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THE DINNER-BELL

In one of Webster's magnificent speeches, he remarks that so vast are the possessions of England, that her morning drum-beat, following the sun and keeping company with the hours, circles the earth daily with one continuous and unbroken strain of its martial airs. There is another musical sound, within the British islands themselves, which does not as yet quite traverse the whole horary circle, but bids fair to do so in the course of time, and to this we would direct the attention of the American secretary, as a fitting subject for a new peroration. We allude to the Dinner-bell. At noon, in the rural districts of England, this charming sound is heard tinkling melodiously from farm or village factory; at one, in the more crowded haunts of industry, the strain is taken up ere it dies; and by the time it reaches Scotland, a full hungry peal swells forth at two. At three till past four there is a continuous ring from house to house of the small country gentry; and at five this becomes more distinct and sonorous in the towns, increasing in importance till six. From that time till seven and half-past, it waxes more and more fashionable in the tone, till at eight it stops abruptly: not like an air brought to a conclusion, but like one broken off accidentally, to be by and by resumed.

The dinner hours of the labouring-class are no doubt regulated according to business, and perhaps receive some modification from national character. An Englishman, for instance, is said to work best after his meal, and accordingly his dinner makes its appearance sometimes as early as noon, but never later than one; while a Scotchman, who is fit for anything when half-starved, is very properly kept without solid food till two o'clock. As for the smaller gentry, who scorn to dine at workmen's hours, and yet do not pretend to the abnegation of the great, they may follow their own fancy without doing any harm to others; but the case is different as regards the hours assigned to *dinner-parties*, for these affect the health and comfort of the whole body of the gentry together.

We are no enemy to dinner-parties; on the contrary, we think we have not enough of them, and we never shall have enough, till some change takes place in their constitution. We are a small gentleman ourselves, who dine at the modest hour of four, and what is the use to us of a six or seven o'clock invitation? We accept it, of course, being socially disposed, and being, moreover, philosopher enough to see that such meetings are good for men in society: but so far as the meal itself goes, it is to us either useless or disagreeable. If we have dined already, we do not want another dinner; and if we have not dined, our appetite is lost from sheer want. It is vain to say, Let us all dine habitually at six—seven—eight o'clock. Few of us will—few of us can—none of us ought. Nature demands a solid meal at a much earlier hour; and true refinement suggests that the object of the evening reunion should not be the satisfaction of the day's hunger. Only half of this fact is seen by the classes who give the law to fashion, and that half consists of the grosser and coarser necessity. They have already, more especially at their country seats, taken to the tiffin of the East, and at a reasonable hour make a regular dinner of hot meats, and all the usual accessories, under the name of lunch. So complete is this meal, that the ladies, led away no doubt by association, meet some hours afterwards in mysterious conclave, to drink what our ancestors called 'a dish of tea;' and having thus diluted the juices of their stomachs for the reception of another supply of heavy food, they descend to dinner!

The evening dinner is, therefore, a mere show-dinner, or something worse. But it is still more objectionable on the score of taste than on the score of health. We find no fault with the elegances of the table, in plate, crystal, china, and so forth; but an English dinner is not an elegant meal. The

guests are supposed, by a *polite* fiction, to have the hunger of the whole day to satisfy, and provision is made accordingly. Varieties of soup, fish, flesh, fowl, game, rich-made dishes, load the board spread for a group of well-dressed men and women, known to have already dined, and who would affect to shudder at so heavy a meal, if it was termed supper. There is a grossness in this arrangement which is strangely at variance with the real advancement of the age in refinement; but it has likewise a paralysing effect both upon the freedom and delicacy of social intercourse. These show-dinners are too costly to be numerous. Even a comparatively wealthy man is compelled to look closely to the number of his entertainments. He scrutinises the claims of his acquaintance; he keeps a debtor and creditor account of dinners with them; and if now and then he invites a guest for the sake of his social qualities, he sets him down in the bill of cost. This does away with all the finer social feelings which it should be the province of such meetings to foster and gratify, and adds a tone of moral vulgarity to the material vulgarity of the repast.

