.

As I listened to the throbbing of the great human engines in the buildings about me, a rising and a falling there seemed as of those great steel-limbed monsters, weird contortionists of metal, that jet up and down, and writhe and wrestle this way and that behind the long glass windows of great water-towers, or toil like Vulcan in the bowels of mighty ships—an expression of frenzy seems to come up even from the dumb tossing steel, sometimes it seems to be shaking great knuckled fists at one and brandishing threatening arms, as it strains and sweats beneath the lash of the compulsive steam. As one watches it there seems something of human agony about its panic-stricken labours, and something like a sense of pity surprises one—a sense of pity that anything in the world should have to work like that, even steel, even, as we say, senseless steel. What, then, of these great human engine houses! Will the engines always consent to rise and fall, night and day, like that ? or will there some day be a mighty convulsion, and this blind Samson of labour pull down the whole engine-house upon his oppressors ? Who knows ? These are questions for great politicians and thinkers to decide, not for a poet, who is too much terrified by these forces to be able calmly to estimate and prophesy concerning them.

Yes ! if you want to realise Tennyson's picture of " one poor poet's scroll " ruling the world, take your poet's scroll down to Fenchurch Street and try it there. Ah, what a powerless little "private interest" seems poetry there, poetry "whose action is no stronger than a flower." In days of peace it ventures even into the morning papers, but let only a rumour of war be heard and it vanishes like a dream on doomsday morning. A County Council Election passeth over it and it is gone.

Yet it was near this very spot that Keats dug up the buried beauty of Greece, lying hidden beneath Finsbury Pavement! and in the deserted City churches great dramatists lie about us. Maybe I have wronged the City—and at this thought I remembered a little bookshop but a few yards away, blossoming like a rose right in the heart of the wilderness.

Here, after all, in spite of all my whirlpools and engine-houses, was for me the greatest danger in the City. Need I say, therefore, that I promptly sought it, hovered about it a moment—and entered. How much of that grateful governmental twelve-pound-ten came out alive, I dare not tell my dearest friend.

At all events I came out somehow reassured, more rich in faith. There was a might of poesy after all. There were words in the little yellow-leaved garland, nestling like a bird in my hand, that would outlast the bank yonder, and outlive us all. I held it up. How tiny it seemed, how frail amid all this stone and iron. A mere flower—a flower from the seventeenth century—long-lived for a flower! Yes, an *immortelle*.

II—Variations upon Whitebait

A VERY Pre-Raphaelite friend of mine came to me one day and said apropos of his having designed a very Early English chair: "After all, if one has anything to say one might as well put it into a chair!"

I thought the remark rather delicious, as also his other remark when one day in a curiosity-shop we were looking at another chair, which the dealer declared to be Norman. My friend seated himself in it very gravely, and after softly moving about from side to side, testing it, it would appear, by the sensation it imparted to the sitting portion of his limbs, he solemnly decided "I don't think the *flavour* of this chair is Norman!"

I thought of this Pre-Raphaelite brother as the Sphinx and I were seated a few evenings ago at our usual little dinner, in our usual little sheltered corner, on the Lover's Gallery of one of the great London restaurants. The Sphinx says that there is only one place in Europe where one can really dine, but as it is impossible to be always within reasonable train service of that Montsalvat of cookery, she consents to eat with me—she cannot call it dine—at the restaurant of which I speak. I being very simple-minded, untravelled, and unlanguaged, think it, in my Cockney heart, a very fine place indeed, with its white marble pillars surrounding the spacious peristyle, and flashing with a thousand brilliant lights and colours; with its stately cooks, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, ranged behind a great altar loaded with big silver dishes, and the sacred musicians of the temple ranged behind them—while in and out go the waiters clothed in white and black, waiters so good and kind that I am compelled to think of Elijah being waited on by angels.

