HOMES OF THE PASSING SHOW. PUBLIC DINNERS

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BEATTY KINGSTON & ROBERT HICHENS & E. R. PENNELL

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Trieste

HOMES

OF THE

PASSING SHOW.

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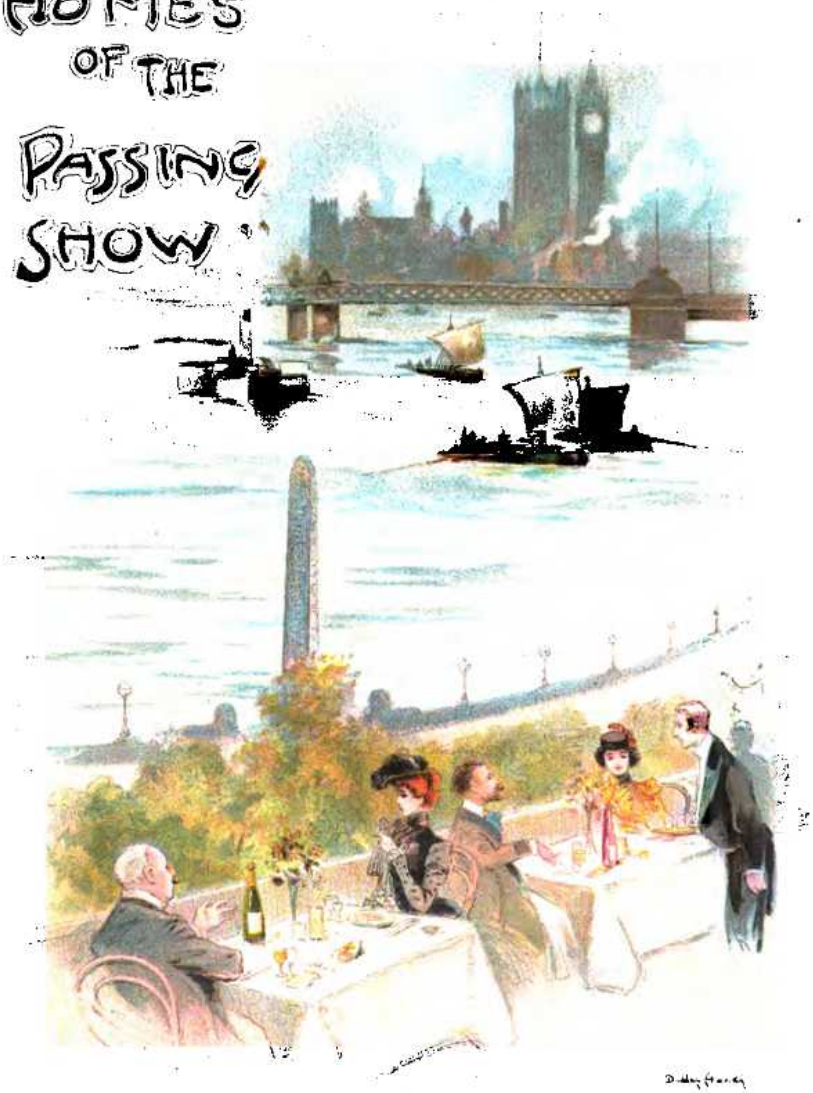


HOMES OF THE PASSING SHOW.

Public Dinners.

By ROBERT HICHENS.

