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THE INCONSIDERATE WAITER

THEY were the family of William, one of our club waiters who had been disappointing me grievously of late. Many a time have I deferred dining several minutes that I might have the attendance of this ingrate. His efforts to reserve the window-table for me were satisfactory, and I used to allow him privileges, as to suggest dishes ; I have given him information, as that some one had startled me in the reading-room by slamming a door ; I have shown him how I cut my finger with a piece of string. William was none of your assertive waiters. We could have plotted a murder safely before him. It was one member who said to him that Saucy Sarah would win the Derby and another who said that Saucy Sarah had no chance, but it was William who agreed with both. The excellent fellow (as I thought him) was like a cheroot which may be smoked from either end.

I date his lapse from one evening when I was dining by the window. I had to repeat my order, 'Devilled kidney,' and instead of answering brightly, 'Yes, sir,' as if my selection of devilled kidney was a personal gratification to him, which is the manner one expects of a waiter, he gazed eagerly out at the window, and then, starting, asked, 'Did you say devilled kidney, sir?' A few minutes afterwards I became aware that some one was leaning over the back of my chair, and you may conceive my indignation on discovering that this rude person was William. Let me tell, in the measured words of one describing a past incident, what next took place. To get nearer the window he pressed heavily on my shoulder. 'William,' I said, 'you are not attending to me!'

To be fair to him, he shook, but never shall I forget his audacious apology, 'Beg pardon, sir, but I was thinking of something else.'

And immediately his eyes resought the window, and this burst from him passionately, 'For God's sake, sir, as we are man and man, tell me if you have seen a little girl looking up at the club windows.'

Man and man! But he had been a good waiter once, so I pointed out the girl to him. As soon as

she saw William she ran into the middle of Pall Mall, regardless of hansoms (many of which seemed to pass over her), nodded her head significantly three times, and then disappeared (probably on a stretcher). She was the tawdriest little Arab of about ten years, but seemed to have brought relief to William. 'Thank God!' said he fervently, and in the worst taste.

I was as much horrified as if he had dropped a plate on my toes. 'Bread, William,' I said sharply.

'You are not vexed with me, sir?' he had the hardihood to whisper.

'It was a liberty,' I said.

'I know, sir, but I was beside myself.

'That was a liberty again.'

'It is my wife, sir, she——'

So William, whom I had favoured in so many ways, was a married man. I felt that this was the greatest liberty of all.

I gathered that the troublesome woman was ailing, and as one who likes after dinner to believe that there is no distress in the world, I desired to be told by William that the signals meant her return to health. He answered inconsiderately, however, that the doctor feared the worst.

‘Bah, the doctor!’ I said in a rage.

‘Yes, sir,’ said William.

‘What is her confounded ailment?’

‘She was allus one of the delicate kind, but full of spirit, and you see, sir, she has had a baby-girl lately——’

‘William, how dare you!’ I said, but in the same moment I saw that this father might be useful to me. ‘How does your baby sleep, William?’ I asked in a low voice, ‘how does she wake up? what do you put in her bath?’

I saw surprise in his face, so I hurried on without waiting for an answer. ‘That little girl comes here with a message from your wife?’

‘Yes, sir, every evening; she’s my eldest, and three nods from her means that the missus is a little better.’

‘There were three nods to-day?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I suppose you live in some low part, William?’

The impudent fellow looked as if he could have struck me. ‘Off Drury Lane,’ he said, flushing, ‘but it isn’t low. And now,’ he groaned, ‘she’s afeard she will die without my being there to hold her hand.’

‘She should not say such things.’

‘She never says them, sir. She allus pretends to be feeling stronger. But I knows what is in her mind when I am leaving the house in the morning, for then she looks at me from her bed, and I looks at her from the door—O my God, sir!’

‘William!’

At last he saw that I was angry, and it was characteristic of him to beg my pardon and withdraw his wife as if she were some unsuccessful dish. I tried to forget his vulgar story in billiards, but he had spoiled my game, and next day to punish him I gave my orders through another waiter. As I had the window-seat, however, I could not but see that the little girl was late, and though this mattered nothing to me and I had finished my dinner, I lingered till she came. She not only nodded three times but waved her hat, and I arose, having now finished my dinner.

William came stealthily toward me. ‘Her temperature has gone down, sir,’ he said, rubbing his hands together.

‘To whom are you referring?’ I asked coldly, and retired to the billiard-room, where I played a capital game.

I took pains to show William that I had forgotten his maunderings, but I observed the girl

nightly, and once, instead of nodding, she shook her head, and that evening I could not get into a pocket. Next evening there was no William in the dining-room, and I thought I knew what had happened. But, chancing to enter the library rather miserably, I was surprised to see him on a ladder dusting books. We had the room practically to ourselves, for though several members sat on chairs holding books in their hands they were all asleep, and William descended the ladder to tell me his blasting tale. He had sworn at a member!

