

FANTASMANIA

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AFTER the Great Earthquake which devastated Fantasia, I decided to visit it to see for myself some part of the stricken land; and there, one day, poking in a pile of rubble, I stumbled on a smashed writing-desk, one drawer being jammed intact. With the help of a big stone, I loosened the drawer. It was filled with papers among which I found the following manuscript, not uninteresting as it records something of the country's story.

It begins:

My land is called Fantasia. It is rich in oil. Our climate is healthy. We have vast mountains and fertile valleys. The people belong to tribes, basically differentiated by the characteristic size of the foot. The Little-foot tribe to which I belong is numerically small, the Big-foot much larger. There are other tribes also, the Medium-foot, the Odd-foot etc.; I shall not mention them all.

Big-footers are countrymen by taste. However, since they form the labour force of Fantasia they do come to the cities where they enjoy a comfortable living, amenities being freely available to them. The men live in large hotels where they are protected from the temptations of 'the bright lights'. The special terms offered by these hotels ensure that they keep up their physical strength and also preserve their virtue.

The wives too, apart from the men, can lock themselves away in their small safe quarters elsewhere, without fear of molestation. Safety-guards regularly check that no unauthorised visitors have got in. The strictest regard for the morals of these workers is a feature of our government.

By day these women provide domestic help in the homes of the Little-foot ladies whose gratitude for their services often takes a generous form, such as allowing one woman one tea-bag every two days and at Christmas rewarding them with cast-off shoes. It is to be regretted that these shoes seldom fit their smiling recipients but the spirit of giving is what matters in the 'season of goodwill to all men' and this is absolutely spontaneous. Indeed the employers are often glad to get rid of their discarded footwear in such a satisfactory way.

We Little-footers have our residences in and around the cities where of course the money is. For that reason members of the other tribes like to come in and one can but admire their initiative in the matter of building for themselves, often making splendid and thrifty use of the most un-

likely materials to which wealthier builders have not given a second thought.

Though the size of foot varies from tribe to tribe, our human qualities are the same. We walk upright, laugh and weep for the same causes. We love children, mourn the dead, honour the family unit, worship as we believe. The Big-footers used to observe a constricting moral code, now practically outmoded, the example set by us to their younger members making itself felt so that their standards are altering to reach up to ours.

Big-footers are unable to grasp the value of money. They prefer to have a lot of children: a laughable miscalculation. However, as with the ethical code, the young appear to be adopting our views, realising that a large family is a drag and that that which a man must aim at all his life is to get rich. Big-footers also used to hold the outdated idea of keeping grannies and grandpas in the family, an idea which we know is quite impossible.

Certain other qualities divide us. Big-footers can stand more, owing to the larger area each man's foot covers, and this is convenient. They stand a lot. Only a few tend to lose their sense of balance. This unfortunately would seem to be a growing weakness, possibly due to their increasing taste for packaged food which until now has been the preserve of the Little-feet and which is entirely unsuitable for them.

They are slow movers, and laugh heartily at our mincing steps. In their simplicity they think we are ill-mannered because we move fast. They also complain that we 'lay down the law', as our idiom has it, not comprehending that we are in the position to do this because we are always right and that there is no need to consult with them over anything.

On the other hand it is not unusual to hear Little-footers at parties merrily recounting to friends and lovers funny incidents from Big-foot life, as for example the story of the woman who was accused of hanging about a hospital to pick up men, when she was in fact trying to get news of her sick child.

But no country is without its trivial disagreements and the pronouncement of our governors that conditions in Fantasia are the best in the world is believed and stoutly maintained by a big majority of the people, that is to say, Little-footers.

Lest at this point there should appear to be some discrepancy in my statements, I must explain to my reader that only Little-footers have the privilege of speaking out: and we well know that this is a privilege, not a right.

We are ruled by a king. We have no queen, but the king has a large and close-knit family of sons and daughters; close-knit that is, with the exception of his youngest daughter, Cassandra. While the others are intellectuals, Cassandra is a stupid woman who, in the teeth of common sense argues that the values of the heart are as important as those of the head.

