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<HOTEL LIFE IN ENGLAND.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

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If any one wants to see human nature stripped of certain conventional

disguises and reduced to some of its primitive elements, let him try a

boarding-house or family hotel for a while. If not always a

profitable, it is generally an amusing, exhibition of character; and

materials are never wanting to the student of human life. The

predominating quality of most people will be found to be selfishness.

There is a kind of fighting for self that goes on which is very funny,

because concentrated on such mean objects. Who shall have the most

comfortable chair, the best place at the window, the cosiest by the

fire--such are the favourite prizes to be gained by superior craft or

boldness; and the ladies chiefly interested have recourse to a series

of manoeuvres to circumvent their rivals, or steal a march on them

unprepared, more ingenious at times than well-bred. Then there is the

lady who appropriates the only footstool, and the lady who disputes

the appropriation and sometimes 'comes to words' on the same; the

couple who monopolize the bagatelle board, and the couple waiting

savagely for their turn, which comes only when the gong sounds for

dinner or the sky clears up for a walk. The quartet who settle

themselves to whist every evening as to a regular part of the business

of life, without caring to inquire whether others would like to cut in

or not, are more justified in their exclusiveness; else it may happen

that a Club man who can make his bad cards beat his opponent's good

ones is mated with a partner who inquires anxiously 'Is that the queen

to beat?' then, with the king in his hand, quietly drops the deuce,

and gives the adversaries the game. All these however, are regarded

with equally hostile feelings by the rest of the community; and sharp

sermons are administered on the sin of selfishness by the bolder sort,

with the application too evident to be misunderstood.

At meal times the same kind of odd fighting for self goes on. The

table is set as for a dinner party; but it is the hands of Esau and

the voice of Jacob. Instead of the silent waiting for one's turn, with

the quiet acceptance of fate in the shape of the butler and his

underlings, that belongs to a private dinner-table, here, at the

\_table d'hôte\_, there is an incessant call for this or that out of

time; an angry demand to be served sooner or better than one's

neighbours; a greedy 'taking care of number one' at the head of the

table that excites as greedy apprehensions in number two at the foot;

a running fire of criticism on the dishes--that does not help the

illusion of the private dinner-party; and, with people who live much

about in hotels, there is a continual comparison with this and that,

here and there, always to the disadvantage of the place and the thing

under present consideration.

Among the inmates are sure to be some who are fastidious and peevish

about their food; women who come down late and complain that things

are not as fresh as when first served up; men who always want fried

fish when the management has provided boiled, and boiled when the

\_menu\_ says fried; dyspeptic bodies who cannot eat bread unless it is

two days old, and bodies defiant of dyspepsia who will not eat it at

all unless it is hot from the oven; plain feeders who turn up their

noses at the made dishes, and dainty livers who call simple roast and

boiled coarse. And for all these societies the management has to cater

impartially; and probably miss the reward of thanks at the end.

The feelings of people are expressed with the same kind of defiant

individualism as are their tastes. There are the married people who

make love to each other in public, and the married people who make

anything but love; the women who sit and adore their husbands like

worshippers before a shrine, and who like the world to be conscious of

their devotion; the men who call their wives pet names for the benefit

of the whole table, and even indulge in playful little familiarities

which make the girls toss their heads and the young men laugh; and the

happy pair who quarrel without restraint, and say snappish and

disagreeable things to each other in audible voices, to the

embarrassment of all who hear them. There is the rakish Lothario who

neglects his own better half and devotes himself to some other man's,

with a lofty disregard of appearances; and there is the coquettish

little wife who treats her husband very much like a dog and very

little like her lord, and who carries on her flirtations in the most

audacious manner under his eyes, and apparently with his sanction.

And, having his sanction, she defies the world about her to take

umbrage at her proceedings.

As for flirtations indeed, these are always going on in hotel life.

Sometimes it is flirtation between a single man and a single woman,

against which no one has a word to say on the score of propriety,

though some think it will never come to anything and some think it

will, and all scan curiously the signs of progressive heating, or the

process of cooling off. Sometimes it is a more questionable matter;

the indiscreet behaviour of a young wife, unprotected by her husband,

who takes up furiously with some stranger met at the \_table d'hôte\_ by

chance, and of whose character or antecedents she is utterly ignorant.

This is the kind of things that sets the whole hotel by the ears. Prim

women ask severely, 'How long has Mrs. So-and-So known Major

Fourstars?' and their faces, when told, are a sufficient commentary on

the text. Others, in seeming innocence, call them by the same name,

and express intense surprise when informed they are not man and wife,

but acquaintances of only a week's standing. Others again say it is

shameful to see them, and wonder why some one does not write home to

the poor husband, and speak of doing that kind office themselves; and

others watch them with a cynical half-amused attention, interpreting

their actions by the broadest glossary, and carefully guarding their

wives or daughters from any association with either of the offenders.