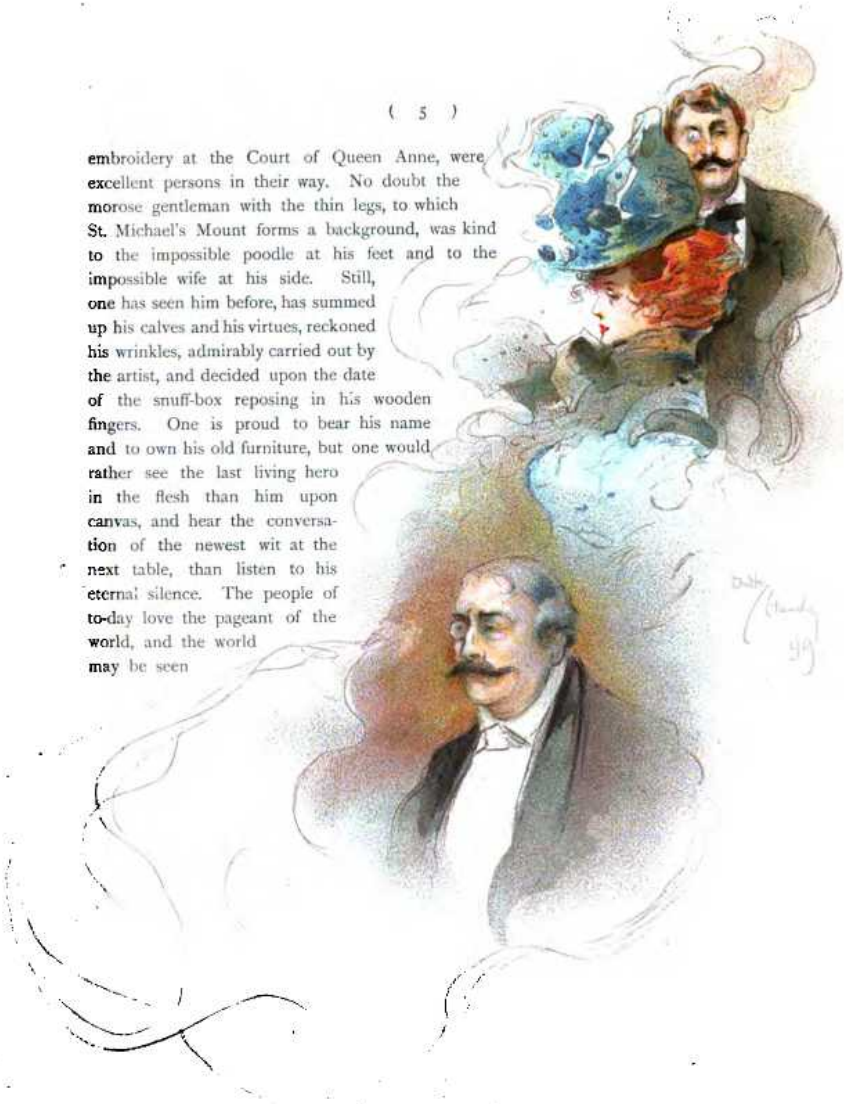
NOTHING on earth is, to me, much more intolerable than what your man of many words, your speech-making monstrosity, knows by the name of a public dinner. To him such a function signifies one thing, and one thing only: an orgie of inordinate feeding, instantly succeeded by an orgie of inordinate monologues, real turtle followed by real twaddle, venison giving place to vain platitudes, the loving cup tottering from hand to hand as a signal to plethoric officialdom that the era of stammer about the Royal Family, and bad grammar about the Army and Navy, is at hand, while four unfortunate persons are, more often than not, ushered in from some secret place to pipe and trill "O who will o'er the Downs?" to an assemblage that can only think of active exercise as an invention of the Devil, and of any downs whatever as things to be gazed on from afar by the glazed eyes of men who can never hope to play a game of golf or to "give the dogs a run" again. At such public dinners as these Death often sits, I feel convinced. They clear the crowd from behind the door at which the younger generation is so diligently knocking.

But there is another sort of public dinner, which is a very different matter. It does not always begin with real turtle, and the loving cup does not circle to set bald heads heavily bowing during its progress. Its end is not made ridiculous by elderly generals searching for military puns, or by genial Aldermen declaring that the Mansion House is the bulwark of our liberties, and the Bank—where the omnibuses stop—the prop and mainstay of the Anglo-Saxon race. It does not begin too early or end too late. It is a dinner gay with flowers and gay with conversation, soothed by the strains of carefully withdrawn violins, and ministered to by human beings whose gait is not eloquent of flat-footed affliction, and who do not look upon china as a means of impromptu musical performances of a barbaric nature, combined with that form of ineffective juggling which wreathes the heads of the guests with unexpected asparagus, or obliges them to "strike out" for a place of safety through an undesired ocean of white sauce.