Is it impossible to bring about a reform in this important matter? Difficult, not impossible. Dinner-giving is not an integral part of the monarchy, and it might therefore be touched—if not too rudely—without a political revolution. The grand obstacle would be the unsettled claims. A has given B a show-dinner, and it is the duty of B to return it. Invitation for invitation is the law of the game. How, then, stands the account? Would it be necessary to institute a dinner-insolvency court, where all defaulters might take the benefit of the act? We think not. No creditor in his senses would refuse a handsome composition; and if it could be shewn—as it might in the present case—that the composition was in real, though not ostensible value, equivalent to the debt, hesitation would vanish. Before proceeding to shew this, we shall present what may be called the common-sense statement of the whole case:—

Mankind in their natural state dine at noon, or at least in the middle of the working-day. It is the middle meal of the day—the central of three. In our artificial system of society, it has been postponed to a late hour of the afternoon, so as either to become the second of two meals, or, where lunch is taken, the third of three. The change is not consistent with hygienic principle; for, if lunch be not taken, the interval between breakfast and dinner is too great, and in that case hunger tempts to make the meal too heavy for the exhausted powers of the stomach: if, on the contrary, lunch be taken, dinner becomes an absurdity, as in that case a meal so elaborate and heavy is not required, and cannot healthfully be partaken of at so late an hour. Nevertheless, in a plan of life which devotes the eight or nine hours after breakfast either to business or to out-door amusements, it is needless to think of reviving the old meridian dinner for any but ladies and other stay-at-home people; nor even for them, seeing that they must be mainly determined in their arrangements by those leading members of the family who have to spend that part of the day away from home.

There is a need for some reform which would at once accommodate the busy, and save the multitude from the disadvantages of heavy six-and-seven-o'clock dinners. This might be effected by arranging for only a supper at six or seven o'clock—that is, some lighter meal than dinner—leaving every one to take such a lunch in the middle of the day as he could find an opportunity of eating. Let this supper be the meal of family reunions—the meal of society. Composed of a few light tasteful dishes, accompanied by other indulgences, according to taste or inclination, and followed by coffee, it would be a cheerful and not necessarily unhealthful affair. As a meal to which to invite friends, being cheaper, it would allow of more society being indulged in than is compatible with the monstrous presentments of meat and drink which constitute the modern company dinner. It would be practically a revival of those nice supper-parties which our grandfathers indulged in after the hours of business, and of the pleasantness of which we have such glowing accounts.

That this is really the common-sense view of the question, can hardly be doubted. By bringing the cost within reasonable limits, the plan proposed relieves the entertainment from moral vulgarity; and by avoiding all suggestion of a meeting for the gratification of mere physical hunger, it relieves it from material vulgarity. We have laughed too heartily at the dinner of the ancients in 'Peregrine

Pickle,' to wish to lead back the age to a classic model; and yet on all subjects connected with taste, there are some things to be learned from that people whose formative genius is still the wonder of the world. The meal of society among the Greeks consisted of only two courses, or, to speak more strictly, of one course and a dessert; and the first or solid course was in all probability made up of small portions of each kind of food. The more vulgar Romans added in all cases a third, but occasionally a fourth, fifth, sixth, even a seventh course; and at the fall of the empire, barbarian taste uniting with the *blasé* luxury of Rome, heaped viand upon viand, and course upon course, till the satire of a later poet became mere common-place:—

'Is this a dinner, this a genial room?
No; 'tis a temple, and a hecatomb!'

This extravagance has gradually given way in the course of civilisation. We have no more meals consisting of a score of courses; no more gilded pigs, fish, and poultry; no more soups, each of three or four different colours: but as yet we are only in the midst of the transition, and have not got back even to the comparative refinement of the Greeks. At the end of their first course, the more earthly part of the entertainment was already over. Then the guests washed their hands; then they were presented with perfumes and garlands of flowers; and then they drank wine, accompanied with the singing of the pæan and the sound of flutes. Such adjuncts, with us, would for the most part be out of place and time; but some of them might be taken metaphorically, and others entirely changed—such as the libation to the gods—to suit a new religious feeling, and a new form of manners. The modern *cæna* might thus be made to surpass that of the ancients in refinement and elegance; and it would include, as a matter of course, some of the amusements—varying from a song to a philosophical discussion—which gave the charm to their symposia.

As for the symposium, we shall have nothing to do with that vexed subject, further than just to hint—for we should be loath to exclude from the benefit of our proposed reform a certain numerous and respectable class of the community—that in ancient times it had no necessary connection with the dinner at all. A little wine-and-water was drunk during the dessert—never during the first course—and then the meal was over. The symposium was literally a drinking-party, given, for the sake of convenience, after the dinner-party; but so far from forming a part of the latter, the guests were sometimes different. It was, in fact, in this respect, like the evening company we occasionally find assembled in the drawing-room on getting up from our show-dinners.