‘I hardly knew what I was doing all day, sir, for I had left her so weakly that——’

I stamped my foot.

‘I beg your pardon for speaking of her,’ he had the grace to say. ‘But Irene had promised to come every two hours; and when she came about four o’clock and I saw she was crying, it sort of blinded me, sir, and I stumbled against a member, Mr. B——, and he said, “Damn you?” Well, sir, I had but touched him after all, and I was so broken it sort of stung me to be treated so, and I lost my senses, and I said, “Damn *you!*”’

His shamed head sank on his chest, and I think some of the readers shuddered in their sleep.

‘I was turned out of the dining-room at once, and sent here until the committee have decided what to do with me. O sir, I am willing to go on my knees to Mr. B——’

How could I but despise a fellow who would be thus abject for a pound a week?

‘For if I have to tell her I have lost my place she will just fall back and die.’

‘I forbid your speaking to me of that woman,’ I cried wryly, ‘unless you can speak pleasantly,’ and I left him to his fate and went off to look for B——. ‘What is this story about your swearing at one of the waiters?’ I asked him.

‘You mean about his swearing at me,’ said B——, reddening.

‘I am glad that was it,’ I said, ‘for I could not believe you guilty of such bad form. The version which reached me was that you swore at each other, and that he was to be dismissed and you reprimanded.’

‘Who told you that?’ asked B——, who is a timid man.

‘I am on the committee,’ I replied lightly, and proceeded to talk of other matters, but presently B——, who had been reflecting, said: ‘Do you know I fancy I was wrong in thinking that the

waiter swore at me, and I shall withdraw the charge to-morrow.'

I was pleased to find that William's troubles were near an end without my having to interfere in his behalf, and I then remembered that he would not be able to see the girl Irene from the library windows, which are at the back of the club. I was looking down at her, but she refrained from signalling, because she could not see William, and, irritated by her stupidity, I went out and asked her how her mother was.

'My,' she ejaculated, after a long scrutiny of me, 'I b'lieve you are one of them!' and she gazed at me with delighted awe. I suppose William tells them of our splendid doings.

The invalid, it appeared, was a bit better, and this annoying child wanted to inform William that she had took all the tapiocar. She was to indicate this by licking an imaginary plate in the middle of Pall Mall. I gave the little vulgarian a shilling, and returned to the club disgusted.

'By the way, William,' I said, 'Mr. B—— is to inform the committee that he was mistaken in thinking you used improper language to him, so you will doubtless be restored to the dining-room to-morrow.'

I had to add immediately, 'Remember your place, William.'

'But Mr. B—— knows I swore,' he insisted.

'A gentleman,' I replied stiffly, 'cannot remember for many hours what a waiter has said to him.'

'No, sir, but——'

To stop him I had to say, 'And—ah—William, your wife is decidedly better. She has eaten the tapioca—all of it.'

'How can you know, sir?'

'By an accident.'

'Irene signed to the window?'

'No.'

'Then you saw her and went out and——'

'How dare you, William!'

'O sir, to do that for me! May God bl——'

'William.'

He was reinstated in the dining-room, but often when I looked at him I seemed to see a dying wife in his face, and so the relations between us were still strained. But I watched the girl, and her pantomime was so illuminating that I knew the sufferer had again cleaned the platter on Tuesday, had attempted a boiled egg on Wednesday (you should have seen Irene chipping it in Pall Mall,

and putting in the salt), but was in a woeful state of relapse on Thursday.

‘Is your mother very ill to-day, Miss Irene?’ I asked, as soon as I had drawn her out of range of the club windows.

‘My!’ she exclaimed again, and I saw an ecstatic look pass between her and a still smaller girl with her, whom she referred to as a neighbour.

I waited coldly. William’s wife, I was informed, had looked like nothing but a dead one till she got the brandy.

‘Hush, child!’ I said, shocked. ‘You don’t know how the dead look.’

‘Bless yer!’ she replied.

Assisted by her friend, who was evidently enormously impressed by Irene’s intimacy with me, she gave me a good deal of miscellaneous information, as that William’s real name was Mr. Hicking, but that he was known in their street, because of the number of his shirts, as Toff Hicking. That the street held that he should get away from the club before two in the morning, for his missus needed him more than the club needed him. That William replied (very sensibly) that if the club was short of waiters at supper-time some of the gentle-

men might be kept waiting for their marrow-bone. That he sat up with his missus most of the night, and pretended to her that he got some nice long naps at the club. That what she talked to him about mostly was the kid. That the kid was in another part of London (in charge of a person called the old woman), because there was an epidemic in Irene's street.

'And what does the doctor say about your mother?'

'He sometimes says she would have a chance if she could get her kid back.'

'Nonsense.'

'And if she was took to the country.'

'Then why does not William take her?'

'My! And if she drank porty wine.'

'Doesn't she?'

'No. But father, he tells her 'bout how the gentlemen drinks it.'

