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<ON A VISIT.>

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To most young people the social arrangement known as going on a visit

to friends at a distance is one of the most charming things possible.

Novelty being to them the very breath of life, and hope and

expectation their normal mental condition, the mere fact of change is

in itself delightful; unless it happens to be something so hopelessly

dull as a visit single-handed to an invalid grandmother, or the yearly

probation of a girl of the period, when obliged to put herself under

the charge of a wealthy maiden aunt with strict principles and no

games of any kind allowed on the lawn. If the young ladies out on a

visit are however, moderately cheerful, they can contrive to make

amusement for themselves out of anything short of such sober-tinted

extremes as these; and very often they effect more serious matters

than mere amusement, and their visit brings them a love-affair or a

marriage which changes the whole tenor of their lives. At the worst,

it has shown them a new part of the country; given them new patterns

of embroidery; new fashions of hairdressing; new songs and waltzes;

and afforded an occasion for a large supply of pretty dresses--which

last to most young women, or indeed to most women whether young or

old, is a very effectual source of pleasure.

The great charm and excitement of going on a visit belongs naturally

to the young of the middle classes; among those of higher condition it

is a different matter altogether. When people take their own servants

with them and live in exactly the same style as at home, they merely

change the furniture of their rooms and the view from the windows. The

same kind of thing goes on at Lord A.'s as at Lord B.'s, in the

Scottish Highlands or the Leicestershire wolds. The quality of the

hunting or shooting may be different, but the whole manner of living

is essentially repetition; and the dead level of civilization is not

broken up by any very startling innovations anywhere. But among the

middle classes there is greater variety; and the country clergyman's

daughter who goes on a visit to the London barrister's family, plunges

into a manner of life totally different from that of her own home; the

personal habits of town and country still remaining quite distinct,

and the possibilities of action being on two different plans

altogether.

A London-bred woman goes down to the country on a visit to a hale,

hearty Hessian, her former school-fellow, who tucks up her woollen

gown midway to her knees, wears stout boots of masculine appearance,

and goes quite comfortably through mud and mire, across ploughed

field and undrained farmyards--taking cramped stiles and five-barred

gates in her way as obstacles of no more moment than was the mud or

the mire. Long years of use to this unfastidious mode of existence

have blinded her to the perception that a woman, without being an

invalid, may yet be unable to do all that is so easy to her. So the

London lady is taken for a walk, say of five or six miles, which to

the vigorous Hessian is a mere unsatisfying stroll, to be counted no

more as serious exercise than she would count a spoonful of

\_vol-au-vent\_ as serious eating. To be sure the walk includes a few

muddy corners and the like, and Bond Street boots do not bear the

strain of stiff clay clods too well; neither is a new gown of the

fashionable colour improved by being dragged through furze bushes and

bracken, and brushed against the wet heads of field cabbages.

Moreover, crossing meadows tenanted by cattle that toss their heads

and look--and looking, in horned cattle, is a great offence to our

town-bred woman--is a service of peril which alone would take all the

strength out of her nerves, and all the pleasure out of her walk; but

the hostess cannot imagine feelings which she herself does not share,

and the London lady is of course credited with courage, because to

doubt it would be to cast a slur on her whole moral character. The

Hessian minds the beasts no more than so many tree-stumps, but her

friend sees a raging bull in every milky mother that stares at her as

she passes, and thinks something dreadful is going to happen because

the flies make the heifers swish their tails and stamp. Then the dogs

bark furiously as they rush out of farmsteads and cottages; and the

newly dressed fields are not pleasant to cross nor skirt. The visitor

cares little for wild flowers, less for birds, and all trees are

pretty much alike to her; and this long rude walk, accentuated with

the true country emphasis, has been too much for her. Her host wonders

at her evening lassitude and low spirits, and fears that she finds it

dull; and the robust hostess anathematizes the demoralizing effects of

Kensington, and scornfully contrasts her present friend with her past,

when they were both schoolgirls together and on a par in strength and

endurance. 'She was like other people then,' says the well-trained

Hessian who has kept herself in condition by daily exercise of a

severe character; 'and now see what a poor creature she is! She can do

nothing but work at embroidery and crouch shivering over the fire.'

Sometimes however, it happens the other way, and the lady guest, even

though a Londoner, is the stronger of the two. The wife has been

broken down by family cares and the one inevitable child too many; the

guest comes fresh, unworn, unmarried, still young. The wife seldom

goes beyond the garden, never further than the village, and is knocked

up if she has done two miles; the guest can manage her six or eight

without fatigue. Hence she naturally becomes the husband's walking

companion during her visit, to his frank delight and as frank regrets

that his wife cannot do as much. And the wife, though good-breeding

and natural kindness prevent her objecting to these long walks, finds

them hard lines all things considered. Most probably she bitterly

regrets having invited her former friend, and mentally resolves never

to ask her again. She wanted her as a little amusement and relaxation

for herself. Her health is delicate and her life dull, and she thought

a female friend in the house would cheer her up and be a help. But

when she finds that she has invited one who, without in the least

intending it and only by the force of circumstances, sets her in

unfavourable contrast with her husband, we may be sure that it will

not take much argument to convince her that asking friends on a visit

is a ridiculous custom, and that people, especially young ladies fond

of long walks, are best at their own homes.

