

FEDERICO PELITI.

Among the minor notabilities who often add to the prestige of a city and to the comfort of the inhabitants was Federico Peliti, a cultured man of good family, native of North Italy, who founded the famous firm bearing his name. He came to India as caterer to the Earl of Mayo, that most handsome of Governor-Generals, who was assassinated in 1872. Peliti brought out his cousin, Cornaglia, to work under him as chef to the Viceroy, and later, he managed a branch of Peliti's business in Bombay. Finding branches in Simla, Naini Tal and other places too difficult to manage, Peliti eventually presented the Bombay business to Cornaglia.

The untimely death of his patron forced Peliti to look after himself and he decided to start business in Calcutta. Thomas O'Neill apparently found the money, for they started as "O'Neill & Peliti" in 1872 at No. 41 Bentinck Street, a few doors from Esplanade Corner. Some idea of the change in social life can be formed from recollections of what Bentinck Street was like forty years ago (or less). It was just wide enough for two trams to pass ; an eighteen-inch footpath ran along the west side ; it was never swept therefore the stench on a hot day was beyond belief. Judged by present-day standards, Bentinck Street should have been the last place in Calcutta for a high class confectioners. Next door to Peliti's place of business was Mackintosh Burn's building yard, where a soorkey engine ground bricks to dust all day long, making no end of noise in the process. In spite of obviously unfavourable surroundings, Bentinck Street had long been the home of Calcutta fashionable confectioners. "Dainty Davie," otherwise David Wilson, founder of the Auckland Hotel, afterwards known as the Great Eastern, but still known to the Indian inhabitants as "Wilson Hotel," started there in the 1830's.

The partnership with O'Neill did not last long, for in 1875 Peliti moved to 18/1 Chowringhee as a tenant of a wealthy Jewish landlord—E. S. Gubbay. Peliti was a fine character, artistic, sympathetic, open-hearted, open-handed, and nervously independent, contrasting with the shrewd business instincts of his landlord. Like all generous men with a good memory, he passionately resented injustice, real or imaginary.

Something transpired which bitterly annoyed Peliti and in the quarrel W. Newson came to his assistance. Newson was in a small way of business as a manufacturer of Indian condiments at No. 14 Chowringhee, Incidentally, he was the father of Sir Percy Newson, the millionaire partner of Jardine Skinner & Co. He persuaded Peliti to design an artificial ham of large size, coloured to (still) life, and hang it over the centre of the drive into Gubbay's compound. Apparently, as Gubbay lived next door, at No. 19 Chowringhee, he and Peliti used the same entrance.

Aurangzeeb, (or was it Shah Jehan ?) full of complacent cynicism, declared, "Thrice blessed are the Christians. They can eat the revered beef of the cow, and the abhorred flesh of the pig." To annoy Jews, old-time Spaniards used to cultivate the friendly habit of eating pork on the Jewish Sabbath, but nothing could have been better devised to rasp Gubbay's feelings than that ham, particularly as he knew that was why it hung there.

Gubbay's Mahomedan coachman, a mullah whose dyed beard told the world of a pious pilgrimage to Mecca, resented the pollution attached to that succulent joint more than his master. Every time he drove in or out of the compound he had to duck to avoid the accursed emblem of uncleanness. He obviously grew to feel more and more that that ham was more unlucky than travelling with an out of work actor. His *izzat* (prestige) was lowered. In the East there is no stature without dignity. Master and man, Jew and Moslem, demanded that the offensive emblem of trade be taken down, but Peliti claimed the need for advertising his goods, and although he was cursed for countless generations, fore and aft, there was nothing for it. They parted company and in 1881 Peliti moved into large premises at 10 and 11 Esplanade East, but resided at No. 5 Crooked Lane, which happened to be the house I went to on arriving in the country in 1883.

He bought the building long occupied by Francis Ramsay Wakefield (drapers) in 1902 and moved from Esplanade East at the end of that year. The Directory for that date gives him as a "Wine Merchant and Court Caterer, 10 and 11 Esplanade East, 61 Bentinck Street, Calcutta, and Regent House, Simla." Lord Lytton, who saw and liked what was artistic in Peliti, did much to help him on

the road to fortune. That Viceroy was addicted to hospitality and was said to be a gleaner of favours among the unfair sex. He was credited with having inaugurated the order of the “ Kala Juggur ”, where friendly intentions in a dim light could develop into amorous intentions without publicity. Peliti reserved part of his restaurant for little cubicles, comfortable places, which gave the young an opportunity to dodge the rigid social restriction of those days. Under Viceregal patronage “ Peliti's ” bounded into popularity.

