

THE PARTING GUEST

OF all human situations, that perhaps which marks the end of a visit is the most difficult to define. Its ceremonial contains elements which cannot have varied greatly since the beginning; and yet it must, and does without hypocrisy, appear to be special to this leave taking, isolated from all others. Upon humble door-steps, and where even neither door nor step has been, ritual which is forever associated with ancient breeding observes its due development, the note of slight fatigue, the scarcely perceptible smile. There is no margin for criticism; for all that is evil or less perfect has been eliminated, while reticent benevolence pervades the rite.

A barrier as of golden gossamer, exquisite in its tenuity, descends; and it is at the same time a mutual screen to cover the nakedness of whatever regret, awkwardness, relief might humanly be present; restoring solemnity; preserving the sacredness of hospitality, recalling its noble etymology. Sooner or later, seldom or often, each has stood on one side or the other of this imagined partition.

To what remote genesis does the visit lead back, link by link; to what incautious invitation; what fawning hint, unworthy scheming, what jolt of importunity has contributed to its fulfilment? 'Some day we shall have to invite' Nothing is wrong in this formula; for, after all, what is a family in its essence? Circle is the favourite metaphor; and the penetration of it has a miraculous quality. The mind or atmosphere contained has been brought, if not to desire, to permit a highly special intrusion; and the permission implies a multitude of adaptations, every one of which is hostile to interior harmony.

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He, then, who at length became the occasion of much whispering and telephoning, of shifts and sacrifices such as only royalty could be aware of without blushing, really had for some hours, it must be supposed, a peculiar place in that exclusive society which a family is; the place, namely, of one temporarily adopted.

Adoption in the usual sense, by civilised, barbaric, or savage men, may follow from one of many motives; and it always evokes a cloud of hazardous consequences. Permanence is its formidable condition, urging to foresight, tending to forbid cordiality. But that which is the fruit of chance acquaintance looks to the shortest of days, and is consequently rich in the abundance of admirable properties.

It is in the nature of a host to recognise his privilege, and use it with abandonment, in trying to crowd into the numbered hours of his hospitality all the benevolence that ever hung, cautious and nebulous, in the mind of the legal adopter; and pray what is to hinder his benevolence from becoming beneficence? The sovereignty inherent in a paterfamilias rises to tyranny: not only is power over his subjects reinforced, but he himself may perform services unheard-of. While he remains hypothetically wise, nay, verges on infallibility, he becomes disastrously indulgent; he accepts responsibility, not only for his rational dependents, but for his pets, the creatures in his service, even for his vehicles, the state of the roads; even the markings of the barograph.

And, as all that in other conjunctions would be called the trouble is concealed, the resultant activity is ideal conduct. There is no need that the apparatus of hospitality should be intrinsically good; for the perfection with which it is used is the sole criterion.

Benedict had perforce to legislate upon hospitality, owing to his larger conception of every stranger as a

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guest; *omnes supervenientes hospites tanquam Christus suscipiantur, quia ipse dicturus est: Hospes fui, et suscepistis me*; but, in the more limited view, hospitality makes its own laws as it goes, and takes obstacles with the indifference of a Roman road. It is well that it has for one of its canons secrecy; or no one would presume to enjoy it.

What is written is no more than a dim light held for the reader to see his own face; the lamp might be brighter, the hand steadier; his own conscience will define what is only adumbrated. But who can arrange words to represent the all-essential culmination, the moment when the visit ends? How simple by comparison would be the verdict on a life, when all its happenings are assembled, as some pretend they may be. For now are drawn to a point sharper than the pen of an abdication experiences intricately rich as only these conditions could ever have made them: all, whatever all may mean, is the guest's to take away, a speck of wealth. Let him who associates riches with bulk recall the object, the size of a pea, laid in the palm of Julian; and the mysterious definition of it: All that is made.

The visit, for any visit is typical of all, each is superlatively choice, was at a spot where, in the Black Mountains, the valleys cease their writhing, and a great, clumsy homestead has space to deploy. At the sources of the Hondy the vale is both deep and high. The buildings, which would merit description, have not always been the home of the hosts. They founded upon a ruin, a site, a name on the ordnance map, and read in chronicles, what will hereafter have to be known by their name; and have awoke each morning since to find what they brought there first increased by reaction to the landscape, which sea-level people might think terrific; they and their own remaining delicate, like rock-rose in the desert.

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How complete is the home of such in such surroundings; how balanced are its resources; how mysterious are its communications in regions where only foxes really know the road. The low, dark clouds cutting the steeps midway, lanes all but tunnels, the roughness of foot-going and the hazards of crossing torrents, all that composes the exterior darkness, pressing upon it, concentrates the qualities of home within the enlightened sphere.

Yet, as its lamps are visible and guiding marks from afar, thoughts within radiate accurately to persons and particulars in all the directions of the thinly inhabited region. The mesh of conversation, as the occupants of the hall move and mope, is woven from the facts of the world at large, and those quite local; it is salted with provisional judgments and spiced with proper names. The guest, bewildered by these fruits of the confidence placed in him, assigns a personality to every strange name he hears; and his part in the conversation is dexterously made to appear intelligible. His sense of enjoyment is wealth of impression; and, through his eyes, the gigantic dresser, for example, contributes to it. Its load of utensils seems to present the utmost variety, say, in the diameter and material of its platters; and multitude, if only of hanging beakers,

Like noughts disposed to start a race
Across the leagues of stellar space.

It is all the experiences of which these are selected examples which impinge on the point of departure, becoming, as it were, portable. Not that the guest knows more than he knew, unless by accident; not that he is intellectually or commercially richer by what hospitality has lavished; but he is greater by all his hosts could give of all they have been or had or known.

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What happened in little is to happen in great. The hosts, at the last happiest touches of off-sending, had then to dispose themselves to be parting guests. If that departure ever came to be told it would have to be tenderer, fairer. The region has its human history, foundations, passionate movements, the preached crusade; in our period the tenancy adventures of Landor, the social enterprise of Lyne, pleasantly tickling the mind as the bygone does; the deeper history through recent centuries of those who had not the ready gift of expression; the bearers of stalwart names, immovable heritors, tenacious occupants to-day, each having opened host-fashion to those who came to share the hills with them the treasure of which he was able to make free, so treasure-hidden in the obscure matters of sheep-rearing, daily shift and contrivance, inevitable contentions. And all the tracks the children at least knew, the outlook from every point within reach; nor forget the guests in their seasons and whatever they left of brightness or gloom in the air; shadows of clouds, sweeping, lingering.

As the hospitality of a region is almost elemental, parting from it must be a distributed anguish if it to be borne: for stones and rushing water are hosts, lines of horizon engrave their delicacy upon the contemplative soul, chill and damp corrode, drenching rain and hip-deep snow are not so easily forgotten.

JOHN GRAY.