In London there are two kinds of guests from the country; the

insatiable, and the indifferent--those who wear out their hosts by

their activity and those who oppress them by their supineness. The

Londoner who has outlived all the excitement of the busy city life

wonders at the energy and enthusiasm of his friend. Everything must be

done, even to the Tower and the Whispering Gallery, Madame Tussaud's

and the Agricultural Hall. There is not a second-rate trumpery trifle

which has been in the shop windows for a year or more, that is not

pored over, and if possible, bought; and among the inflictions of the

host may be counted the crude taste of the guest, and the childish

flinging away of money on things absolutely worthless. Or it may be

that the guest has come up stored with many maxims of worldly wisdom

and vague suspicion, and, determined not to be taken in, attempts to

bargain in shops where a second price would be impossible, and where

the host is personally known.

With guests of superabundant energy a quiet evening is out of the

question. They go the round of all the theatres, and fill in the gaps

with the opera and concerts. They have come up not to stay with you,

but to see London; and they fulfil their intention liberally. Or they

are indifferent and supine, and not to be amused, do what you will.

They think everything a bore, or they are nervous and not up to the

mark. They beseech you not to ask any one to dinner, and not to take

them with you to any reception. They are listless at the theatre and

go to sleep at the opera. At the Royal Academy the only pictures they

notice are those landscapes taken from their own neighbourhood, or

perhaps one by a local artist known to them. All the finest works of

the year fall flat; and before you have seen half the exhibition, they

say they have had enough of it, and sit down, plaintively offering to

wait till you have done, in the tone of a Christian martyr.

These are the people who are always complaining of the dirt and smoke

of London and the stuffiness of the houses, as if they were personally

injured and you personally responsible. They show a very decided

scorn for all London produce, natural or artificial, and wonder how

people can live in such a place. They are sure to deride the

prevailing fashions, whatever they may be; while their own, of last

season, are exaggerated and excessive; but they refuse to have the

town touch laid on them during their stay, and heroically follow the

millinery gospel of their local Worth, and measure you by themselves.

They show real animation only when they are going away, and begin to

wonder how they shall find things at home, and whether Charles will

meet them at the station or send William instead. But when they write

to thank you for your hospitality, they tell you they never enjoyed

anything so much in their lives; leaving you in a state of perplexity,

as you remember their boredom, and peevish complainings, and evident

relief in leaving, and compare your remembrance with the warm

expressions of pleasure now before your eyes. All you can say is, that

if they were pleased they took an odd way of showing it.

There are people rash enough to have other people's children on a

visit; to take on themselves the responsibility of their health and

safety, when the young guests are almost sure to fall ill by the

change of diet and the unwonted amount of indulgence allowed, or to

come into some trouble by the relaxing of due supervision and control.

They get a touch of gastric fever, or they tumble into the pond; and

either bronchitis, or a fall from horseback, toppling over from a

ladder, or coming to grief on the swing, or some such accident, is

generally the result of an act which is either heroism or madness as

one may be inclined to regard it. For of all the inconveniences

attending visiting, those incidental to child-guests are the most

distressing. Yet there are philanthropic friends who run these risks

for the sake of giving pleasure to a few young people. Whether they

deserve canonization for their kindness or censure for their rashness

we leave an open question.

As for a certain disturbance in health, that generally comes to other

than children from being on a visit. Hours and style of food are sure

to be somewhat different from those of home; and the slight constraint

of the life, and the feverishness which this induces, add to the

disturbance. Occupations are interrupted both to the guest and the

host; and some hosts think it necessary to make company for the guest,

and some guests are heavy on hand. Some regard your house as a gaol

and you as the gaoler, and are afraid to initiate an independent

action or to call their souls their own; others treat you as a

landlord, and behave as if you kept an inn, making a convenience of

your household in the most unblushing manner. Some are fastidious, and

covertly snub your wines, your table, and your whole arrangements;

others embarrass you by the fervour of their admiration, as if they

had come out of a hovel and did not know the usages of civilized

homes. Some intrude themselves into every small household matter that

goes on before them, and offer advice that is neither wanted nor

desired; and others will not commit themselves to the most innocent

opinion, fearful lest they should be thought to interfere or take

sides. Some of the women dress at the husband; some of the men flirt

with the wife or make love to the daughters surreptitiously; some loaf

about or play billiards all day long till you are tired of the sound

of their footsteps and the click of the balls; other bury their heads

in a book and are no better than mummies lounging back in easy chairs;

some insist on going to the meet in a hard frost; others will shoot in

a downpour; and others again waste your whole day over the

chess-table, and will not stir out at all. Some are so sensitive and

fidgety that they will not stay above a day or two, and are gone

before you have got into the habit of seeing them, leaving you with

the feeling of a whirlwind having passed through your house; and

others, when they come, stick, and you begin to despair of dislodging

them.

On the other hand, there are houses where you feel that you would wear

out your welcome after the third day, how long soever the distance you

have come; and there are others where you would offend your hosts for

life if you did not throw overboard every other duty and engagement to

remain for as many weeks as they desire. In fact, paying visits and

inviting guests are both risky matters, and need far more careful

consideration than they generally receive. But when it happens that

the thing is congenial on both sides, that the guest slips into a

vacant place as it were, and neither bores nor is bored, then paying a

visit is as delightful as the young imagination pictures it to be; and

the peculiar closeness and sweetness of intimacy it engenders is one

of the most enduring and charming circumstances incidental to

friendship. This however, is rare and exceptional; as are most of the

very good things of life.