Eight miles out of Simla he bought a piece of land on which he built an artistic villa, making the bricks on the spot himself. Naming it “ Villa Carignano ” after his birthplace, it became a popular and fashionable resort, commanding, as it did, the finest view in the neighbourhood.

Then F. Marion Crawford, the handsome author of *Mr. Isaacs* in which “ Jacobs of Simla ” was thinly and romantically disguised, clothed Simla in such refinement, that living in Peliti's Regent House was, of all resorts, the place where “ the high official from the plains takes his wife, his daughters, and his liver. There the journalists congregate to pick up the news that oozes through the pent-house of Government secrecy, and failing such scant drops of information, to manufacture as much as is necessary to fill the columns of their dailies. On the slopes of “ Jako ”—the wooded eminence that rises above the town—the enterprising German establishes his concert-ball and his beer garden ; among the rhododendron trees Madame Blavatzky, Colonel Olcott and Mr. Sinnett move mysteriously in the performance of their wonders ; and the wealthy tourist from America, the botanist from Berlin, and the casual peer from Great Britain, are not wanting to complete the motley crowd. ”

When a hotel-keeper has stuff like that appearing in a “ best-seller ” about the place where his hostelry is situated, he is likely to benefit by it particularly as Peliti was educated up to giving his patrons all the refinement they demanded. Whether that is good for the patrons is another matter. I picked up some books in a secondhand bookshop in Portsmouth in which was the name of one of the Simla exquisites of those days. I was told that the owner was very poor indeed, supporting two invalid sisters, and that he used to sell one book at a time, regretting the need for parting with them. Simla was the essence of “ class ” in those spacious days, and no ordinary people—that is ordinary British-Indians in trade—were allowed to pollute the sanctuary. But Peliti saw to it that all that was put down in the bill, and rapidly grew rich.

During Peliti's early business days he fell out with Sir Stuart Hogg, to whom Calcutta is indebted for the Sir Stuart Hogg Market. From what can be seen in the Five Continents, there is no market to approach it in size, to say nothing about the variety of goods sold there.

Hogg was a real, old-time Anglo-Indian with strong views, impetuous, and full of all that courage which is so much the better part of valour. He fought vested interests and those who held on to them, to a standstill. Police officers of those days used to tell blood-curdling stories about what went on in the 'Seventies when a powerful Maharajah employed 2,000 *goondas* (professional bullies) to picket shops and whack on the head those who deserted Dhurrumtola Market for the Naya Bazaar.

Vested interests in India are fought for as ruthlessly as in Christian countries, and possibly as unscrupulously. The difference between the two worlds is that the Indian sees no shame in admitting that he has a monopoly and doesn't intend to give up a cowrie. They are the same in England but a little more afraid of public opinion.

It is not so many moons ago that a Member of the Legislative Assembly (a sort of Indian synthetic House of Lords), in defending his vested interests declared— “ I keep brothels, and I'm not ashamed of it either ! ” One can easily believe both statements, but what would be thought did one of our democratic peers come out with anything like that in the House of Lords ?

Hogg was more or less compelled to combat illegalities with illegalities. Men willing to fight for a monopoly have to be fought so Hogg roped in another army of ruffians and he also had the polite to help him. There were regular pitched battles in the streets and when Hogg was found to be too strong, the “ vested interests ” started the other form of goondaism—High Court proceedings. Being an official, Hogg was vulnerable when it came to traversing the spirit of the law, so if he found himself without a leg to stand on, he humbly apologised. When proceedings were withdrawn, he

started all over again. In the end, he won, defeating some of the richest men of Calcutta.

It was easy for anyone to quarrel with Sir Stuart Hogg and a highly-strung, sensitive man like Peliti would be among the first to find himself in trouble with little chance of retaliation. But the opportunity came. When the great man was due for retirement, Gubbay organised a public dinner in his honour. Gubbay had done quite well for himself by anticipating some of Hogg's schemes, and, at the time, was Sheriff of Calcutta, an honorary appointment much prized on account of a purely sentimental forty thousand rupees a year appertaining to it.