With the help of selected courtiers, the Royal Family rules, respecting the traditions of their land as their Little-foot fathers and grandfathers shaped them. Cassandra alone wanted change, despite her family's mockery and the anger of her father.

Yet beneath this almost universal calm, there is unrest. Some blame it on the nonsensical concept which has swept the new world that men, so far from doing their accepted duty in their state of life, should live in constant rebellion against it.

The king has pondered long and earnestly. He has become convinced that the root of the trouble lies in the fact that the tribes are jumbled together, higgledy-piggledy throughout the land. He knows that by divine ruling certain benefits were meant for certain tribes only and to allow every man to share them is to fly in the face of providence. He is a deeply religious man.

Notices such as 'Little-foot Reserve, entry permit required' and 'Footprints must not exceed regulation size' have been put up outside parks, playgrounds etc. insisting on separateness and requesting people to take their recreation apart these are ignored. Friendly jingles, 'There is no fear Of Big-foot here', and 'T'is surely meet That Little-feet Should stay elite' displayed on hoardings have been defaced.

Foreign visitors, whose impolite disregard for our feelings has hurt the good king deeply, ridicule the notices. In reply he often cites instances of malpractice in other states, thus proving conclusively that there are none in Fantasmania.

At last the King like Archimedes had his inspiration. He called his council. 'I have resolved to put an end to this intermixing. I shall chop the land into pieces. Into each piece I shall put one tribe. We shall each follow our own path of life. The path of one is not the path of another and none shall trespass where he should not be. Our paths lie apart: our paths **must** lie apart. The path of the Little-footers must be safeguarded for the Little-footers . . .' but here Cassandra interrupted. 'But, Pa, Your Majesty, don't all paths lead to heaven?'

To say the councillors were shocked is to understate the situation: they were stunned. Then in chorus they burst forth. 'Silence! In the interest of Public Security, be quiet!'

Unswerving from the path, the King pressed on. 'We know from the Bible that God chose a people and divided the land. In this land, the duty devolves on me. We must no more tread upon each other's toes. None shall crowd the Little-footers from their path of life'.

Cassandra seemed unable to adjust her views: she was a person of fixed ideas. 'But, she cried', what have paths to do with it? All feet walk the same. If you have feet, you want shoes; it's as simple as that.

'A person wants everything the same as everyone else. Big-foot babies come the same way as ours do'. (The men stirred uneasily). 'You don't have to be born with little feet to want to drive a car or have pretty curtains or eat in smart places'.

By this time the others had had enough. 'Disgusting! Subversive!' they yelled and pulled her down in her seat. One put his hand over her mouth (which she gleefully bit), and the furious king threatened to shut her up in her room for no one knew how many days, while the rest of the council chanted: 'Law Norder! Law Norder! They pronounced it this way because it was a phrase they were required to shout so often that the pernicky pronunciation of the words separately had been banned.

So the Royal Plan was launched. It was decided, and in this the King had the support of the agricultural sector, to give to the Big-foot tribe all the mountain tops; to the Little-foot, the valleys. This was undeniably fair as there were many Big-feet and many mountain tops. Fantasmania justly prides herself on her sense of fair-play.

By putting men where there was no work, they would find it; rock would, by their initiative, turn to fertile soil. Self-help was a virtue which must be encouraged in others. 'Let them build character before houses', the King continued. 'In due course hospitals and schools will grow. In time some small businesses may arise'.

In his compassion the King forbade the Big-feet to take pets up on to the heights because of the altitude. His imagination knew no bounds. 'Let troughs be placed to supply water', he pronounced.

In all these measures he had, with the exception of his dissident daughter, the enthusiastic support of his councillors. The security-wardens also did their part in implementing the Royal Plan, aided by their gentle dogs who needed but a word to bring a malefactor down.

The King permitted no weakness in administration, restraining at once any who showed even a suspicion of non-co-operation. His faith in the Plan was so strong that one might almost say he was no more a man but a conviction.

At first there was little opposition. Cassandra had a small party who clung to the old ideas and could not see how muddling it was to have the tribes intermixing.

Then, inarticulate at first, the Big-footers suddenly became vocal in their reaction to the Plan. There were comments such as, 'Never mind the troughs; what about the water?' Some, with unintentional pathos cried, 'Give us light in our darkness!'

