FAMILY MANNERS

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BY

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I.

"MAX was really vexed with me to-day, Miss Fitts," said Rosalie, as she came and seated herself in the sewing-room.

"What did you do?" asked Miss Fitts.

"Why, nothing; certainly nothing worth apologizing for. At lunch he was trying to help the preserves, and to tell something he was interested in at the same time. So he didn't give any attention to the spoon; and I watched the sloppy, ineffective way he was handling it, till I couldn't keep quiet another minute. Said I, 'For mercy's sake, Max, just see what you're doing! How can you fool with the spoon that way?'"

"Did that do any good?" asked Miss Fitts.

"Why, yes; he colored up, shut his mouth, and helped the preserves out right smartly. But he did not say another word the whole of lunch time."

"You got your sweetmeats, my dear, but you stopped the flow of soul."

"But to think of his laying up a little thing like that!"

"Oh, he didn't lay it up, only he was momentarily hurt by your tone."

"But it was unmannerly of him to help things so, clattering the dishes, and threatening to spill the syrup."

"But you jarred the social atmosphere, and spilt the peace. That was more unmannerly."

"O Miss Fitts! so it was."

"Once I was at a table," said Miss Fitts, "where a good-natured little lady was telling a humorous story. In the very midst of it her husband, who was peevish and tired, broke in, in a vexed tone, saying, 'Mary, I wish you *would* sit straight in your chair!' It was like cold water thrown on the company. She managed to answer pleasantly, and to finish her story; but the laughter over it was hollow, every one present had such vexation for her in his heart. I think, Rosalie, if she had sat upon the table it would not have been a worse breach of decorum than his. He had destroyed the pleasant social atmosphere."

"Was my rudeness to Max as unpardonable as that?" asked Rosalie.

"Well, try it by this test. Suppose Max had been a guest; under the same circumstances, would you have spoken in the same way?"

"Why, no."

"You'd have said something playful or kindly to call his mind back if he were inattentive. Why didn't you do that for Max?"

"I might, I suppose. But, Miss Fitts, I do like to use a little snap with Max sometimes. I suppose that man who straightened his wife in the chair felt the same way. A little snap once in a while is such a satisfaction."

"What does that mean, Rosalie?"

"Oh, I suppose it means that the lurking savage in us likes to get the upper hand sometimes, just as the black kitten likes to give you a pretty serious blow or scratch in the midst of playing with you."

"The lurking savage!" mused Miss Fitts. "We don't take him much into company. He doesn't show well there; he would hardly be invited again; he can't take on company manners. We only indulge him at home."

"You see, one gets tired of company manners."

"You mean the savage gets tired of them; not the lady, of course. What are they, my dear?"

"Oh, manners that fit one for company, I suppose."

"Then I should think they ought to belong most to those with whom we keep company most."

"You make no allowance for the savage, Miss Fitts."

"Why not change the method, let him loose abroad, and keep him muzzled at home?"

"He could not survive that, you know."

"No; he would either die a natural death for want of exercise, or else be clubbed to death by an indignant public. Instead of that we pamper him, and give him his head at home till he often gets so rampant he unfits his entertainers in the end to go in society at all. I know a family where that had really happened."

"It must have been pleasant."

"Yes. If you went there to tea, the pleasure would begin in this way: 'These apple preserves,' the mother would innocently say, 'were made by a receipt of Mr. Brown's grandmother.' 'No, they weren't,' Mr. Brown would break in hotly. 'How you forget things, Julia! It was step-grandfather's

first wife.' 'You never told me so before,' says Julia in an aggrieved tone. 'You said it was the one who never put salt in her bread.' 'I never said anything about her never putting salt in her bread,' retorts Mr. Brown. 'For all I know, she put salt in her bread till the day of her death.' 'O John, how you do dispute! You *did* say she never put salt in her bread.' 'Yes, father,' pipes up little Julia, 'you said it as much as twenty times.' 'Now *you* needn't put in your oar,' says young John; 'what do you know?' 'I know what I heard,' retorts little Julia. 'Father's no business to say he didn't say it.' 'There, Mrs. Brown,' says the father, 'see what impertinence you encourage in your girl!' 'It's your own blame, Mr. Brown;'—and so on, and so on, and so on. There was never any end to it. It was, as the Scripture says, like the 'letting out of water.' And all the voices in that family got thin and sharp, and all the brows frowning, and the savage got so dictatorial there wasn't even an attempt made to disguise him. Those were good worthy people and church-members he lived with, too."

"Well, most people in civilized life do better than that," said Rosalie.

"The savage takes a less exasperating method in most places," replied Miss Fitts. "Sometimes he's only lazy and abstracted. He does not want to take the trouble to answer questions or remarks. The wife gets so accustomed to hearing hers received without reply, that she almost takes it as a matter of course. But what other lady than his wife would a man treat in that way? Then there's the savage of petty tyranny. Rosalie, it's most always in a woman, this one. '*Don't* push your specs up on your

forehead!' she says. 'Why are you wearing your best hat? I'll *hide* that book so you *shall* talk to me!'"

"Oh, I hate *that* savage!" said Rosalie.

"It takes long patience to bear with him. Then there's the complaining one who never gets good steak or coffee. Do you think he would fret at any other table as he does at his own? Why shouldn't we honor our own tables with pleasant expressions as well as other people's? What makes a table worth honoring, Rosalie? I don't know of any rule for heavenly bread but a sweet, grateful spirit in the heart of the one who breaks it."

"I've seen some bread," said Rosalie, smiling, "that not even that would lighten."

"Well, a sweet temper would redeem it for digestion better than a sour one. The spirit has its own power over the body and all it receives. And the savage, why, he's just that old thief who comes not but to steal, kill, and destroy."

"Miss Fitts, do you think we can kill the savage out and out, so as to be always lovely and gracious? Things press so in this world, you know, and we get so hurried and worried. We push on just to get things done, and speak out to get them said in the shortest way possible, no matter whether the manner suits people or not."

"It can't be what God means," said Miss Fitts. "I don't believe that lives with such manners accomplish the most, or are rounded out to the noblest fulfilment. That was a beautiful thing Lowell said about Washington, our greatest man, you know,—the man of great trials, and great affairs, and great achievements. The poet talks about

'The habitual full-dress of his well-bred mind.'"