I turned from her with relief, but she came after me.

'Ain't yer going to do it this time?' she demanded with a falling face. 'You done it last time. I tell her you done it'—she pointed to her friend, who was looking wistfully at me—'ain't you to let her see you doing of it?'

For a moment I thought that her desire was another shilling, but by a piece of pantomime she showed that she wanted me to lift my hat to her. So I lifted it, and when I looked behind she had her head in the air and her neighbour was gazing at her awestruck. Those little creatures are really not without merit.

About a week afterwards I was in a hired landau, holding a newspaper before my face lest any one should see me in company of a waiter and his wife. William was taking her into Surrey to stay with an old nurse of mine, and Irene was with us, wearing the most outrageous bonnet.

I formed a mean opinion of Mrs. Hicking's intelligence from her pride in the baby, which was a very ordinary one. She created a regrettable scene when it was brought to her, because 'she had been feared it would not know her again.' I could have told her that they know no one for years had I not been in terror of Irene, who dandled the child on her knees and talked to it all the way. I have never known a bolder little hussy than this Irene. She asked the infant improper questions, such as, 'Oo know who gave me this bonnet?' and answered them herself, 'It was the pretty gentleman there'; and several times I had to affect sleep,

because she announced, 'Kiddy wants to kiss the pretty gentleman.'

Irksome as all this necessarily was to a man of taste, I suffered still more acutely when we reached our destination, where disagreeable circumstances compelled me to drink tea with a waiter's family. William knew that I regarded thanks from persons of his class as an outrage, yet he looked them though he dared not speak them. Hardly had he sat down at the table by my orders than he remembered that I was a member of the club and jumped up. Nothing is in worse form than whispering, yet again and again he whispered to his poor foolish wife, 'How are you now? You don't feel faint?' And when she said she felt like another woman already, his face charged me with the change. I could not but conclude from the way she let the baby pound her that she was stronger than she pretended.

I remained longer than was necessary because I had something to say to William which I feared he would misunderstand, but when he announced that it was time for him to catch a train back to London, at which his wife paled, I delivered the message.

'William,' I said, backing away from him, 'the

head-waiter asked me to say that you could take a fortnight's holiday. Your wages will be paid as usual.'

Confound him.

'William,' I cried furiously, 'go away.'

Then I saw his wife signing to him, and I knew she wanted to be left alone with me.

'William,' I cried in a panic, 'stay where you are.'

But he was gone, and I was alone with a woman whose eyes were filmy. Her class are fond of scenes. 'If you please, ma'am!' I said imploringly.

But she kissed my hand; she was like a little dog.

'It can be only the memory of some woman,' said she, 'that makes you so kind to me and mine.'

Memory was the word she used, as if all my youth were fled. I suppose I really am quite elderly.

'I should like to know her name, sir,' she said, 'that I may mention her with loving respect in my prayers.'

I raised the woman and told her the name. It was not Mary. 'But she has a home,' I said, 'as you have, and I have none. Perhaps, ma'am, it would be better worth your while to mention me.'

It was this woman, now in health, whom I in-

trusted with the purchase of the outfits, 'one for a boy of six months,' I explained to her, 'and one for a boy of a year,' for the painter had boasted to me of David's rapid growth. I think she was a little surprised to find that both outfits were for the same house ; and she certainly betrayed an ignoble curiosity about the mother's Christian name, but she was much easier to browbeat than a fine lady would have been, and I am sure she and her daughter enjoyed themselves hugely in the shops, from one of which I shall never forget Irene emerging proudly with a commissionaire, who conducted her under an umbrella to the cab where I was lying in wait. I think that was the most celestial walk of Irene's life.

I told Mrs. Hicking to give the articles a little active ill-treatment that they might not look quite new, at which she exclaimed, not being in my secret, and then to forward them to me. I then sent them to Mary and rejoiced in my devilish cunning all the evening, but chagrin came in the morning with a letter from her which showed she knew all, that I was her Mr. Anon, and that there never had been a Timothy. I think I was never so gravelled. Even now I don't know how she had contrived it.

Her cleverness raised such a demon in me that

I locked away her letter at once and have seldom read it since. No married lady should have indited such an epistle to a single man. It said, with other things which I decline to repeat, that I was her good fairy. As a sample of the deliberate falsehoods in it, I may mention that she said David loved me already. She hoped that I would come in often to see her husband, who was very proud of my friendship, and suggested that I should pay him my first visit to-day at three o'clock, an hour at which, as I happened to know, he is always away giving a painting-lesson. In short, she wanted first to meet me alone, so that she might draw the delicious, respectful romance out of me, and afterwards repeat it to him, with sighs and little peeps at him over her pocket-handkerchief.

She had dropped what were meant to look like two tears for me upon the paper, but I should not wonder though they were only artful drops of water.

I sent her a stiff and tart reply, declining to hold any communication with her.