But as I have said, they were countrymen at heart and those in the country were for the most part employed in cutting down the trees (for fuel), hunting the game (for food), queuing in the small hours at bus stops (for work or shopping: we have a remarkable transport service), and lining up at the foetid streams or it might be at the stand-pipe, to get drinking water. These activities did not leave much time for evaluating ideas.

Nevertheless as the months have passed, opposition to the King and his council has inexplicably grown. Some demon of discontent possesses the Big-feet.

Issues which in the past have been unquestioned have become rallying points for malcontents. Take for instance the case of eating places. Up till now the Big-feet have been happy in the towns to eat their offal at midday in the blazing sun, sitting on the pavement, their feet in the gutter. Now suddenly there has arisen a demand for restaurants.

Another development is that their once simple trust in unfulfilled promises has given place to suspicion. They fail to recognise the selflessness of those into whose hands arrangements have been entrusted.

Cassandra's party, has become openly argumentative. The Royal Plan is proving costly. Money melts; no one knows where it goes. Hosts of clerks have been engaged, skilled in drawing up regulations meant not only to deal with every foreseeable difficulty but also to take it impossible for anyone else to deal with it. Offices have been furnished with desks, typewriters, computers, telephones, microphones, listening devices, speed-trapping devices, concealed cameras, radar and trays marked In, Out and Pending. The Pending Trays are made to special measurements.

In no time, seven comma five million ordinances had been printed, apart from those already on the statute book; and still, though every eventuality had been anticipated, they have proved inadequate to cope with the twists and turns of human affairs. No man was entitled to a house on a mountain top until he had established five years' residence there without a house. Intricacies such as this call for superhuman sagacity in the handling.

Illusions of grandeur have begun to permeate other tribes. Controversy is fierce and wide-spread so that polite society has itself spontaneously evolved a rule: certain issues have been tacitly declared **Unacceptable Subjects For Discussion At Parties**. This has silenced those who are unable to see that topics even faintly political are unsuited to gatherings the prime purpose of which is 'to eat, drink and be merry'.

Those who insist on dragging up undesirable issues in conversation have found themselves persona non grata even among old friends. This has led to a growing number of so-called protest meetings, which the King has had to forbid for they

encourage an independence of thought which must **not**, in the public interest, be encouraged.

Even in this, the King has shown his liberality. Regulation 9z90x sub sec Y permits meetings provided no person speaks. Inversely, one may, unmet, talk to oneself. No demagogue could ask for more; there are always people who love to make a political football of any trumpery question.

On a lighter note let me mention one small — one might say negligible — group of Little-feet which pursues, with total concentration, the interest which fully satisfies it: that of balloon flying.

No expense is spared to procure balloons which are of every size, shape and colour. Enormous crowds gather to watch the record-reaching flights of contestants. Moving pictures bring the excitement into almost every home.

Balloon flyers select schools for their offspring where prowess in the harmless sport counts for more than academic achievement. It follows naturally that the balloon flyers have dropped out completely from Fantasia's national affairs. All balloons are inflated by mouth and there is little space left in the mind for competing values.

The upshot of all this stir is that, while the contentment and wellbeing of the whole population of Fantasia is not for one moment in question, discontent is gathering momentum. Reasonable checking measures have failed to silence agitators who are persuading the Big-foot children that their schools are inferior to those of the Little-feet. The schools have always been separate and, needless to say, equal.

Slogans such as, NO MOUNTAIN TOPS FOR US; WANT THE VALLEYS, and BIG-FEET SAME AS LITTLE-FEET have been forced upon them with no justification and they have started marching. This of course is treason and some children had to be shot.

I interrupt my writing. A premonition of terror fills me. My desk lurches, rocks — I can not be mistaken. My dog has begun to howl. There is disturbance in the street. Something is very wrong. The radio . . . the words are slurred . . . the mirror is swinging wildly. An earth tremor, it must be, pray God not a bad one. I am putting my papers in the drawer: outdoors is safest. I . . .

Here the manuscript ends in a scrawl. The writer perished with thousands in that fearful confrontation of forces which split Fantasia and wiped out all their civilisation had achieved.