

Reminiscences : I enter society

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REMINISCENCES.

I ENTER SOCIETY.

By ST.

To every man or woman born into a certain *milieu* comes a time, when "Society" claims them: in short when they have to make their *début* or what the French call, "aller dans le monde."

Some make their bow in most exalted circles, and others in humbler ones; but whatever the grade, it is undoubtedly a great event in the life of the one, who is about to enter into what is known universally as "Society," and of which it is said that it is ever ready to worship success, but rarely forgives failure.

The act of "entering" takes various courses, all subject to the customs, ranks and circles into which one is born. Amongst the savages, the entry into Society is attended, in many cases, by a long period of trials previous to the initiation. During this period the young men or women, form themselves into temporary republics in the recesses of the forest, where they dwell entirely apart from the rest of their tribe. Then again, in some Eastern countries, the entry into Society is accompanied with much ceremonial pomp, the candidates ornament themselves with jewellery of all kinds, bracelets, leather thongs, etc. To come to nearer or more civilised countries, we find *f.i.*, that ladies put white ostrich feathers in their hair, cover their lily white arms with kid gloves, and drag a long

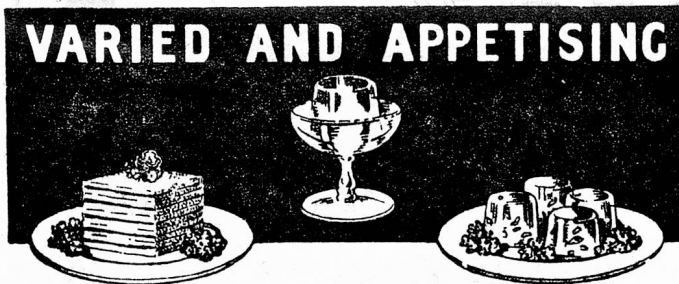
train behind them. They usually are brought to the "slaughter house" in a motor-car, where they pass their time, waiting for the entry, by knitting, playing cards and by being admired by an envious crowd, which passes complimentary or often rude remarks about the "victims." They enter Society as ordinary "females" and henceforth are expected to be "Ladies" in behaviour as well as name. Men dress up in more or less becoming uniforms, which are known as Court or Levee Dress, of which knee-breeches are a distinct feature; instead of putting feathers into their hair they carry a dainty little sword, but I have never yet been able to discover for what reason, as I cannot conceive that they are going to slay each other on that occasion. They are then supposed to make a very deep bow, or if they are lucky, to shake hands, and on leaving the place, they are then supposed to be really and truly "Gentlemen." —

The day of my entry into Society, many, many years ago is still vividly in my memory, it is true there were no feathers and no swords, but it was nevertheless an imposing show, and coincided with the very day on which I finished my apprenticeship.

One fine day my mother acquainted me with the fact that a friend of the family, had been appointed to a high government position in relation with banking, and that he was giving a reception and dinner, to which the cream of Society in my home town was invited, amongst them my parents and their offsprings.

These were exciting news, but I felt, however, a little uneasy; as mentioned before, on that very day, I was to leave the firm where I had spent three long years, trying to become an efficient business man. It was the age-long custom in this concern, that on leaving, the departing one should invite his former colleagues to a little luncheon, and treat them to a small barrel of beer. In view of the impending party, at the house of my family's friends, I tried to make an exception to the rule, or to at least postpone the luncheon to a more opportune moment. But for some reason or other this was not possible, and after a more or less heated argument with my parents, I received the permission to invite my colleagues to the customary luncheon, which was held at a small Restaurant in the town, provided I should later on make an appearance, and my *début* into Society.

