Mrs. Basset's Boarders.

"'Twas from Kathleen's eyes he flew,
Eyes of most unholy blue!"

Gerald Griffin.

Mrs. Basset was dismayed to the verge of tears.

"I never thought you'd take it so hard, sir," she said.

Mr. Alexander Freer looked around the well-kept dining room and then at the tempting breakfast set before him. He knew that never was meal of his intrusted to the ignorance of the ordinary servant. It was Mrs. Basset who had made that golden-brown and fragrant coffee. It was her plump hands which had broiled the white-fish and arranged it in its crisp little bed of watercress and sliced lemon. It was she who had become flushed in the preparation of that enticing toast. No, Mrs. Basset had never failed in consideration of his comfort. They had got on so smoothly together — a monthly acknowledgment! But all was to be changed now. In fancy he saw across that pleasant table a new face confronting him—the face of a woman. And at the idea of that vision, materializing into flesh, his frown deepened.

"How long have I boarded with you, Mrs. Basset?"

"Seven years come September, sir."

"Quite right. During that time you have occasionally accommodated men who wished to board here, but never women. I understood that no woman was to be received here. For the last year I have been the only boarder and the solitude has been delightful. Now, this woman—" He removed part of the whitefish to his plate in an ominous silence.

His landlady, generously proportioned, broad of girth, rosy of cheek and ordinarily placid of brow, gazed at him in mental perturbation. That handsome, ascetic countenance, with its scholarly air; that noble head under its thatch of wavy brown hair; that reserve charm of manner which set him apart from men of less spiritual personality—she had come to know well and to admire the possessor of these. When he had not been at his club or delving in the libraries he had been content at home, surrounded by his books, his etchings, his rare collection of marine aquarelles. Quiet, self-centered, not prone to find fault—an ideal boarder, truly.

"I'm that sorry!" The emotion in her voice was genuine. "When she wrote and asked me to let her come I said yes right off. Once, sir, a long way back, before John and me were married, I was in service with Miss Jeannette's mother. They were rich folks then and held their heads high. All that's changed now. It's me and John that have done well and got money out. Her parents are dead. She supports herself. She teaches school—night school. She wouldn't be here in the evenings at all."

A school teacher! Again Mr. Freer looked across the table. Again his mental vision dicerned a vis-a-vis. This time the individual opposite took definite shape. Tall, prim, angular, sallow, with spectacles astride a beak-like nose and grim lips forcing smiles of antique coquetry. He shuddered.

"She attends clubs, I suppose," he ventured.

"She is president of one and secretary of another. She is bright."

He groaned. His opportunities to study the progress of women had been limited. To him, as to many who should be more liberally informed, a club woman meant necessarily an indifferent mother or domestic slattern.

"I shouldn't wonder," he hazarded drearily, "if she were versed in the ologies."

Mrs. Basset fell to plaiting the edge of her immaculate apron. "She's published a book on chemistry, which has gone into its tenth edition," she admitted humbly.

"Just as I supposed!" Mr. Freer gulped down his coffee, took up his paper, and rose.

"When is she to—to honor us with her presence?"

Mrs. Basset's guilty conscience shrank like that of Eugene Aram when she encountered the penetrating eyes piercing her perjured soul.

"Not—not before to-morrow afternoon, sir!"

He muttered something about twenty-four hours of grace, and went off to his big, beautiful front room, wherein were gathered together his accumulation of literary and artistic treasures. An hour later he opened his door in response to a tentative knock. "I'd like to ask you a favor Mr. Freer, sir," began Mrs. Basset. "I've just got a telephone message that my sister, who lives on the west side, has come down with pneumonia. She's the only sister I've got, and I'm worried to know how bad she is. I thought—seeing you were staying in, sir——"

"Yes. That's all right."

"But it's Thursday, and Delia is going out. The new housemaid was to come at 3. I thought if it wouldn't be asking too much—if you'd let her in when she rings—"

"Certainly. Any directions?"

"No. She won't need to do anything till I get back. Thank you, sir."

She took her portly person away, and Alexander Freer went back to his book. He left his door wide that he might hear the ring. He did hear it an hour after Delia's crackling skirts on the stairs had indicated her festive departure. He went down, opened the door. The girl in the vestibule wore a trim black gown, a tan jacket, and an audacious little spring hat. She had rippling reddish hair and the milk white skin that goes with it, a scarlet mouth, and eyes of forget-me-not blue. Something singularly youthful and fragile about the slight form, something lonely in the lifted eyes, appealed to him. Like Becket, Freer "spoke to a noble as though he were a churl, and to a churl as though he were a noble!" Now he addressed the girl with the delicate courtesy women of his own class, so admired in him. "Mrs. Basset was obliged to go out," he explained. "The cook is also absent. You are the new housemaid, I believe. Come in. Mrs. Basset desired me to mention there would be no task for you until her return."