But such references to the customs of bygone ages are introduced merely to shew, that among the most accomplished people of history, the social meal was looked upon as a field for the display of taste, not of that barbarian magnificence which consists in quantity and cost. The *cæna* of the moderns should far excel that of the Greeks in elegance, refinement, and simplicity. We have all history for our teacher; we have a finer system of morals; we have a purer and holier religion; and a corresponding influence should be felt in our social manners. When the object of the feast is no longer the satisfaction of mere physical hunger, it should be something intended to minister to the appetites of the mind. When the dinner is no longer the chief thing, some trouble will doubtless be taken with the assortment of the company. Simultaneously with the business of eating and drinking, we shall have anecdote, jest, song, music, smiles, and laughter, to make us forget the business or troubles of the day; and in the morning, instead of arranging our debtor and creditor account of invitations, we shall throw in the evening's gratification to strike the balance, and then make haste to begin a new score.

TWO KINDS OF HONESTY

Some few years ago, there resided in Long Acre an eccentric old Jew, named Jacob Benjamin: he kept a seed shop, in which he likewise carried on—not a common thing, we believe, in London—the sale of meal, and had risen from the lowest dregs of poverty, by industry and self-denial, till he grew to be an affluent tradesman. He was, indeed, a rich man; for as he had neither wife nor child to spend his money, nor kith nor kin to borrow it of him, he had a great deal more than he knew what to do with. Lavish it on himself he could not, for his early habits stuck to him, and his wants were few. He was always clean and decent in his dress, but he had no taste for elegance or splendour in any form, nor had even the pleasures of the table any charms for him; so that, though he was no miser, his money kept on accumulating, whilst it occurred to him now and then to wonder what he should do with it hereafter. One would think he need not have wondered long, when there were so many people suffering from the want of what he abounded in; but Mr Benjamin, honest man, had his crotchets like other folks. In the first place, he had less sympathy with poverty than might have been expected, considering how poor he had once been himself; but he had a theory, just in the main, though by no means without its exceptions—that the indigent have generally themselves to thank for their privations. Judging from his own experience, he believed that there was bread for everybody that would take the trouble of earning it; and as he had had little difficulty in resisting temptation himself, and was not philosopher enough to allow for the varieties of human character, he had small compassion for those who injured their prospects by yielding to it. Then he had found, on more than one occasion, that even to the apparently well-doing, assistance was not always serviceable. Endeavour was relaxed, and gratuities, once received, were looked for again. Doubtless, part of this evil result was to be sought in Mr Benjamin's own defective mode of proceeding; but I repeat, he was no philosopher, and in matters of this sort he did not see much farther than his nose, which was, however, a very long one.

To public charities he sometimes subscribed liberally; but his hand was frequently withheld by a doubt regarding the judicious expenditure of the funds, and this doubt was especially fortified after chancing to see one day, as he was passing the Crown and Anchor Tavern, a concourse of gentlemen turn out, with very flushed faces, who had been dining together for the benefit of some savages in the Southern Pacific Ocean, accused of devouring human flesh—a practice so abhorrent to Mr Benjamin, that he had subscribed for their conversion. But failing to perceive the connection betwixt the dinner and that desirable consummation, his name appeared henceforth less frequently in printed lists, and he felt more uncertain than before as to what branch of unknown posterity he should bequeath his fortune.

In the meantime, he kept on the even tenor of his way, standing behind his counter, and serving his customers, assisted by a young woman called Leah Leet, who acted as his shopwoman, and in whom, on the whole, he felt more interest than in anybody else in the world, insomuch that it even sometimes glanced across his mind, whether he should not make her the heiress of all his wealth. He never, however, gave her the least reason to expect such a thing, being himself incapable of conceiving, that if he entertained the notion, he ought to prepare her by education for the good-fortune that awaited her. But he neither perceived this necessity, nor, if he had, would he have liked to lose the services of a person he had been so long accustomed to.

At length, one day a new idea struck him. He had been reading the story of his namesake, Benjamin, in the Old Testament, and the question occurred to him, how many amongst his purchasers of the poorer class—and all who came to his shop personally were of that class—would bring back a piece of money they might find amongst their meal, and he thought he should like to try a few of them that were his regular customers. The experiment would amuse his mind, and the money he might lose by it he did not care for. So he began with shillings, slipping one in amongst the flour

before he handed it to the purchaser. But the shillings never came back—perhaps people did not think so small a sum worth returning; so he went on to half-crowns and crowns, and now and then, in very particular cases, he even ventured a guinea; but it was always with the same luck, and the longer he tried, the more he distrusted there being any honesty in the world, and the more disposed he felt to leave all his money to Leah Leet, who had lived with him so long, and to his belief, had never wronged him of a penny.