The restaurant dinner, long so popular in Paris, is at last becoming as popular in London, and even the owners of charming houses, and the possessors of divine cooks, desert their homes to entertain their friends in public, and fare forth to seek the gaiety and the distraction attendant upon those public feasts which need terrify neither the digestion nor the brain. Of course there exist, and will always exist, persons of a serious cast of thought—the frivolous name them fogies—who prefer to swallow in seclusion, and who consider that the hum and twinkle of distant violoncellos and violins obscure the alertness of the palate and slay the serenity of the mind. These individuals are apt to suppose that a public dinner, of whatever kind, must closely resemble the banquet of the invalids described by Zola in "Lourdes," and are lost in astonishment at the modern restlessness which leads so many of us to give our cooks a quiet evening over the "Family Herald," while we flutter from the Savoy to Claridge's, intent upon the satisfaction of the ear and eye, as well as upon the satisfaction of the appetite. They call the smallest restaurant a caravanserai, and the most soothing quartet of strings a brass band. And, sitting quietly at home, not wholly free from a haunting sensation of being "out of it," they predict the end of the world and the speedy destruction of this generation of diners in public.

The diners in public don't much care. They find it entertaining to exchange the usually small private dining room for a large and lofty apartment, carefully lighted and admirably ventilated. They enjoy the murmur of the music prompting them to talk. Above all, they are amused by the vision of the world, which fills their eyes more satisfactorily than the ancestors in oils at home. No doubt the staring hero who fought at Waterloo, the simpering damsel who played with her

embroidery at the Court of Queen Anne, were excellent persons in their way. No doubt the morose gentleman with the thin legs, to which St. Michael's Mount forms a background, was kind to the impossible poodle at his feet and to the impossible wife at his side. Still, one has seen him before, has summed up his calves and his virtues, reckoned his wrinkles, admirably carried out by the artist, and decided upon the date of the snuff-box reposing in his wooden fingers. One is proud to bear his name and to own his old furniture, but one would rather see the last living hero in the flesh than him upon canvas, and hear the conversation of the newest wit at the next table, than listen to his eternal silence. The people of to-day love the pageant of the world, and the world may be seen



looking its best when it is dining, after the soup has stolen its fatigue and before the liqueurs have flushed its cheeks. For the man who is not genial towards the end of a good dinner is probably never genial at all; and the woman who can't be lively over an ice soufflet, or sweet after a glass of dry champagne, can scarcely possess the happy capacity for persiflage, or the feminine gift of fascination. Dinner is a delightful fact, and it is also a fact that delightful people are most delightful at dinner.

There are men and women who can be brilliant or entertaining anywhere, even in a bathing machine or a four-wheeler. Unfortunately they are rare birds. Most of us require a certain amount of assistance to enable us to be amusing, witty, and gay. Place us among the ancestors in oils, in the small private dining room, and we are a little dull. The poodle and St. Michael's Mount do not prompt us to our best *bon mot*. The impossible wife, the wrinkles, and the snuff box do not elicit our latent powers of anecdote and of repartee. But when we dine in public, when we find ourselves surrounded by a gay universe intent upon entrées and intercourse, when we hear delicious fiddles playing Délibes and have a world of conversational material spread out before us—in our neighbours, where is the limit to our enchanted chatter? The sight of the fascinating actress, wearing her hair in indiscreet bandeaux, at the next table but one, reminds us of that capital story about a European monarch; the profile of the politician, who is trying to find definite sustenance in the minute body of the hot quail, on the left, jogs our memory of a passage in his early career which we, at least, shall not willingly let die. All about us there is a sparkle of talk which acts upon us like an electric battery. The great room is full of mental emanations which are as bellows waking the slumbering fires of our souls. Scarcely knowing why, we grow lively, we feel elated. In the distance we catch sight of friends looking hilarious, and we are disposed to emulate them. Why should they have the monopoly of the evening's gaiety? We arm our wits for the fray, and this arming is no longer an effort. On the contrary, it has become a pleasure. In a crowd, self-consciousness flies. Small rooms, small companies, are apt to foster it, unless the gathering be a closely intimate one. The laugh that is conspicuous in a private house is no more than a smile in a smart restaurant, and if a jest is feeble or a story rather lacking in point, the fiddles are very kind and hide the rags, or even turn them into a semblance of brocade.

The extraordinary person, the wit of the very first water, the profound philosopher, the passionate seeker after knowledge, the romantic dreamer, these may find their happiest hunting ground within narrow walls and a strictly limited