<Saturday Review 15 October 1870, 486-7>

<SOCIAL NOMADS.>

<Eliza Lynn Linton>

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As there are wandering tribes which neither build houses nor pitch

their tents in one place, so there are certain social nomads who never

seem to have a home of their own, and who do not make one for

themselves by remaining long in any other person's. They are always

moving about and are to be met everywhere; at all sea-side places; at

all show places; in Switzerland, France, Italy and Germany; where they

live chiefly in \_pensions\_ at moderate charges, or in meagre lodgings

affiliated to a populous \_table d'hôte\_ much frequented by the

English. For one characteristic of social nomads is the strange way in

which they congregate together, expatiating on the delights of life

abroad, while seeing nothing but the outside of things from the centre

of a dense Britannic circle.

Another characteristic is their chronic state of impecuniosity, and

the desire of looking like the best on a fixed income of slender

dimensions. Hence they are obliged to organize their expenditure on a

very narrow basis, and therefore live in boarding-houses, \_pensions\_,

or wherever good-sized rooms, a sufficient table, and a constant

current of society are to be had at small individual cost. As they

are people who travel much, they can speak two or three languages, but

only as those who have learnt by ear and not by book. They know

nothing of foreign literature, and but little of their own, save

novels and the class which goes by the name of 'light.' Indeed all the

reading they accomplish is confined to newspapers, magazines and

novels. But at home, and among those who have not been to Berlin, who

have never seen Venice, and to whom Paris is a dream still to be

realized, they assume an intimate acquaintance with both the

literature and the politics of the Continent--especially the

politics--and laugh at the English press for its blindness and

onesidedness. They happen to know beyond all doubt how this

Correspondent was bought over with so much money down; how that one is

in the toils of such or such a Minister's wife; why a third got his

appointment; how a fourth keeps his; and they could, if they chose,

give you chapter and verse for all they say.

If they chance to have been in India some twenty or thirty years ago,

they will tell you why the Mutiny took place, and how the change of

Government works; and they can put their fingers on all the sore

places of the Empire, beginning with the distribution of patronage and

ending with the deficiency of revenue, as aptly as if they were on the

spot and had the confidence of the ruling officials. But in spite of

these little foibles they are amusing companions as a rule, if

shallow and radically ill-informed; and as it is for their own

interest to be good company, they have cultivated the art of

conversation to the highest pitch of which they are capable, and can

entertain if not instruct. When they aim at instruction indeed, they

are pretty sure to miss the mark; and the social nomad who lays down

the law on foreign statesmen and politics, and who speaks from

personal knowledge, is just the one authority not to be accepted.

Always living in public, yet having to fight, each for his own hand,

the manners of social nomads in \_pensions\_ are generally a strange

mixture of suavity and selfishness; and the small intrigues and crafty

stratagems going on among them for the possession of the favourite

seat in the drawing-room, the special attention of the head-waiter at

table, the earliest attendance of the housemaid in the morning, is in

strange contrast with the ready smiles, the personal flatteries, the

affectation of sympathetic interest kept for show. But every social

nomad knows how to appraise this show at its just value, and can weigh

it in the balance to a grain. He does not much prize it; for he knows

one characteristic of these communities to be that everybody speaks

against everybody else, and that all concur in speaking against the

management.

Still, life seems to go easily enough among them. They are all

well-dressed and for the most part have their tempers under control.

Some of the women play well, and some sing prettily. There are always

to be found a sufficient number of the middle-aged of either sex to

make up a whist-table, where the game is sound and sometimes

brilliant; and there are sure to be men who play billiards creditably

and with a crisp, clean stroke worth looking at. And there are very

often lively women who make amusement for the rest. But these are

smartly handled behind backs, though they are petted in public and

undeniably useful to the society at large.

The nomadic widow is by some odd fatality generally the widow of an

officer, naval or military, to whose rank she attaches an almost

superstitious value, thinking that when she can announce herself as

the relict of a major or an admiral she has given an unanswerable

guarantee and smoothed away all difficulties. She may have many

daughters, but more probably she has only one;--for where

olive-branches abound nomadism is more expensive than housekeeping,

and to live in one's own house is less costly than to live in a

boarding-house. But of this one daughter the nomadic widow makes much

to the community; and especially calls attention to her simplicity and

absolute ignorance of the evils so familiar to the girls of the

present day. And she looks as if she expects to be believed. Perhaps

credence is difficult; the young lady in question having been for some

years considerably in public, where she has learnt to take care of

herself with a skill which, how much soever it may be deserving of

praise, can scarcely claim to be called ingenuous. She has need of

this skill; for, apparently, she and her mother have no male relations

belonging to them, and if flirtations are common with the nomadic

tribe, marriages are rare. Poor souls; one cannot but pity them for

all their labour in vain, all their abortive hopes. For though there

is more society in the mode of life they have chosen than they would

have had if they had lived quietly down in the village where they were

known and respected, and where, who knows? the fairy prince might one

day have alighted--there are very few chances; and marriages among

'the inmates' are as rare as winter swallows.