For a moment she regarded him blankly. Then her lips drooped. "I am sorry," she said, advancing. She took off her hat and jacket and hung them up. "I could do a good deal if I knew what was to be done. I dislike being idle."

To do! Hadn't he been staring off and on since his late breakfast at the dusty books on his topmost shelves? Had he not been cherishing a secret plan of flight? But he could not pack his precious possessions himself. He dreaded the indifference with which professional packers would squeeze his adored volumes into soap boxes. Nor might he ask the aid of Mrs. Basset. He could not tell her of his intended departure until all was in readiness, and then—an extra month's rent would simplify matters. He was not definite as to his future abode. A hotel would do for the present. At any rate he must escape from the new boarder—the school teacher who belonged to clubs and who had written a book on chemistry!

"I wonder," he cried in somewhat a volcanic fashion; "if you would be good enough to help me pack my books and etchings. I have a collection, too, of first proof engravings. You look as though you could do the work satisfactorily. I can bring my packing boxes out of the basement. I am going to change my quarters. We would have a few hours before Mrs. Basset gets home," he went on, hastily. "I shall be glad to pay well for the assistance." He broke off breathless, and stood looking inquiringly at her.

The milk white skin grew pink under his glance. For a moment she did not reply.

"I will help you," she consented.

Somewhere in the kitchen regions she found and donned a big blue check apron. She presented herself at the first room of his suite, her sleeves rolled up, a soft old cloth in one hand, a feather duster in the other. The woman-hater watched her as she worked with anxiety that finally merged in complacency. How well she knew how to handle a book! The way she opened each, gave it a little sharp closing gesture to dislodge the dust, wiped it flickingly all over, and laid it gently down satisfied even his jealous criticism. As she prepared the books for packing he stowed them away in a lined box. He grew quite excited over his task—almost hilarious.

"I feel like a criminal!" he told her, laughing. "I know how men feel who go off leaving their board bill unpaid. I tried to tell Mrs. Basset this morning that I would leave, but I lacked the courage. The dear soul! It will be many a day before I find a place that suits me as this does."

"Why are you leaving then?" she asked.

From her perch on top of the little library ladder she was handing him down a first edition of the Rubaiyat as she spoke.

"You may not think mine the best of reasons. I am leaving because Mrs. Basset is to receive another boarder—a woman?"

"Yes?" Clearly she expected him to say more.

"I understand she is one of those appalling creatures they call new women," he went on, unconsciously glad of a confidante. "She supports herself, you know, teaches school, and even writes—books on abstruse subjects."

"Dear! Dear!" ejaculated the pretty housemaid.

Sympathy is sweet. If any one had told Alexander Freer that morning he would have been glad of its gift from a housemaid he would have been incredulous. But here he was hugging it to his flattered soul, and fishing for more. He told her how he had never known a real home since his mother died when he was a boy of 10. After that there were schools and colleges. Then travel, hotels and boarding houses. "Here," he concluded, "I've been comfortably anchored for seven years, with leisure for my own interests and pursuits, and quite secure from interruption. But now I must give it up. I never can face that gaunt creature in spectacles, who will talk pedantically to me across the table three times a day!"

"Does she wear spectacles?" demanded a demure voice.

Freer lifted his head out of the packing case. "I'm sure she does. They all do—the clever ones. She might expect me to take her to lectures. She might induce me to take up municipal reform. She" — the sweat of fear breaking out on his forehead—"might give me worsted slippers—or a birthday edition of poems—she might!"

"That's so!" assented a solemn little voice from the ladder. In the silence that followed they heard the hall clock strike.

"Four!" Freer exclaimed. "So late! Mrs. Basset may be back any minute—Hark! Isn't that she now?" He stumbled to his feet, looking like a detected schoolboy. "There! One box is ready, anyhow. You must let me thank you, Miss—Miss—"

"Jean," she prompted.

"Miss Jean—and take this." There was a sound of the door, which had been opened with a latchkey, swinging shut again. A heavy step came up the stairs. You are welcome, but I can't take any money. Here is Mrs. Basset!"

And there, indeed, was that worthy woman, leaning against the open door and staring in wild astonishment at the scene presented. The packing cases—the heaped up books—the confounded owner of the latter—the shapely sylph on the ladder.

"Jeanette!" she cried. "My dear! What does this mean?"

