

The Sophistication of Avril

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A GIRL in a yellow slicker walked beneath the grey spires of High Street, Oxford, smoking a cigarette. Her cap, which was cocked on one side revealing yellow bobbed hair, marked her as an "undergraduette" of that ancient University. It was a puffy, black four-cornered monstrosity, a cross between a mortarboard and a tam-o'-shanter. Not the slicker alone—although an innovation on the east side of the Atlantic—nor the flaunting disregard of the University rule which prohibits smoking in academic dress—not these alone would suffice to attract the obvious interest lavished upon her by the passing Oxonians. For the first commandment in the decalogue of every Oxford man is: "Thou shalt not display interest in anything."

"Rather ripping, that," observed one athlete to another, as they cycled, hairy knees exposed, toward the river.

A fair aesthete in a turtle-neck sweater and delicate orchid "bags," twenty-five inches at the flapping knees, quoted reassuringly to himself, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara, in my fashion."

"Hot number," remarked a Rhodes Scholar.

"Ravissante," commented the elegant Viscount Marismore to a sympathetic gargyle.

An anemic scholar in a long gown ransacked his mind for a line from Petronius.

The yellow slicker turned into the winding Turl. It swished past a capped and gowned figure bearing a silver sceptre, followed by the Vice-Chancellor of the University in all his majesty.

"Good afternoon," said the girl, with just the correct blend of nonchalance and deference. The dignitary, Olympian, stroked his beard and tried without success to appear unconscious of her.

She stopped before an arched doorway to greet her classics tutor, a carelessly-dressed young man of twenty-five, who had just been petting the Exeter College cat. Although

Hilary Bynnes ballooned in "plus-fours" as voluminously as any undergraduate, a certain mellowed, disillusioned air of having mastered the sum of human knowledge and of having found it nothing to get particularly agitated about, invested him as an Oxford don.

"You should be careful, Miss Doheny," he said casually, "how you go about—what do you Americans call it?—knocking people cold. The Vice-Chancellor has been notoriously pickled in Port for the last thirty years. A bit of excitement might be fatal to him."

"One presumes that a Vice-Chancellor should have arrived at the age of discretion," she replied. "And please don't pretend you have difficulty in remembering American slang. Everyone knows that your year's fellowship at Yale Americanized you frightfully."

"Yes, but most of the greybeards haven't yet become reconciled to the fair invasion of our celibate cloisters. And such a startling object as a yellow slicker—well, you may have heard that Oxford has certain conservatism."

"I don't imagine that the English undergraduettes—slaves of a Serious Purpose—startle the mossbacks much."

"Sneer not at a Serious Purpose. The American college girl also has her serious purpose—matrimony." Mr. Bynnes sprang to the defence of English womanhood patriotically. "But I realize that beside the Flaming Youth of your Vassar, say, the Oxford undergraduette might appear a bit stodgy."

"And should one add—drab?"

"The well-known American democracy, Miss Doheny," philosophized the Englishman, "permeates all aspects of your life except the political. Through the bounty of nature and the perfection of art all American girls manage to avoid singeing one's eyelashes. They are all chic, animated, neat, and obviously unreal. Even those with homely features and bad complexions manage to transform themselves miraculously. Not that I object. I have always rejoiced to believe that 'Great is Delusion and will prevail.' Of course there are charming exceptions"—the Oxford bow consists in inclining the forehead two inches—"but it is a bit perplexing not to be able to tell a shop-girl from a college-graduate in looks, language, dress, manners, or ideas. Now, for better or for worse, an English girl is what she is. If she is by nature

homely, she manages to make herself as homely as possible. But when she is beautiful, she is a goddess unadorned."

"Truly? But perhaps my experience has been limited, since I am not in a college. I had got the impression, — well—"

"Yes?"

"I had received the impression that all English girls wore red-flannel underwear."

II.

Merdlyn College, Oxford,
Tuesday.

Dear Miss Evelyn;

An American tutee of mine, Avril Doheny, believes that all English girls wear red-flannel underwear. Will you have tea with us at my room in Merdlyn next Saturday, to correct her misinformation?

Yrs.,

Hilary Bynnes.

III.

The slim spires on the gate-tower of Merdlyn College rose, burgeoning out of the mist, before the eyes of the girl in the yellow slicker.

"Rather a decent custom, this," thought Avril," for Oxford men never to call for girls when they invite them anywhere. Going to even the tamest tea gives one the deliciously wicked sensation of keeping an assignation-----But it does make one feel dreadfully forward, poking about asking college porters where men's rooms are."