'What's this you have put into the gruel, Mary?' said a pale, sickly-looking man one evening, taking something out of his mouth, which he held towards the feeble gleams emitted by a farthing rush-light standing on the mantel-piece.

'What is it, father?' inquired a young girl, approaching him. 'Isn't the gruel good?'

'It's good enough,' replied the man; 'but here's something in it: it's a shilling, I believe.'

'It's a guinea, I declare!' exclaimed the girl, as she took the coin from him and examined it nearer the light.

'A guinea!' repeated the man; 'well, that's the first bit of luck I've had these seven years or more. It never could have come when we wanted it worse. Shew it us here, Mary.'

'But it's not ours, father,' said Mary. 'I paid away the last shilling we had for the meal, and here's the change.'

'God has sent it us, girl! He saw our distress, and he sent it us in His mercy!' said the man, grasping the piece of gold with his thin, bony fingers.

'It must be Mr Benjamin's,' returned she. 'He must have dropped it into the meal-tub that stands by the counter.'

'How do you know that?' inquired the man with an impatient tone and a half-angry glance. 'How can you tell how it came into the gruel? Perhaps it was lying at the bottom of the basin, or at the bottom of the sauce-pan. Most likely it was.'

'O no, father,' said Mary: 'it is long since we had a guinea.'

'A guinea that we knew of; but I've had plenty in my time, and how do you know this is not one we had overlooked?'

'We've wanted a guinea too much to overlook one,' answered she. 'But never mind, father; eat your gruel, and don't think of it: your cheeks are getting quite red with talking so, and you won't be able to sleep when you go to bed.'

'I don't expect to sleep,' said the man peevishly; 'I never do sleep.'

'I think you will, after that nice gruel!' said Mary, throwing her arms round his neck, and tenderly kissing his cheek.

'And a guinea in it to give it a relish too!' returned the father, with a faint smile and an expression of archness, betokening an inner nature very different from the exterior which sorrow and poverty had incrustated on it.

His daughter then proposed that he should go to bed; and having assisted him to undress, and arranged her little household matters, she retired behind a tattered, drab-coloured curtain which shaded her own mattress, and laid herself down to rest.

The apartment in which this little scene occurred, was on the attic storey of a mean house, situated in one of the narrow courts or alleys betwixt the Strand and Drury Lane. The furniture it contained was of the poorest description; the cracked window-panes were coated with dust; and the scanty fire in the grate, although the evening was cold enough to make a large one desirable—all combined to testify to the poverty of the inhabitants. It was a sorry retreat for declining years and sickness, and a sad and cheerless home for the fresh cheek and glad hopes of youth; and all the worse, that neither father nor daughter was 'to the manner born;' for poor John Glegg had, as he said, had plenty of guineas in his time; at least, what should have been plenty, had they been wisely husbanded.

But John, to describe the thing as he saw it himself, had always 'had luck against him.' It did not signify what he undertook, his undertakings invariably turned out ill.

He was born in Scotland, and had passed a great portion of his life there; but, unfortunately for him, he had no Scotch blood in his veins, or he might have been blessed with some small modicum of the caution for which that nation is said to be distinguished. His father had been a cooper, and when quite a young man, John had succeeded to a well-established business in Aberdeen. His principal commerce consisted in furnishing the retail-dealers with casks, wherein to pack their dried fish; but partly from good-nature, and partly from indolence, he allowed them to run such long accounts, that they were apt to overlook the debt altogether in their calculations, and to take refuge in bankruptcy when the demand was pressed and the supply of goods withheld—his negligence thus proving, in its results, as injurious to them as to himself. Five hundred pounds embarked in a scheme projected by a too sanguine friend, for establishing a local newspaper, which 'died ere it was born;' and a fire, occurring at a time that John had omitted to renew his insurance, had seriously damaged his resources, when some matter of business having taken him to the Isle of Man, he was agreeably surprised to find that his branch of trade, which had of late years been alarmingly declining in Aberdeen, was there in the most flourishing condition. Delighted with the prospect this state of affairs opened, and eager to quit the spot where misfortune had so unrelentingly pursued him, John, having first secured a house at Ramsay, returned to fetch his wife, children, and merchandise, to this new home. Having freighted a small vessel for their conveyance, he expected to be deposited at his own door; but he had unhappily forgotten to ascertain the character of the captain, who, under pretence that, if he entered the harbour, he should probably be wind-bound for several weeks, persuaded them to go ashore in a small boat, promising to lie to till they had landed their goods; but the boat had no sooner returned to the ship, than, spreading his sails to the wind, he was soon out of sight, leaving John and his family on the beach, with—to recur to his own phraseology—'nothing but what they stood up in.'