I can still remember, how my mother, gave me some sound advice on how to deport myself at the two parties. I was particularly requested not to forget to "whom I belonged," and that I had been brought up decently, and that I should be judged by my manners. I promised faithfully that I would bear all those counsels in mind, and after I was inspected as to clean collar, ears and finger nails, I was dismissed. My luncheon party was a great success, I made a little speech to my colleagues, who still had to "slog" along in the fetters of their apprenticeship, telling them how sorry I was to leave them — although in fact I was jolly glad to have seen the last of them. In return they also expressed their heartfelt regret at losing my valued collaboration, and the youngest apprentice even recited a poem, which he had composed for the occasion, and each verse closed with the refrain: "Farewell, Excelsior!" I thought it was awfully nice, and I really began to feel sorry to say *valet* to such fine specimens of the commercial fraternity. There were many sing songs, and many glasses were emptied on the slightest provocation. As



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the afternoon wore on, the singing became louder, but rather less melodious and a note was sent upstairs by some person in authority, that various customers did not enjoy the concert, with the usual result, that everybody bellowed louder than before, and remarks such as killjoys and wet blankets were uttered. It was unanimously agreed, that we were living in a free country, and therefore could do as we liked; these high sounding words, were sealed with two extra rounds of beer, glasses to be emptied in one gulp.


A glance at my watch revealed the fact that the time for my departure was rapidly approaching, and after many handshakes and tender words of farewell, I said good-bye to my former colleagues in order to "enter Society." On the way to the appointed place I tried hard to memorise the many counsels I had received that morning, but striving to think as hard as I could, my brain only echoed time and again those insane words: "Farewell Excelsior!", and for a time I even forgot to "whom I belonged."

The first stop was made at a flower-shop, where I

bought a *bouquet* of carnations which were surrounded by asparagus fern, and the whole was neatly enveloped in spotless white tissue paper. Onward I marched with a martial stride, swinging my arms like propellers. On arriving at the front door, I could hear merry laughter and sounds of many voices. I rang the bell, once, twice, three times, nobody seemed to take the slightest notice, in a fit of despair I even kicked the door, doing more damage to my foot, than to the door, but then suddenly I remembered those words of my mother, "by your manners you will be judged," and as a last attempt I pressed the button of that infernal bell, until I got the cramp in my finger; it was no good, I came to the conclusion that the servants were either deaf or drunk. Wearily I started to trot round the house, when I noticed, that a door leading into the garden was ajar and peeping through the opening, I saw that it led straight into the Drawing Room, where the whole company was assembled. There I could see the *elite* of my home town, amongst them my parents, brothers and sister all merry and bright, so I decided to "enter into Society" through that very same door, thinking that such an entry would be rather impressive and quite out of the ordinary. — It was. — I pulled myself together, opened the door, stepped forward and fell headlong into the room. The cause of this accident was a loathsome little footstool, which stood right in front of the door, and which I could not see, as my eyes were eagerly fixed on the many faces to detect the effect which my unsuspected entry would have. I collected myself as quickly as I could, muttered a few inaudible words of excuse, met the eyes of my whole family, which were not very encouraging, and stepped forward to the hostess to present my *bouquet* with a few words of congratulations. To my intense horror, there was only the paper and a few pieces of asparagus fern left, the rest I must have lost on the way, and this so unnerved me that I simply could not think of anything to say. All I remembered were those words: "Farewell, Excelsior!", but as I had only just arrived, I thought perhaps this would not do; so I simply made a neat bow, and after that was speedily ushered into a corner by my brothers. They anxiously wanted to know, whether I was alright, I assured them that I felt very well indeed, and hoped that they felt equally well, and after we had mutually agreed that we felt all very fit, we joined heartily into the merry-making.—

In those days, wireless was, of course, an unknown quantity, and people had to provide their own amusement. Some of the guests regaled the company with playing on various instruments, such as the piano, violin, flute, etc., whilst others recited, and one Gentleman excelled in conjuring tricks. I, *f.i.* was asked to sing, which put me rather in a quandary; I simply could not think of an appropriate song. Receiving however, some encouragement from a sweet little lady for whom I had nourished a tender regard for a long time, I felt I ought to do something, and I announced that I was going to sing a song entitled "Du hast mich nie geliebt" (Thou never has loved me) I got through it quite well, and sang it with feeling and restraint, but when on finishing, I looked towards the lady with the bewitching eyes she gave me such a look of contempt, that my heart almost ceased to beat. She at least must have thought, that my turn was a failure, stole away to my corner, reflecting that it is very difficult to please some people, and that so far my

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"entry into Society" had not been exactly a success. — But worse was to come.