They have such an eye for a romance, too, and really take it personally to heart if it should befall that our little table is usurped by others that know not love. I like them, too, because they really seem to have an eye for the strange beauty and charm of the Sphinx, quite an unexpected taste for Botticelli. They ill conceal their envy of my lot, and sometimes in the meditative pauses between the courses I see them romantically reckoning how it might be possible by desperately saving up, by prodigious windfalls of tips, from unexampled despatch and sweetness in their ministrations, how it might be possible in ten years' time, perhaps even in five—the lady would wait five years ! and her present lover could be artistically poisoned meanwhile !—how it might be possible to come and sue for her beautiful hand. Then a harsh British cry for " waiter " comes like a rattle and scares away that beautiful dream-bird, though, as the poor dreamer speeds on the quest of roast beef for four, you can see it still circling with its wonderful blue feathers around his pomatumed head.

Ah, yes, the waiters know that the Sphinx is no ordinary woman. She cannot conceal even from them the mystical star of her face ; they too catch far echoes of the strange music of her brain ; they too grow dreamy with dropped hints of fragrance from the rose of her wonderful heart.

How reverently do they help her doff her little cloak of silk and lace ; with what a worshipful inclination of the head, as in the presence of a deity, do they await her verdict of choice between rival soups—shall it be " clear or thick ? " And when she decides on "thick" how relieved they seem to be, as if—well, some few matters remain undecided in the universe, but never mind, this is settled for ever, no more doubts possible on one portentous issue, at any rate—Madame will take her soup " thick."

" On such a night " our talk fell upon whitebait.

As the Sphinx's silver fork rustled among the withered silver upon her plate, she turned to me and said :

" Have you ever thought what beautiful little things these whitebait are ? "

" Oh, yes," I replied, " they are the daisies of the deep sea, the threepenny-pieces of the ocean."

" You dear ! " said the Sphinx, who is alone in the world in thinking me awfully clever. "Go on, say something else, something pretty about whitebait—there's a subject for you!"

Then it was that, fortunately, I remembered my Pre-Raphaelite friend, and I sententiously remarked: "Of course, if one has anything to say one cannot do better than say it about whitebait. . . . Well, whitebait. . . ."

But here, providentially, the band of the beef—that is, the band behind the beef; that is, the band that nightly hymns the beef (the phrase is to be had in three qualities)—struck up the overture from "Tannhäuser," which is not the only music that makes the Sphinx forget my existence; and thus, forgetting me, she momentarily forgot the whitebait. But I remembered, remembered hard—worked at pretty things, as metal-workers punch out their flowers of brass and copper. The music swirled about us like golden waves, in which swam myriad whitebait, like showers of tiny stars, like falling snow. To me it was one grand processional of whitebait, silver ripples upon streams of gold.

The music stopped. The Sphinx turned to me with the soul of Wagner in her eyes, and then she turned to the waiter: "Would it be possible," she said, "to persuade the bandmaster to play that wonderful thing over again?"

The waiter seemed a little doubtful, even for the Sphinx, but he went off to the bandmaster with the air of a man who has at last an opportunity to show that he can dare all for love. Personally, I have a suspicion that he poured his month's savings at the bandmaster's feet, and begged him to do this thing for the most wonderful lady in the world; or perhaps the bandmaster was really a musician, and his musician's heart was touched—lonely there amid the beef—to think that there was really some one, invisible though she were to him, some shrouded silver presence, up there among the beefeaters, who really loved to hear great music.

Perhaps it was thus made a night he has never forgotten ; perhaps it changed the whole course of his life—who knows ? The sweet reassuring request may have come to him at a moment when, sick of heart, he was deciding to abandon real music for ever, and settle down amid the beef and the beef-music of Old England.

Well, however, it was the waiter came back radiant with a "Yes" on every shining part of him, and if the "Tannhäuser" had been played well at first, certainly the orchestra surpassed themselves this second time.