She entered the ogival doorway as the great bells overhead were chiming quarter to five. A tall, superb girl with amber hair was conversing with the porter at the door of his lodge.

"You know where the Great Quad is, miss? Staircase number fourteen, third to your left as you go in, miss," he said in more deferent tones than usual, she observed. Like most old Oxford servants, the Merdlyn porter resented the intrusion of women into his domain.

The tall girl moved ahead and stopped to read a notice on the bulletin board. In passing, Avril glanced at it:

Gentlemen wishing tickets
for the Merdlyn Ball
please secure them at the
Porter's Lodge immediately.

One would feel aristocratic going to the Merdlyn Ball, thought Avril. For Merdlyn was acknowledged to be a very exclusive college. But Hilary—or, rather Mr. Bynnes: one should not think of one's tutor by his first name, should one?—was leaving Oxford just after the end of the term, for some mountain-climbing in Norway. And strangely enough, she had not many acquaintances in Merdlyn.

Through a low stone passageway and a cloister court she went into the Great Quad. Entering a dark doorway, she ascended the spiral staircase to the second floor and knocked.

Hilary Bynnes admitted her with animation to a large, oak-panelled room decorated with a tortured Cezanne, a brown wooden Polynesian thunderbird, and photographs of snow-capped mountains.

From the soft depths of a stuffed chair an elegant young man rose languidly.

"Miss Doheny, a compatriot, Mr. Parker of Virginia and Merdlyn." Mr. Parker's graceful way of meeting her was a true Virginian blend of warmth and composure, she noticed. And what splendid, delicate eyebrows he had!

A few moments later Hilary Bynnes admitted the tall girl whom Avril had left scrutinising the poster for the Merdlyn Ball. Upon being introduced, the girls greeted each other with reserve, and slight evidences of mutual distrust upon the eyelids.

Her features are more regular than mine, observed Avril, with a bit of envy, and I like amber hair, and her cheeks are pink but not red, and she does not wear spectacles. She is more beautiful than I am, but she is austere. And her feet are slightly large. But who imagined that an Oxford coed could dress so stunningly?

"The purpose of this tea," announced Bynnes, "is to promote Anglo-American discord."

This badinage contained more than a little truth. Hilary

Bynnes was a student of feminine mentality as well as of Greek lyrics. And it might be interesting to bring together the vivacious American, a bit over-weening from her easy conquest of Oxford, and the beautiful English girl who went about with the younger literary set in London, wrote Baudelairian verse, and knew Aldous Huxley. And Trevor Parker might serve excellently as an apple of discord. He was a bit ignorant, but a master of *savoir faire*. And all the ladies found him so charming! The girls surely could not help trying to impress him.

"Do you not find Oxford rather monastic----after an American university, Miss Doheny?" asked Frances Evelyn, with perhaps a hint of malice.

"Oxford is monastic," replied Avril, "but Oxford men are not monks."

"In support of which remark I am impelled to a breach of confidence," volunteered the young don. "It is dangerous for one of my age to be made a father-confessor. As witness the monk in Thais. In fact sixteen Oxonians in two and a half terms have offered to forego the vows of celibacy in Miss Doheny's behalf. They include, I believe, two bloods from Christ Church, a Hungarian baron from Oriel, a professor of Assyriology, two absinthe-drinking poets from New College, the Maharajah of Swampuri from Balliol, a student of theology from Keble, a South African (white) from St. Edmund's Hall, and seven football players from Brasenose."

"I see that Merdlyn is not represented on your list," said Parker with Southern Gallantry. "I dare say that Bynnes or I will crash through for the honor of our college."

"I think I shall eventually marry a man from Merdlyn," said Avril whimsically, a bit pleased to take the center of the stage, "because Merdlyn has such ugly gargoyles. After looking at them every day for three or four years, he would be certain to be a realist----- For these spires and cloisters and chapels can make young men so sentimental."

Trevor Parker made some fatuous but complimentary remark, and Frances Evelyn said to Avril with ennui:

"So you intend to marry? I suppose it is in vogue to be old-fashioned now."

Avril observed a sly smile on the lips of Hilary as he removed the scones and crumpets and passed the cakes.

The tea-kettle whistled on the open fire; across the quad Avril watched a stray shaft of light move athwart the Chapel window, kindling a glory of rich magentas and blues and gold; the long English twilight thickened a little; and the conversation sputtered on in an atmosphere of paradox.

IV.