Dinner was now announced, and full of pleasant anticipation, everybody filed into the dining room, where a beautifully laid table delighted the eye. The dinner was excellent, with one exception; one of the vegetables dished up, consisted of little carrots. Now I simply loathed carrots. I was told at home that this special dish was a very healthy one, as carrots purified the blood, and also made the hair curl; yet I considered that my blood was quite healthy enough, and I had not the faintest wish to be adorned with curls, as a matter of fact, I hated boys with curls. However, bearing in mind the good counsel I had received, I attacked with a stout heart these to me disagreeable objects, but it was no good, I simply could not swallow them, they made me feel sick, and yet it would have been rude and impolite to leave them on the plate.

Suddenly an inspiration crossed my mind, what about making them disappear somehow? I awaited an opportune moment, when the attention of my table neighbours were diverted, and quickly made them disappear into my handkerchief, which I had previously brought into the vicinity of my plate. The trick proved to be successful, not a soul noticed my clever manœuvre. — After the dinner all and sundry adjourned again into the Drawing Room, and it was proposed that a game of blind man's buff should be played. I was chosen to start it, and innocently, quite having forgotten what secrets my handkerchief harboured, snatched it out of the depths of my pocket, with the distressing result, that a shower of carrots descended on the expectant onlookers, one nearly hitting my distinguished hostess in the eye.

There was great consternation, I secretly prayed that the earth would open and swallow me up, but as earthquakes cannot be ordered at convenience, I had to face the ordeal and give some explanation. Luckily I hit one which was, the least said, plausible. I at once declared, that it was rather a mean trick of the conjuring Gentleman, to let those carrots disappear into my pockets, and on the whole, this statement went down quite well, in fact, some members of the company congratulated my friend on his clever performance. Not so my family, they, of course, knew of my aversion to this special dish, and black looks were cast in my direction, with the consequence that for the rest of the evening I kept rather quiet and subdued.

Luckily enough, soon after this for me most trying incident, the gathering dispersed. The home journey, was a quiet one, but this uncanny silence preyed on my mind, was this, I thought, what is known as the "silence before the storm." — It was. — The storm broke out in all its fury, on arriving home. I was told, that I did not only disgrace myself, but the whole family, that I was not fit to be let loose amongst decent people, that the company of Hottentots, Bushmen, and any other savage tribe, would be more in my line. I vainly protested, no excuse was accepted. Oh, how I hated *Society* that night, on laying a weary heart to rest; and during a sleepless night I made my mind up to keep aloof from it, as long as I would live, it was certainly no place for me.

The next morning I was ordered to personally tender my apologies to our host and hostess for my disgraceful behaviour. With some trepidation, and a ready made speech, I arrived at the door, where I

casually noticed, that I had the previous evening been pressing the door knob, instead of the bell, which explained, why I could not get a hearing. I was shown into the Drawing-Room, which quarters evoked in me some mixed feelings, and I was just going to look around whether there were any more carrots to be found, when the door opened, and my host and hostess entered. Before I could utter a word, they shook hands with me, tapped me on the back, at least my host did, and told me that I was the success of the evening, and that they haven't had for a long time, such a good laugh. I could hardly believe my ears, after all *Society* was not such a dreadful thing and I was looking forward to the next event; which soon turned up, and which unfortunately, was also accompanied with some disaster, but about this another time, perhaps.

FREIHEIT, DIE ICH MEINE.

Freedom, gift I cherish
 Treasured in my heart,
 May you never perish
 Nor from us depart.
 Ever brightly shining
 In the starry skies,
 Our faith refining,
 Light that never dies.

In the shady woodlands,
 In the verdant dells,
 'Mongst the flow'ry garlands,
 There your spirit dwells.
 O how sweet its flavour,
 When in storm and stress,
 Gently freedom's favour
 You on us impress.

When God's spirit enters
 In our souls anew,
 And within them centres
 All that's good and true,
 When free men are meeting,
 Noble aims in view,
 Shall our hearts be beating,
 Liberty, for you.

(Translated by J.J.F.S.)

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