When the great jinnee of music had once more passed out of the hall, the Sphinx turned with shining eyes to the waiter :

"Take," she said, "take these tears to the bandmaster. He has indeed earned them."

"Tears, little one," I said. "See how they swim like whitebait in the fishpools of your eyes ! "

"Oh, yes, the whitebait," rejoined the Sphinx, glad of a subject to hide her emotion. "Now tell me something nice about them, though the poor little things have long since disappeared. Tell me, for instance, how they get their beautiful little silver waterproofs ? "

"Electric Light of the World," I said, "it is like this. While they are still quite young and full of dreams, their mother takes them out in picnic parties of a billion or so at a time to where the spring moon is shining, scattering silver from its purse of pearl far over the wide waters, silver, silver, for every little whitebait that cares to swim and pick it up. The mother, who has a contract with some such big restaurateur as ours here, chooses a convenient area of moonlight, and then at a given sign they all turn over on their sides, and bask and bask in the rays, little fin pressed lovingly against little fin—for this is the happiest time in the young whitebait's life : it is at these silvering parties that matches are made and future consignments of whitebait arranged for. Well, night after night, they thus lie in the moonlight, first on one side then on the other, till by degrees, tiny scale by scale, they have become completely lunar-plated. Ah! how sad they are when the end of that happy time has come."

"And what happens to them after that?" asked the Sphinx.

"One night when the moon is hidden their mother comes to them with treacherous wile, and suggests that they should go off on a holiday again to seek the moon—the moon that for a moment seems captured by the pearl-fishers of the sky. And so off they go merrily, but, alas, no moon appears, and presently they are aware of unwieldly bumping presences upon the surface of the sea, presences as of huge dolphins, and rough voices call across the water, till, scared, the little whitebaits turn home in flight—to find themselves somehow meshed in an invisible prison, a net as fine and strong as air, into which, O agony, they are presently hauled, lovely banks of silver, shining like opened coffers beneath the coarse and ragged flares of yellow torches. The rest is silence."

"What sad little lives! and what a cruel world it is!" said the Sphinx—as she crunched with her knife through the body of a lark, that but yesterday had been singing in the blue sky. Its spirit sang just above our heads as she ate, and the air was thick with the grey ghosts of all the whitebait she had eaten that night.

But there were no longer any tears in her eyes.

III—A Seaport in the Moon

No one is so hopelessly wrong about the stars as the astronomer, and I trust that you never pay any attention to his remarks on the moon. He knows as much about the moon as a coiffeur knows of the dreams of the fair lady whose beautiful neck he makes still more beautiful. There is but one opinion upon the moon—namely, our own. And if you think that science is thus wronged, reflect a moment upon what science makes of things near at hand. Love, it says, is merely a play of pistil and stamen, our most fascinating poetry and art is "degeneration," and human life, generally speaking, is sufficiently explained by the "carbon compounds"—God-a-mercy! If science makes such grotesque blunders about radiant matters right under its nose, how can one think of taking its opinion upon matters so remote as the stars—or even the moon, which is comparatively near at hand?

Science says that the moon is a dead world, a cosmic ship littered with the skeletons of its crew, and from which every rat of vitality has long since escaped. It is the ghost that rises from its tomb, every night to haunt its faithless lover, the world. It is a country of ancient silver mines, unworked for centuries. You may see the gaping mouths of the dark old shafts through your telescopes. You may even see the rusting pit tackle, the ruinous engine-houses, and the idle pick and shovel. Or you may say that it is counterfeit silver, coined to take in the young fools who love to gaze upon it. It is, so to speak, a bad half-a-crown.