Avril continued to keep the lead, and chattered vivaciously on trivial matters. Miss Evelyn continued rather quiet and reserved, convinced that American girls were aggressive. Avril decided to give the conversation an intellectual turn. Edna St. Vincent Millay was under discussion.

"The hope for the paganization of America," expounded Avril, "lies in the American girl. She believes neither in Santa Claus nor in Dr. Sylvester Hall. As you know, I am a devotee of the Greek ideal. And every once in a while in America I meet a girl who pays devotion to the Pagan Trinity of Love, Beauty and Wisdom. On the whole, I might say, the third person of the Trinity is somewhat neglected. But unless the influence of Deans of Women continues to increase, I dare say that will come too. For the necessary introduction to the theme of Reason is the removal of inhibitions."

"Why be so hostile to inhibitions?" asked Miss Evelyn languorously. "Breaking them is half the fun."

Avril had no reply forthcoming, and the English girl continued:

"And don't you find the Pagan virtues a bit strenuous? For my part, I am glad I was born in a milieu of decadence. Of course you are all wonderfully young and untainted and all that in America as yet. The Greek ideal may suit you very well. But in Europe we are a little weary. We are learning at last that Wisdom is useless in a world of fools, that Love usually becomes eroticism, and that Beauty must reconcile itself to shine from a frame of corruption:

'The flower that out of evil grows
Hath scent more sweet than any rose.'

Decadence has its joys, too,—rather neurotic ones, perhaps, but pleasures with a rare poignancy, like Stravinsky's music and opium dreams."

"But can they last?" asked Avril, a bit frightened at such ruthless sophistication.

"My dear, the world has always been decadent. Decadence is the only thing that lasts."

Cakes being disposed of and cigarettes lighted, the host poured out the sherry. Trevor Parker watched the fire glow through the wine, lighting it to the pellucid amber of Frances Evelyn's hair. His toast showed that he had not quite caught the drift of her ideas:

"The French girl is champagne: fizz and froth, quick intoxication, and you have to drink it fast or it leaves you; the Viennese is absinthe: divine delirium; the signorina is Chianti: the inspirer of street songs and tinkling gaiety; the Spanish girl is cognac: sudden death. But the English girl is old sherry: the richness and bloom of life!"

With Virginian idealization of women he pictured the pure face of Frances Evelyn in a mansion smiling, madonna-like, on a bevy of rosy-cheeked children.

When the others had drunk the toast, Frances Evelyn said:

"I am sorry, but I am on a diet of straight vermouth." She pulled forth a pocket-flask, and asked Hilary for an empty glass. Trevor Parker, shocked, lapsed into meditation.

The conversation played lazily over Norman Douglas' latest novel, the approaching Eights Week, what was the most difficult peak to climb in Switzerland, the long whiskers on the porter of All Souls College, the immortality of matter, and lectures as a survival of medievalism; flickering out at length, like all Oxford conversations, in irrelevancy.

V.

Hilary Bynnes put a record on the gramophone, and a raucous fox-trot blared forth. The tea-table was pulled back, and the rugs and chairs were piled in the adjacent bed-room. Trevor Parker, who sat next to Avril, of course asked her for the first dance. They whirled away blithely, but not more so than the young Englishman and Frances Evelyn.

"There are no flies on my tutor, eh what?" remarked Avril to the gentleman from Virginia.

On the next dance, a Viennese waltz, they changed

partners. And Avril, strangely enough, was not sorry. Trevor was a superb dancer, but one's tutor----had anyone ever such a tutor as Hilary Bynnes?

"Oxford isn't so conservative after all, you know," she confided to him as they glided to the strains of the waltz. "Isn't this new rule rather wonderful that permits you to dispense with a chaperone if two girls come together?"

"It may be wonderful," he replied, indicating the other couple, "but it is not wise."

As they waltzed past, Frances Evelyn was heard to say to the Virginian: "Of course you do it beautifully, but petting was really not originated in America. It had been developed to a high art in England when Poughkeepsie, New York, was covered with wigwams."

VI.

"You, my beloved Avril," said Hilary Bynnes, "are really not wild at all. You are a domestic little person, and would make a very good wife for a scholar. The Chaplain of Merdlyn College has a deep voice, and intones the Anglican marriage-service with great unction. The day after the Merdlyn Ball would be a good time to start for our honeymoon in Norway."

"It would be rather a dramatic gesture to marry one's tutor," replied Avril, not in the least cowed, "and you have not taught me Sophocles for nothing."

"Oh, by the way," said Hilary after a few moments, "Avril, when you prepare your trousseau...."

"Yes?"

"Please omit red-flannels."