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<STRANGERS AT CHURCH.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

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If nothing is sacred to a sapper, neither is anything sacred to

temper, ostentation, vanity; and church as little as any place else.

In those thronged show-places which have what is called a summer

season, church is the great Sunday entertainment; and when the service

is of an ornate kind, and the strangers' seats are chairs placed at

the west end, where in old times the village choir or the village

schoolboys used to be, a great deal of human life goes on among the

occupants; and there are certain displays of temper and feeling which

make you ask yourself whether these strangers think it a religious

service, or an operatic, at which they have come to assist, and

whether what you see about you is quite in consonance with the spirit

of the place or not. If the church is one that presents scenic

attractions in the manner in which the service is conducted, there is

a run on the front middle seats, as if the ceremonies to be performed

were so much legerdemain or theatrical spectacle, of which you must

have a good view if you are to have your money's worth; and the more

knowing of the strangers take care to be early in the field, and to

establish themselves comfortably before the laggards come up. And when

the best places are all filled, and the laggards do come up, then the

human comedy begins.

Here trip in a couple of giggling girls, greatly conscious of their

youth and good looks, but still more conscious of their bonnets. They

look with tittering dismay at the crowded seats all along the middle,

and when the verger makes them understand that they must go to the

back of the side aisle, where they can be seen by no one but will only

be able to hear the service and say their prayers, they hesitate and

whisper to each other before they finally go up, feeling that the

great object for which they came to church has failed them, and they

had better have stayed away and taken their chance on the parade. When

they speak of it afterwards, they say it was 'awfully slow sitting

there;' and they determine to be earlier another time.

There sweep in a triad of superbly dressed women with fans and

scent-bottles, who disdainfully decline the back places which the same

verger, with a fine sense of justice and beginning to fail a little in

temper, inexorably assigns them. They too confer together, but by no

means in whispers; and finally elect to stand in the middle aisle,

trusting to their magnificence and quiet determination to get 'nice

places' in the pewed sittings. They are fine ladies who look as if

they were performing an act of condescension by coming at all without

special privileges and separation from the vulgar; as if they had an

inherent right to worship God in a superior and aristocratic manner,

and were not to be confounded with the rest of the miserable sinners

who ask for mercy and forgiveness. They are accustomed to the front

seats everywhere; so why not in the place where they say sweetly they

are 'nothing of themselves,' and pray to be delivered 'from pride,

vainglory, and hypocrisy'? That old lady, rouged and dyed and dressed

to represent the heyday of youth, who also is supposed to come to

church to say her prayers and confess her sins, looks as if she would

be more at home at the green tables at Homburg than in an unpretending

chair of the strangers' quarter in the parish church. But she finds

her places in her Prayer-book, if after a time and with much seeking;

and when she nods during the sermon, she has the good-breeding not to

snore. She too, has the odd trick of looking like condescension when

she comes in, trailing her costly silks and laces behind her; and by

her manner she leaves on you the impression that she was a beauty in

her youth; has been always used to the deference and admiration of

men; to servants and a carriage and purple and fine linen; that all of

you, whom she has the pleasure of surveying through her double

eyeglass, are nobodies in comparison with her august self; and that

she is out of place among you. She makes her demonstration, like the

rest, when she finds that the best seats are already filled and that

no one offers to stir that she may be well placed; and if she is

ruthlessly relegated to the back, and stays there, as she does

sometimes, your devotions are rendered uncomfortable by the

unmistakable protest conveyed in her own. Only a few humble Christians

in fashionable attire take those back places contentedly, and find

they can say their prayers and sing their hymns with spiritual comfort

to themselves, whether they are shut out from a sight of the

decorations on the altar and the copes and stoles of the officiating

ministers, or are in full view of the same. But then humble Christians

in fashionable attire are rare; and the old difficulty about the camel

and the needle's eye, remains.

Again, in the manner of following the services you see the oddest

diversity among the strangers at church. The regular congregation has

by this time got pretty well in step together, and stands up or sits

down, speaks or keeps silence, with some kind of uniformity; even the

older men having come to tolerate innovations which at first split the

parish into factions. But the strangers, who have come from the north

and from the south, from the east and from the west, have brought

their own views and habits, and take a pride in making them manifest.

Say that the service is only moderately High--that is, conducted with

decency and solemnity but not going into extremes; your left-hand

neighbour evidently belongs to one of the ultra-Ritualistic

congregations, and disdains to conceal her affiliation. If she be a

tall woman, and therefore conspicuous, her genuflexions are more

profound than any other person's; and her sudden and automatic way of

dropping on her knees, and then getting up again as if she were worked

by wires, attracts the attention of all about her. She crosses herself

at various times; and ostentatiously forbears to use her book save at

certain congregational passages. She regards the service as an act of

priestly sacrifice and mediation, and her own attitude therefore is

one of acceptance, not participation.

Your neighbour on your right is a sturdy Low Churchman, who sticks to

the ways of his father and flings hard names at the new system. He

makes his protest against what he calls 'all this mummery' visibly, if

not audibly. He sits like a rock during the occasional intervals when

modern congregations rise; and he reads his Prayer-book with unshaken

fidelity from first to last, making the responses, which are intoned

by the choir and the bulk of the congregation, in a loud and level

voice, and even muttering \_sotto voce\_ the clergyman's part after him.