Having with some difficulty found shelter for the night, they proceeded on the following morning in a boat to Ramsay; but here it was found that, owing to some informality, the people who had possession of the house refused to give it up, and the wanderers were obliged to take refuge in an inn. The next thing was to pursue, and recover the lost goods; but some weeks elapsed before an opportunity of doing so could be found; and at length, when John did reach Liverpool, the captain had left it, carrying away with him a considerable share of the property. With the remainder, John, after many expenses and delays, returned to the island, and resumed his business. But he soon discovered to his cost, that the calculations he had made were quite fallacious, owing to his having neglected to inquire whether the late prosperous season had been a normal or an exceptional one. Unfortunately, it was the latter; and several very unfavourable ones that succeeded, reduced the family to great distress, and finally to utter ruin.

Relinquishing his shop and his goods to his creditors, John Glegg, heart-sick and weary, sought a refuge in London—a proceeding to which he was urged by no prudential motives, but rather by the desire to fly as far as possible from the scenes of his vexations and disappointments, and because he had heard that the metropolis was a place in which a man might conceal his poverty, and suffer and starve at his ease, untroubled by impertinent curiosity or officious benevolence; and, above all, believing it to be the spot where he was least likely to fall in with any of his former acquaintance.

But here a new calamity awaited him, worse than all the rest. A fever broke out in the closely-populated neighbourhood in which they had fixed their abode, and first two of his three children took it, and died; and then himself and his wife—rendered meet subjects for infection by anxiety of mind and poor living—were attacked with the disease. He recovered; at least he survived, though with an enfeebled constitution, but he lost his wife, a wise and patient woman, who had been his comforter and sustainer through all his misfortunes—misfortunes which, after vainly endeavouring to avert, she supported with heroic and uncomplaining fortitude; but dying, she left him a precious legacy in Mary,

who, with a fine nature, and the benefit of her mother's precept and example, had been to him ever since a treasure of filial duty and tenderness.

A faint light dawned through the dirty window on the morning succeeding the little event with which we opened our story, when Mary rose softly from her humble couch, and stepping lightly to where her father's clothes lay on a chair, at the foot of his bed, she put her hand into his waistcoat-pocket, and, extracting therefrom the guinea which had been found in the gruel the preceding evening, she transferred it to her own. She then dressed herself, and having ascertained that her father still slept, she quietly left the room. The hour was yet so early, and the streets so deserted, that Mary almost trembled to find herself in them alone; but she was anxious to do what she considered her duty without the pain of contention. John Glegg was naturally an honest and well-intentioned man, but the weakness that had blasted his life adhered to him still. They were doubtless in terrible need of the guinea, and since it was not by any means certain that the real owner would be found, he saw no great harm in appropriating it; but Mary wasted no casuistry on the matter. That the money was not legitimately theirs, and that they had no right to retain it, was all she saw; and so seeing, she acted unhesitatingly on her convictions.

She had bought the meal at Mr Benjamin's, because her father complained of the quality of that she procured in the smaller shops, and on this occasion he had served her himself. From the earliness of the hour, however, though the shop was open, he was not in it when she arrived on her errand of restitution; but addressing Leah Leet, who was dusting the counter, she mentioned the circumstance, and tendered the guinea; which the other took and dropped into the till, without acknowledgment or remark. Now Mary had not restored the money with any view to praise or reward: the thought of either had not occurred to her; but she was, nevertheless, pained by the dry, cold, thankless manner with which the restitution was accepted, and she felt that a little civility would not have been out of place on such an occasion.

She was thinking of this on her way back, when she observed Mr Benjamin on the opposite side of the street. The fact was, that he did not sleep at the shop, but in one of the suburbs of the metropolis, and he was now proceeding from his residence to Long Acre. When he caught her eye, he was standing still on the pavement, and looking, as it appeared, at her, so she dropped him a courtesy, and walked forwards; while the old man said to himself: "That's the girl that got the guinea in her meal yesterday. I wonder if she has been to return it!"

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