As you will! but I am of Endymion's belief—and no one was ever more intimate with the moon. For me the moon is a country of great seaports, whither all the ships of our dreams come home. From all quarters of the world, every day of the week, there are ships sailing to the moon. They are the ships that sail just when and where you please. You take your passage on that condition. And it is ridiculous to think for what a trifle the captain will take you on so long a journey. If you want to come back, just to take an excursion and no more, just to take a lighted look at those coasts of rose and pearl, he will ask no more than a glass or two of bright wine ; indeed, when the captain is very kind, a flower will take you there and back in no time ; if you want to stay whole days there, but still come back dreamy and strange, you may take a little dark root and smoke it in a silver pipe, or you may drink a little phial of poppy-juice, and thus you shall find the Land of Heart's Desire ; but if you are wise and would stay in that land forever, the terms are even easier : a little powder shaken into a phial of water, a little piece of lead no bigger than a pea and a farthing's worth of explosive fire, and thus also you are in the Land of Heart's Desire for ever.

I dreamed last night that I stood on the blustering windy wharf, and the dark ship was there. It was impatient, like all of us, to leave the world. Its funnels belched black smoke, its engines throbbed against the quay like arms that were eager to strike and be done, and a bell was beating impatient summons to be gone. The dark captain stood ready on the bridge, and he looked into each of our faces as we passed on board. " Is it for the long voyage ? " he said. " Yes ! the long voyage," I said—and his stern eyes seemed to soften as I answered.

At last we were all aboard, and in the twinkling of an eye were out of sight of land. Yet, once afloat, it seemed as though we should never reach our port in the moon—so it seemed to me as I lay awake in my little cabin, listening to the patient thud and throb of the great screws, beating in the ship's side like a human heart.

Talking with my fellow-voyagers, I was surprised to find that we were not all volunteers. Some in fact complained pitifully. They had, they said, been going about their business a day or two before, and suddenly a mysterious captain had laid hold of them, and pressed them to sail this unknown sea. Thus, without a word of warning, they had been compelled to leave behind them all they held dear. This one felt was a little hard of the captain ;

but those of us whose position was exactly the reverse, who had friends on the other side, all whose hopes indeed were invested there, were too selfishly expectant of port to be severe on the captain who was taking us thither.

There were three friends I had especially set out to see : two young lovers who had emigrated to those colonies in the moon just after their marriage, and there was another. What a surprise it would be to all three, for I had written no letter to say I was coming. Indeed, it was just a sudden impulse, the pistol flash of a long desire.

I tried to imagine what the town would be like in which they were now living. I asked the captain, and he answered with a sad smile, that it would be just exactly as I cared to dream it.

" O, well then," I thought, " I know what it will be like. There shall be a great restless, tossing estuary, with Atlantic winds for ever ruffling the sails of busy ships, ships coming home with laughter, ships leaving home with sad sea-gull cries of farewell. And the shaggy tossing water shall be bounded on either bank with high granite walls, and on one bank shall be a fretted spire soaring with a jangle of bells, from amid a tangle of masts, and underneath the bells and the masts shall go streets rising up from the strand, streets full of faces, and sweet with the smell of tar and the sea. O, captain, will it be morning or night when we come to my city ? In the morning my city is like a sea-blown rose, in the night it is bright as a sailor's star.

" If it be early morning, what shall I do ? I will run to the house in which my friends lie in happy sleep, never to be parted again, and kiss my hand to their shrouded window ; and then I will run on and on till the city is behind and the sweetness of country lanes is about me, and I will gather flowers as I run, from sheer wantonness of joy, and then at last, flushed and breathless, I will stand beneath her window. I shall stand and listen, and I shall hear her breathing right through the heavy curtains, and the hushed garden and the sleeping house will bid me keep silence, but I shall cry a great cry up to the morning star, and say, 'No, I will not keep silence. Mine is the voice she listens for in her sleep. She will wake again for no voice but mine. Dear one, awake, the morning of all mornings has come!'"

As I write, the moon looks down at me like a Madonna from the great canvas of the sky. She seems beautiful with the beauty of all the eyes that have looked up at her, sad with all the tears of all those eyes; like a silver bowl brimming with the tears of dead lovers she seems. Yes, there are seaports in the moon, there are ships to take us there.