

THE PUBLIC DINING ROOM.

To most of those whose lot it is, and has been always, to dine amongst their families or their friends, the eating-house presents itself as a place for satisfaction merely in the entertainment which is indicated in its name. And to such, the entering into one of these of the half-famished mechanic or the hungry clerk, who has passed the day engrossed with thoughts of but little else than the work which occupied his hands, and his coming-forth again, wearing another aspect and surveying humanity about him with a benevolence which is beautiful to see, would suggest but the influence of the viands he has therein paid full justice to.

But while this transformation in the mechanic or the clerk is due in great part, no doubt, to the primary use of the eating-house, it owes its thoroughness and its elaborate finish with an equal absence of doubt, to another entertainment—the contemplation of other mechanics and other clerks, and the observer's own fancied exemption from all notice—which even adds a zest to the primary use itself.

There is a pleasant little dining room on Craig street, situated with happy comfort between two corners, and whose host and hostess—bearers of a name which was famously connected with the same line of business in the world's metropolis in days gone by—at once gain the customer's good opinion in their possession of that geniality of mien which has been a requisite in the successful boniface from time forgotten.

Five two-seat tables, which at the first and last meals of the day are covered by reddish-coloured cloths, and, at the second, white ones, grace one half of the room, which also contains a stove and a cozy little ticket office, placed as befits the actors in the game of "give and take," conveniently near to the door, and to each other. Several appetizing little pictures depend from the wall, which also supports a score or more of iron hooks, or hat-racks, and a clock.

The other half of the room has the commencement of a flight of stairs leading to an upper dining room; a curious old cupboard with an extension of a more modern design and workmanship, and a larger table running parallel to the stairs—and from its close contiguity to the kitchen, parallel also to the inclinations of the more superstitious of the frequenters, on whose susceptibilities it operates on that account, and who therefore patronize it.

The first thing which meets your eye on entering, of a morning, is something of a fat man, who at considerable peril to himself, and with the object of striking terror to your heart, as a newcomer, jerks his ponderous and decided countenance from the paper he is reading, and gives utterance to a hard, long-drawn cough—by which he means to say: "I am here; so, look out for yourself!"

If you be a wealthy man or an M.P. he will have other greetings for you; but if you have reached neither of those positions, do as he says and look out for yourself. Furthermore, you may whistle for the newspaper. But do not be afraid of the fat man. He is there certainly, and he will stay there long after you will have gone. In fact, the fat man is always there. He is there the first thing in the morning, and immediately appropriates the *Gazette* with a plainly-evincing intention of holding it, to the utter confusion of everyone else. Everyone else, therefore, glowers on the fat man; and he, appearing magnificently oblivious to these hostile glances, bogusly contents himself with glowering over the newspaper, while a half-contemptuous, half-exulting drawing-down of the right-hand corner of the mouth sufficiently denotes the nature of his sentiments.

There is one, on whom this peculiarity of the fat man acts more hardly than on the others: a young man, whose neck once fair and short enough, has been gradually forced upward and lengthened by the decrees of fashion, with the ever-increasing height of collars as an instrument. A "choker" of something less than six inches in height adorning a neck of something more than

that, can be traced to the young man; and you interest yourself too in a nobby hat and a cane, and a pair of yellow gloves protruding from a pocket of a yellow overcoat which is hanging on a peg.

The young man has positively no earthly interest in the newspaper beyond a fancy of the reputation he acquires through a seeming perusal of it; but as he regularly makes it a point each morning to endeavour to secure it first, and as the fat man just as regularly forestalls him in that manœuvre, it is no matter for surprise that there is anything but a perfect understanding between them; and you will take notice that on this particular morning there remains for him but ten minutes in which to despatch his breakfast into himself and himself to the office. He is consequently in a very bad humour.

"Er—I say, Sis!" he says to the waitress, with his eyes peering out of the corners of their sockets at the fat man; "Is the paper in this morning yet?"

The girl tells him that the gentleman at the table in front of him has it.

"Oh!" he cries with that peculiar intonation of the voice which is so manifestly inexpressive of the regretful surprise intended. He now looks squarely at the fat man. But the fat man is not to be beguiled in this manner. This is the sort of thing he has to put up with every morning, and as the mornings go by he becomes the more proof against it. The young man politely begs the fat man not to disturb himself on his account, but intimates that if he is really through with the paper some one else may take a notion for it; to which the fat man, turning, replies irascibly that he is not through with the paper, and that he never disturbs himself on anybody's account. An indignant rustle of the sheet completes the young man's frenzy. He thereupon sarcastically requests the fat man not to keep the paper all the week on his own account, hysterically swallows his boiled egg and coffee, and vanishes—five minutes late.