Peliti, being the leading confectioner, was given the catering for the banquet. Like most things done for enemies, the best possible effort was put forward. Peliti personally attended on Hogg and Gubbay. An artist to his finger tips he knew that a little delay would ruffle the skins of the diners and make them more interested in what was coming. Impatience arouses interest. As the diners began to fidget, Peliti struck an approving note by bringing in an ice pudding ornately decorated with the Stuart tartan. Then both Scot and Jew gave a sudden start. The long-delayed reposte was modelled in the shape of the head of a hog. Peliti had scored with right and left barrel and got clean away with it.

An artist to his finger tips, Peliti excelled as a sculptor, on one or more occasions gaining the first prize for work in marble. At one of the Simla Art Exhibitions the pruders of Simla society objected to the nude figures of woman and child and to prevent his work being turned out, Peliti had to drape them. That committee must have been blood relations of the judge who sent a woman to jail for giving birth to a naked baby. Full of scorn and amazement, Peliti had to recognise on which side his bread was buttered.

Lady Lytton, writing in her diary about that time, hit off Simla people with approximate accuracy. She said, they foregathered four days a week for prayer meetings, and the rest of the time was spent in writing poisonous official notes about each other.

T. E. Bevan used to tell a story about meeting Peliti in Simla and being taken to see something that would surprise him. Peliti excelled as a sculptor, and, after placing Bevan in a suitable position, a cloth cover was taken off a marble bust and Peliti stood aside to watch the effect. Bevan sounded the highest notes of his hymn of praise.

“ My word! Isn't that a perfect masterpiece ? ” “ Ha ! said Peliti. “ Do you know who it is ? ”

“ Rather. I'd know it anywhere. It's a speaking likeness. You've got him to the life and no mistake ! ”

“ But who is it ? ” demanded Peliti, feeling well pleased with himself.

“ What's the good of asking such a question ? Why, it's the Viceroy's coachman, of course ! ”

Peliti picked up a heavy mallet, made a frantic rush at the marble masterpiece, flattened the nose, then knocked the head off, startling Bevan who was horrified to see the sudden wrecking of a fine piece of work. Peliti was in a tragic state of excitement so Bevan came away.

Two or three days later Bevan happened to see the Viceroy driving out. It suddenly dawned upon him that he had mixed up the Viceroy with the coachman, a mistake which led to the smashed bust. Bevan never suffered from a rush of tact to the tongue that is, he was hardly a martyr to that complaint, but such an error is not surprising, for servants often imitate the appearance and manner of their masters. When Lord Kitchener broke his leg in Simla both his valet and his coachman followed suit in less than no time.

Lord Curzon had a man servant who so strongly resembled his viceregal master that he was often employed to stand at the carriage door when the train halted at a wayside station to receive the plaudits of the crowd who came to cheer a man they knew nothing about. If His Excellency ordered a lounge suit at Ranken's, the valet had one made exactly like it in which he occasionally received inferior notabilities while the real man worked or dozed. It seemed to work all right and until Curzon himself released the story the secret was well kept. At times, though, the valet would come home in the small hours, after leaving behind among some suburban lady friends a viceregal reputation that would have gone some way to tarnish the Curzon halo had that wonderful man but guessed. But in this world of imitation there is a backlash about everything.

Bevan had another venture into the realms of art. He took an oil painting to Government House in the hope that Lord Curzon would buy it. The subject was some potentate in the robes of the Garter,

but the artist must have been trained in that school which appreciated the truism that a coat of paint needs no buttons. Pointing out one or two slight defects of this sort, the Viceroy sent for his own robes to compare with the picture. The difference in colour was so marked that it was obvious that the artist had done most of his work from memory.

That reminds one of an experience of some tourists who laughed at a rudely carved object intended to represent an elephant which was hanging as a votive offering in the porch of a Buddhist temple. The priest was piqued, declaring that it was remarkably well carved for a man who had never seen an elephant. Nevertheless, one never sees a badly carved figure of an elephant in India which almost proves that it is possible to inherit the ability to depict them.

With an old-fashioned, honourable simplicity of mind, (he was blessed with a large family of strapping sons), Peliti settled in North Italy where he bought a property from which there was one of the most delightful views in the whole world. The King of Italy made him chevalier. His charity and kindness of heart knew no bounds ; he lived in the hearts of the poor to the good old age of seventy-two, and when he died, the little children cried in the streets.

From: Major H. Hobbs, V.D., Talkeetalkeewallahs and others (Calcutta: 1938)