Whatever else fails, this kind of vulgar hotel intrigue is always on

hand at sea-side places and the like; sometimes ending disastrously,

sometimes dying out in favour of a new flame, but always causing

discomfort while it lasts, and annoying every one connected therewith

save the sinners themselves.

The women who dress to excess are balanced by the women who do not

dress at all. The first are the walking advertisements of fashion, the

last might be mistaken for the canvassers of old clothes' shops. The

one class oppress by their magnificence, the other disgust by their

dowdiness; and each ridicules the other to the indifferent third

party, who, holding the scales of justice evenly, condemns both alike.

Then there are the ugly women who manifestly think themselves

attractive, and the pretty women who are too conscious of their

charms. To be sure there are also ugly women who are content to know

themselves unpersonable, as there are pretty women who are content to

know that they are pretty, just as they know that they are alive, but

who think no more about it, and never trouble themselves nor their

neighbours by their affectations. There are the dear motherly women

beyond middle age, scant of breath and incapable of exertion, who sit

in the drawing-room, placid and asthmatic, and to whom every one pays

an affectionate reverence; and there are the elderly women who chirrup

about like young things, and skip up and down steep places with

commendable agility, and who are by no means disposed to let old age

have the victory for many a year to come. There are the mothers who

make their lumpish children sick with a multiplicity of good things,

and the mothers who never give a moment's thought to the comfort nor

the well-being of theirs; the mothers who fidget their little ones and

every one else by their over-anxiety, their over caution, their

incessant preoccupation and fear, and the mothers who let theirs

wander, and who take it quite comfortably if they do not come in even

at night-fall; the mothers who prank their children out like Mayday

Jacks and Jills, and the mothers who let theirs go free in rags and

dirt, till you are puzzled to believe them better born than the

gutter. And with all this there is the plague of the children

themselves--the babies who cry all night; the two-year-olds who scream

all day; the rampaging boys who haunt the stairs and passages and who

will slide down the banisters on a wet afternoon; the clattering

little troop playing at horses before your bedroom door, while you are

lying down with a sick headache; and the irruption into the

drawing-room of the young barbarians who have no nursery of their

own.

Quite recent widows with fluffy heads and no sign of their bereaved

state, come to the hotel flanked by those of a couple of years'

standing, still dressed in the deepest weeds, with the significant cap

cherished as a sacred symbol. Brisk young widows appeal to men's

admiration by their brightness, and languid young widows excite

sympathy by their despair. Pretty young widows of small endowment,

whose chances you would back at long odds, are handicapped against

plain-featured widows, whose desolation you know no one would ever ask

to relieve were it not for those Three per cents. with which they are

credited. And the widows of hotel life are always a feature worth

studying. There are many who do so study them;--chiefly the old

bachelor of well-preserved appearance and active habits, who has

constituted himself the squire of dames to the establishment, and who

takes up first with one and then another of the unprotected females as

they appear, and escorts them about the neighbourhood. He never makes

friends with men, but he is hand-in-glove with all the pretty women;

and his critical judgment on them on their first appearance is

considered final. As a rule he does not care to attach himself so

exclusively to one, be she maid, wife, or widow, as to get himself

talked about; but sometimes he falls into the clutches of a woman of

more tenacity than he has bargained for, and, man of irreproachable

respectability as he is, drifts into a flirtation which the hotel

takes to mean an offer or an intrigue, according to the state of the

lady concerned. As the hotel-life bachelor is generally a man of

profound selfishness, the discomfort that ensues does no great harm;

and it sometimes happens that it is diamond cut diamond, which is a

not unrighteous retribution.

For the most part the people haunting hotels and living at

\_tables d'hôte\_ are not specially charming, but among them may

sometimes be met men and women of broad views and liberal minds,

cultivated and thoughtful, whose association time ripens into

friendship. They stand out in bold relief among the vulgar people who

talk loud, stare hard, ask impertinent questions, and discuss the

dinners and the company in a broad provincial accent; among the silent

people who sit gloomily at table as if oppressed with debt or

assisting at a funeral; among the betting-men who flood the house at

race-time, making it echo with the jargon of the Turf and the stable;

among the quarrelsome people who snap and snarl at every subject

started, like dogs growling over a bone; among the religious people

who will testify in season and out of season, and the political people

who will argue; the stupid people who have not two ideas, and the

ignorant people who do not understand anything beyond the educational

range of a child or a peasant; the conventional people who oppress one

with their strained proprieties, and the doubtful people of whom no

one knows anything and every one suspects all. Among the \_oi polloi\_

of hotel life the really nice people shine conspicuous: and more than

one pleasant friendship which has lasted for life has been begun over

the soup and fish of a \_table d'hôte\_.