Here is a man whom, but for the gradual lessening of his oatmeal porridge, the motion of his right arm and the rapid throbbing of the Adam's-apple in his throat as mouthful follows mouthful, you would associate with something petrified: so rigid is his form, and of such stoniness his gaze.

And opposite, engaged on bacon, is another—a nervous person who has somehow taken it into his head that his neighbour is looking at him. He decides that he will catch the fellow this time, and therefore feigning an indifference of expression, and at the same time a certain dignity, he glances casually from his plate with a great flourish of knife and fork, to find that the stoic is looking, or seeming to look, right over his left shoulder, and not at him at all. To say truth, nobody takes the slightest notice of the nervous man; and again, to do him justice, nothing could exceed his happiness could he bring himself to that belief. Withal, a good-natured person as you can see at a glance, nothing annoys him more than another person's quiet observation of him; but as this observation is illusory, his annoyance is born solely of his own foolish little fancy. It is very distressing to the nervous man, and involves an awkwardness where there would perhaps be enough of that without it.

At the larger table are two newly-arrived Old-countrymen—or rather boys—who, with their hats on, and very apparently impressed with the idea of the approach of a particularly severe winter, are animated by denouncing the productions of every other country but their own. Another who has been before them by some years, and to whom the remarks are addressed, has his own opinion and a different one.

The discussion, by a natural process, turns on the products of the farm.

"Ah!" says O. C. M. number one, "Gi' me some real old English beef and pudden! That's somethin' they can't raise here like they do in the Old Country."

"An' cheese, man!" cries number two; "How I shed like a chunk now o' Stilton for a thruppenny bit, eh?"

"Aye," assents number one.

"Hoo-ootoot!" exclaims the unbeliever, "Ye don't know what you're tacken aboot. Beef in the old country! Why mahn, half the beef they get there coomes from her-re—aye, an' more than half; an' as for quality or what the likes o' you ever got of it, th' old country beast canna hooold a candle to the Canadyen ar-rticle."

"I shed indeed," comments number two pensively, thinking of the cheese.

Number one, finding himself beaten on one point, readily turns to another with the air of a man who can hold it good.

"Well, but it's cheaper over there," says he, "an' I suppose ye'll no be about sayin' it aint."

"Mahn! mahn! Where's your head at all? Cheaper! An' ye know as well as I do that wi' sexpence in th' old country ye canna git above a pound o' the scruffest o' the stoo, an' here—look! look aboot an' see for yersel's. Git your top-coats an' let's be off."

And they go—leaving a jolly little man at the same table who has treated the affair as a tremendous joke, greatly disappointed at its having ended so tamely, and struggling with a feverish disposition to attack somebody for his own amusement. But the jolly little man is soon interested in the arrival of a pompous young man who seems incapable of bringing his eyes to a lower level than the cornices of the ceiling, which invests everyone with a terrifying anxiety lest he trip over the scurrying waitress and break his neck.

"Beef-steak, lamb-chops and sausages?" is the laconic welcome of the young lady; to which the pompous young man, addressing the roof, makes answer: "Lamb chops, very well cooked—and say! no grease!"

And when they are handed him he falls to gamely, using his knife and fork with a mathematical impartiality which is astonishing. Having arrested starvation, he turns his attention to the jolly little man.

"Fine morning, sir," he remarks with his mouth full; "Quite!"

"Ye-es," responds the other, regarding him intently.

"Curious thing—lamb, sir."

The jolly little man becomes very much excited.

"By ginger! That's true," says he; "I say you're right! But now I think of it, there's something more curious still than lamb."

"No! What's that?" asks the pompous young man.

"Calf!" replies the jolly little man, as he reaches for his coat and hat. And the pompous young man is left in a state in which the comingling of his natural disposition with an enforced stolidity leaves little room for the indifference he endeavours to assume.

Noon brings the married man, who finds it too far to walk home; the single man who has no home to walk to, and who, with a view to the other state and the affiliated benefit of spotless pantaloons, flourishes the table napkin vigorously over his chair for a minute or two in search of the odious potato crumb, and the young fellow with good prospects who seats himself at his favourite little table with a great deal of humming and hawing, and puffing and blowing, and talks to his friend in a voice which he calculates drowns everything.

And at night comes the same stream of mechanics and clerks, fat men, jolly men, pompous men and frisky men; the would-be smart person whose actions more befit the fool by profession, and the timid individual who eats but half of what he pays for, and considers himself the landlord's debtor—each an ardent admirer of the six-tickets-for-a-dollar system, and each, or the greater part, hoping for his own quiet comfort that the room is nearly empty, and finding it full in the same measure, accordingly with the greatest politeness feigns a perfect ignorance of the presence of his neighbour while slyly carrying on his observation.

H. C.