The men who live in these places, whether as nomadic or permanent

guests, never have money enough to marry on; and the flirtations

always budding and blossoming by the piano or about the billiard-table

never by any chance fructify in marriage. But in spite of their

infertile experience you see the same mother and the same daughter

year after year, season after season, returning to the charge with

renewed vigour, and a hope which is the one indestructible thing about

them. Let us deal tenderly with them, poor impecunious nomads;

drifting like so much sea-wrack along the restless current of life;

and wish them some safe resting-place before it is too late.

A lady nomad of this kind, especially one with a daughter, is strictly

orthodox and cultivates with praiseworthy perseverance the society of

any clergyman who may have wandered into the community of which she is

a member. She is punctual in church-going; and the minister is

flattered by her evident appreciation of his sermons, and the

readiness with which she can remember certain points of last Sunday's

discourse. As a rule she is Evangelically inclined, and is as

intolerant of Romanism on the one hand as of Rationalism on the other.

She has seen the evils of both, she says, and quotes the state of Rome

and of Heidelberg in confirmation. She is as strict in morals as in

orthodoxy, and no woman who has got herself talked about, however

innocently, need hope for much mercy at her hands. Her Rhadamanthine

faculty has apparently ample occasion for exercise, for her list of

scandalous chronicles is extensive; and if she is to be believed, she

and her daughter are almost the sole examples of a pure and untainted

womanhood afloat. She is as rigid too, in all matters connected with

her social status; and brings up her daughter in the same way of

thinking. By virtue of the admiral or the major, at peace in his

grave, they are emphatically ladies; and, though nomadic, impecunious,

homeless, and \_tant soit peu\_ adventuresses, they class themselves as

of the cream of the cream, and despise those whose rank is of the

uncovenanted kind, and who are gentry, may be, by the grace of God

only without any Act of Parliament to help.

Sometimes the lady nomad is a spinster, not necessarily \_passée\_,

though obviously she cannot be in her first youth; still she may be

young enough to be attractive, and adventurous enough to care to

attract. Women of this kind, unmarried, nomadic and still young, work

themselves into every movement afoot. They even face the perils and

discomforts of war-time, and tell their friends at home that they are

going out as nurses to the wounded. That dash of the adventuress, of

which we have spoken before, runs through all this section of the

social nomads; and one wonders why some uncle or cousin, some aunt or

family friend, does not catch them up in time.

If not attractive nor passably young, these nomadic spinsters are sure

to be exceedingly odd. Constant friction with society in its most

selfish form, the absence of home-duties, the want of the sweetness

and sincerity of home love, and the habit of change, bring out all

that is worst in them and kill all that is best. They have nothing to

hope for from society and less to lose; it is wearisome to look

amiable and sweet-tempered when you feel bitter and disappointed; and

politeness is a farce where the fact of the day is a fight. So the

nomadic spinster who has lived so long in this rootless way that she

has ceased even to make such fleeting friendships as the mode of life

affords--has ceased even to wear the transparent mark of such thin

politeness as is required--becomes a 'character' notorious in

proportion to her candour. She never stays long in one establishment,

and generally leaves abruptly because of a misunderstanding with some

other lady, or maybe because some gentleman has unwittingly affronted

her. She and the officer's widow are always on peculiarly unfriendly

terms, for she resents the pretensions of the officer's daughter, and

calls her a bold minx or a sly puss almost within hearing; while she

throws grave doubts on the widow herself, and drops hints which the

rest of the community gather up like manna, and keep by them, to much

the same result as that of the wilderness. But the nomadic spinster

soon wanders away to another temporary resting-place; and before half

her life is done she becomes as well known to the heads of the various

establishments in her line as the taxgatherer himself, and dreaded

almost as much.

Nomads are generally remarkable for not leaving tracks behind them.

You see them here and there, and they are sure to turn up at

Baden-Baden or at Vichy, at Scarborough or at Dieppe, when you least

expect them; but you know nothing about them in the interim. They are

like those birds which hybernate at some place of retreat no one yet

ever found; or like those which migrate, who can tell where? They come

and they go. You meet and part and meet again in all manner of

unlikely places; and it seems to you that they have been over half the

world since you last met, you meanwhile having settled quietly to your

work, save for your summer holiday which you are now taking, and which

you are enjoying as the nomad cannot enjoy any change that falls to

his lot. He is sated with change; wearied of novelty; yet unable to

fix himself, however much he may wish it. He has got into the habit of

change; and the habit clings even when the desire has gone. Always

hoping to be at rest, always intending to settle as years flow on, he

never finds the exact place to suit him; only when he feels the end

approaching, and by reason of old age and infirmity is a nuisance in

the community where formerly he was an acquisition, and where too all

that once gave him pleasure has now become an insupportable burden and

weariness--only then does he creep away into some obscure and lonely

lodging, where he drags out his remaining days alone, and dies without

the touch of one loved hand to smooth his pillow, without the sound of

one dear voice to whisper to him courage, farewell, and hope. The home

he did not plant when he might is impossible to him now, and there is

no love that endures if there is no home in which to keep it. And so

all the class of social nomads find when dark days are on them, and

society, which cares only to be amused, deserts them in their hour of

greatest need.