

## A Sentimental Cellar

By George Saintsbury

[It would appear from the reference to a "Queen" that the following piece was written in or with a view to the reign of Queen Anne, though an anachronism or two (such as a reference to the '45 and a quotation from Adam Smith) may be noted. On the other hand, an occasional mixture of "you" and "thou" seems to argue a date before Johnson. It must at any rate have been composed for, or in imitation of the style of, one or other of the eighteenth-century collections of Essays.]

IT chanced the other day that I had a mind to visit my old friend Falernianus. The maid who opened the door to me showed me into his study, and apologised for her master's absence by saying that he was in the cellar. He soon appeared, and I rallied him a little on the gravity of his occupation. Falernianus, I must tell you, is neither a drunkard nor a man of fortune. But he has a pretty taste in wine, indulges it rather in collection than in consumption, and arranges his cellar (or, as he sometimes calls it, "cellaret") himself, having no butler or other man-servant. He took my pleasantry very good-humouredly; and when I asked him further if I might behold this temple of his devotions he complied at once. "'Tis rather a chantry than a temple,  
Eugenius,"

Eugenius," said he, "but you are very welcome to see it if you please ; and if you are minded to hear a sermon, perhaps I can preach one different from what you may expect at an Oracle of the Bottle."

We soon reached the cavern, which, indeed, was much less magnificent than that over which Bacbus presided ; and I perused, not without interest (for I had often tasted the contents), the various bins in which bottles of different shapes and sizes were stowed away with a modest neatness. Falernianus amused himself, and did not go so far as to weary me, with some tales of luck or disappointment in his purchases, of the singular improvement of this vintage, and the mortifying conduct of that. For these wine-lovers are curious in their phrase ; and it is not disgusting to hear them say regretfully that the claret of such and such a year "has not spoken yet" ; or that another was long "under the curse of the seventies." This last phrase, indeed, had a grandiloquent and romantic turn which half surprised me from my friend, a humourist with a special horror of fine speech or writing, and turning sharply I saw a smile on his lips.

"But," said I, "my Falernianus, your sermon ? For I scarce think that this wine-chat would be dignified by you with such a name."

"You are right, Eugenius," answered he, "but I do not quite know whether I am wise to disclose even to you the ruling fancy under which I have formed this little liquid museum, or Baccheum if you prefer it."

"I think you may," said I, "for in the first place we are old enough friends for such confidences, and in the second I know you to be too much given to laugh at your own foibles to be greatly afraid of another's ridicule."

"You say well," he said, "so mark ! For if my sermon inflicts  
what

what our toasts call ennui upon you, remember that in the words of their favourite Molière, 'You have willed it.'

"I do not, Eugenius, pretend to be indifferent to good wine in itself. But when I called this little cellar of mine just now a museum I did no dishonour to the daughters of Mnemosyne. For you will observe that wine, by the fact of its keeping powers and by the other fact of its date being known, is a sort of calendar made to the hand of whoso would commemorate, with a festive solemnity, the things that are, as Mr. Dryden says,

'Hid in the sacred treasure of the past.'

If not the mere juice of the grape (for the merit of the strongest wine after fifty or sixty years is mostly but itself a memory), strong waters brewed on the day of a man's birth will keep their fire and gain ever fresh mellowness though he were to outlive the longest lifetime; and in these little flasks here, my Eugenius, you will find a cup of Nantz that was born with me, and that will keep its virtues long after thou and I have gone to solve the great enigma. Again, thou seest those pints of red port which nestle together? Within a few days, Eugenius, of the time when that must was foaming round the Douro peasants, I made mine entrance at the University. You can imagine with what a mixture of tender and humorous feelings I quaff them now and then. When their juice was tunned, what amiable visions, what boyish hopes floated before my eyes! I was to carry off all that Cam or Isis had of honours or profit, all that either could give of learning. I was to have my choice of learned retirement on the one hand, or of ardent struggle at the hoarse bar on the other, with the prizes of the senate beyond. They were scarce throwing down their crust when that dream faded; they

they had scarce become drinkable by a hasty toper before I saw clearly that metaphysical aid was wanting, and that a very different fate must be mine. I make no moan over it, Eugenius, and I puff away like a worse than prostitute as she is, the demon Envy when she whispers in my ear the names of Titius or Seius, and adds, 'Had they better parts, or only better stars than you?' But as they fable that the wine itself throbs with the early movement of the sap in the vines, so, Eugenius, when I sip that cordial (and truth 'tis a noble vintage) the old hopes, the old follies, the old dreams waken in me, and I am once more eighteen.