In the creed, when the Ritualistic lady bends both her knees and

almost touches the ground, he simply bobs his head, as if saluting

Robinson or Jones; and during the doxology, where she repeats the

obeisance, and looks as if she were speaking confidentially to the

matting, he holds up his chin and stares about him. She, the

pronounced Ritualist, knows all the hymns by heart and joins in them

like one well accustomed; but he, the Evangelist, stumbles over the

lines, with his \_pince-nez\_ slipping off his nose, satisfied if he

catches a word here and there so as to know something of his

whereabouts. She sings correctly all through; but he can do no more

than put in a fancy note on occasions, and perhaps come in with a

flourish at the end. There are many such songsters at church who think

they have done all that can be demanded of them in the way of

congregational harmony if they hit the last two notes fairly, and join

the pack at the Amen.

Sometimes the old-fashioned worshippers get put into the front row,

and there, without prayer-stool or chair-back against which to steady

themselves, find kneeling an impossibility; so they either sit with

their elbows on their knees, or betray associations with square pews

and comfortable corners at home, by turning their backs to the altar,

and burying their faces in their rush-bottomed seats. The Ritualist

would have knelt as straight as an arrow and without quivering once

all through.

People are generally supposed to go to church for devotion, but, if

they do, devotion and vanity are twin sisters. Look at the number of

pretty hands which find it absolutely necessary to take off their

gloves, and which are always wandering up to the face in becoming

gestures and with the right curve. Or, if the hands are only mediocre,

the rings are handsome; and diamonds sparkle as well in a church as

anywhere else. And though one vows to renounce the lusts of the world

as well as of the flesh, there is no use in having diamonds if one's

neighbours don't see them. Look too, at the pretty faces which know so

well the effect produced by a little paint and powder beneath a

softening mask of thin white lace. Is this their best confession of

sin? And again, those elaborate toilets in which women come to pray

for forgiveness and humility; are they for the honour of God? It

strikes us that the honour of God has very little to do with that

formidable, and may be unpaid, milliner's bill, but the admiration of

men and the envy of other women a great deal. The Pope is wise to make

all ladies go to his religious festivals without bonnets and in rigid

black. It narrows the margin of coquetry somewhat, if it does not

altogether remove it. But dress ever was, and ever will be, as webs

spread in the way of woman's righteousness; and we have no doubt that

Eve frilled her apron of fig-leaves before she had worn it a day.

All sorts of characters throng these strangers' seats; and some are

typical. There are the men of low stature and awkward bearing, with

stubbly chins, who stand in constrained positions and wear no gloves.

They look like grooms; they may be clerks; but they are the men on

whom \_Punch\_ has had his eye for many years now, when he portrays the

British snob and diversifies him with the more modern cad. Then there

are the well-dressed, well set-up gentlemen of military appearance,

who carry their umbrellas under their arms as if they were swords, and

are evidently accustomed to have their own will and command other

people's; and the men who look like portraits of Montague Tigg, in

cheap kid gloves and suspicious jewelry, who pray into their hats, or

make believe to pray, while their bold eyes rove all about, fixing

themselves most pertinaciously on the old lady with the diamonds and

the giggling young ones with the paint. There is the bride in a white

bonnet and light silk dress, who carries an ivory-backed Church

Service with the most transparent attempts at unconsciousness, and the

bridegroom who lounges after her and looks sheepish; sometimes it is

the bride who straggles bashfully, and the groom who boldly leads the

way. There is the young widow with new weeds; the sedate mother of

many daughters; paterfamilias, with his numerous olive-branches,

leading on his arm the exuberant wife of his bosom flushed with coming

up the hill; the walking tourist, whose respect for Sunday goes to the

length of a clean collar and a clothes-brush; and the female

traveller, economical of luggage, who wears her waterproof and

sea-side hat, and is independent and not ashamed. There are the people

who come for simple distraction, because Sunday is such a dull day in

a strange place, and there is nothing else to do; and those who come

because it is respectable and the right thing, and they are accustomed

to it; those who come to see and be seen; and those--the select few,

the simple yearning souls--who come because they do honestly feel the

church to be the very House of God, and that prayer with its

confession of sin helps them to live better lives. But, good or bad,

vain or simple, arrogant or humble, they all sweep out when the last

word is said, and the cottagers and small townsfolk stand at their

doors to see them pass--'the quality coming out of church' counting as

\_their\_ Sunday sight. The women get ideas in millinery from the show,

and discuss with each other what is worn this year, and how ever can

they turn their old gowns into garments that shall imitate the last

effort of a Court milliner's genius--the result of many sleepless

nights? Fine ladies ridicule these clumsy apings of their humble

sisters, and long for the old sumptuary laws to be in force on all

below them; but if Sunday is the field-day and church the

parade-ground of the strangers, we cannot wonder if the natives try to

participate in the amusement. If Lady Jane likes to confess her shame

and humiliation on a velvet cushion and in silk attire, can we

reasonably blame Joan that her soul hankers after a hassock of felt,

and a penance-sheet of homespun cut according to my lady's pattern?