"Look yonder again at those cobwebbed vessels of various shapes that lie side by side, although of different vineyards, in the peaceful bins. They all date from a year in which the wheel of fortune brought honest men to the top in England; and if only for a brief space, as, I am told, they sing in North Britain, 'the de'il went hame wi' a' the Whigs before him' (I must tell you, Mr. —, that Falernianus, though a loyal subject to our good Queen, is a most malignant Tory, and indeed I have heard him impeached of Jacobitism by ill-willers). But no more of politics." He paused a moment and then went on: "I think I see you smile again, Eugenius, and say to yourself, 'These are but dry-lipped subjects for so flowing a calendar.' And to tell the truth, my friend, the main part of my ephemerides of this kind has been filled by the aid of the goddess who was ever nearest and kindest to Bacchus. In yonder bin lie phials of the mightiest port that Lusitanian summers ever blackened, and flasks of sack from the more southern parts of that peninsula, which our Ben or his son Herrick would have loved. In the same year which saw the pressing of these generous juices the earth was made more fair by the birth of Bellamira and Candiopé. The blackest purple of the Lusitanian grape is not so black as the tresses of Candiopé's hair,  
nor

nor doth the golden glow of the sherris approach in flame the locks of Bellamira ; but if I let the sunlight play through both, Love, with fantastic triumph, shows me, as the bright motes flicker and flee through the sack, the tawny eyes of Candiope, and the stain, no longer black or purple, but rosy red, that floats from the Oportian juice on the white napery, recalls the velvet blush of Bellamira's cheek."

"And this?" I said, pointing to a bin of Bordeaux near me. "Thou shalt try it this very day," said Falernianus with a laugh, which I thought carried off some feelings a little overstrained ; "'tis a right pleasant wine, and they made it in the year when I first saw the lips of Damaris. The flavour is not unlike theirs, and if it should fluster thine head a little, and cause thee what men call heartburn, I will not say that the effects are wholly dissimilar." It is not like Falernianus even to jest at women, and I turned to another. His face cleared. "Many a year has passed," he said, "since the grape that bore that juice was gathered, and even as it was ripening it chanced that I met Lalage and won her. The wine was always good and the love likewise ; but in neither in their early years was there half the pleasure that there is now. But I weary you, Eugenius, and perhaps the philosopher speaks truly in saying that these things are not matters of sympathy, or, as the Scripture saith, a stranger is not partaker of them. Suffice it to say that these imprisoned rubies and topazes, amethysts and jacinths, never flash in the glass, nor collect their deeper body of colour in the flagon, without bringing a memory with them, that my lips seldom kiss them without recalling other kisses, my eye never beholds them without seeing other colours and other forms in 'the sessions of sweet silent thought.' At the refining of this elixir I assumed the virile gown ; when that nectar was fit for drinking I made my first appearance in the field of letters ; and

this again recalls the death of dear friends and the waning of idle hopes. When I am dead, or if any reverse of fortune makes me part with this cabinet of quintessence, it will pass to heirs or purchasers as so much good wine and nothing more. To me it is that and much more—a casket of magic liquors, a museum, as I have called it, of glasses like that of Dr. Dee, in which I see again the smile of beauty and the hope of youth, in which once more I win, lose, possess, conquer, am defeated; in which I live over again in the recesses of fantasy the vanished life of the past.

“But it is not often that I preach in this fashion. Let us take a turn in the garden while they get dinner ready, that you may taste,” and he smiled, “that you may taste—if you dare—the wine that I have likened to the lips of Damaris.”