"I did not intend coming until tomorrow." Miss Jeanette Wallace had descended from her elevated seat and was greeting her friend warmly. "I changed my mind at the last minute—and came. Now I'm going to change it again—and go away."

"Mr. Freer," pleaded the embarrassed landlady, "what is all this about?"

"My blunder, madam!" he cried remorsefully. "Took this young lady for the housemaid and asked her to help me pack my books. I beg her pardon, I'm sure!"

"But—packing! Were you going to leave? O, Mr. Freer! And all on account of——"

"Of me!" cried Jeanette, gaily. "But I shan't be your boarder, Mrs. Basset. Mr. Freer will stay."

Whereat Mr. Freer immediately developed a most extraordinary contradictoriness.

"Not unless you do!" he declared stubbornly.

A saucy smile came sparkling his way.

"I might expect you to take me to lectures," she said.

"You're not a gaunt creature with a hooked nose," he retorted irrelevantly.

"But," the dimples coming and going, "what about municipal reform?"

"I'll risk that," he said decisively.

She knit her slim, dark brows. "To be talked to pendantically across the table three times a day," she preceeded gravely.

"Is what I should enjoy above all things!" he proclaimed heroically.

With his hair rumpled, his cheek flushed and that new, eager light of interest in his eyes, he appeared ten years younger than the precise and self-sufficient gentleman who had frowned over the broiled whitefish that morning. Good Mrs. Basset looked helplessly from one to the other.

"Settle it between you," she cried. Then bursting out laughing: "The new housemaid is cross-eyed and pock-marked, Mr. Freer. I should have told you!"

"That's all right!" commented Freer contentedly. "Now, I'm going to unpack these books and put them back where they belong."

It was pouring rain one afternoon a couple of months later when Jeanette Wallace came forth from a meeting of the Woman's club. An umbrella was raised as she stepped out, and a familiar figure walked beside her through the rain.

"This is rash!" she cried. "It is almost as bad as taking me to lectures! But I haven't given you worsted slippers yet—nor a birthday edition of poems!"

Alexander Freer held the umbrella lower—leant closer.

"No, but there is a gift I'd dearly love to have, little Jean—and only you can give it to me!"

"O!" said Jean softly.

The rain came down in a deluge. On either side of them people were coming and going. But Freer only leaned nearer—spoke with more earnest passion. And—why not? For sure there was—

Nothing to frighten a man away,
Only a cheek like a strawberry bed—
Only a ringlet's gold astray,
And a mouth like a baby's, dewy-red!"

CRITICISM.

The habit of depreciatory criticism is a mental pit fall which has serious consequences. Though criticism, which is merely a detailed examination and review, implying a precise knowledge and keen insight, combined with an exact judgment and perfect mental balance, is not always harsh and of a censorious character, yet the term has come to be applied almost entirely to adverse judgment. As such, criticism is an evil habit. How easy it is to see with a critical eye, only the evidence of weakness and folly and not what is best in the natures, actions, and dress of our friends! By passively permitting the cynical side of character to gain the upper hand we cultivate a state of mind which, beginning with a caviling captiousness, ends at last in the depths of an all-pervading pessimism. This pessimistic regard of life grows on us, so that finally all the good points of a toilette, a picture, a character are utterly overwhelmed with the magnified immensity of the blemishes, the unfinished details, and the unavoidable defects.

By allowing this fault-finding act of harsh judgment to grow into a habit and by giving free rein to the tendency to put the worst construction on others' words and deeds, we will at length find our cup of life over-flowing with gall and bitterness; and yet quite within our reach lay unlimited happiness. For, a large and broad nature which finds the total of the greatness that is in every character and looks not persistently for the evil that has been in all but One, is also the outgrowth of habit, and can be cultivated to a considerable extent by all. We all undoubtedly inherit certain fundamental principles of character, nevertheless, in different hands the development of this endowment will often attain quite opposite results. We are the controllers, to what extent we will, of this development of character; for in so far as we rule ourselves, to that extent will we control the growth of our natures.

It is doubtless a heavy drain on ones Christian charity and forbearance to acquiesce in praise and commendation which we know is misplaced or uncalled for. It requires quickness of thought and self-control to give an assent which will appear entirely spontaneous; but though difficult, it is necessary to guard the tongue from speaking ill, even though the ill be merely truth-telling. The term "frank criticism" is used by many to cover up nicely what is in reality an evidence of lack of breed and fellow-kindness. In some cases this delightful frankness amounts almost to a brutal disregard of others feelings. "Evil speaking" would be a more correct description. Evil speaking is the result of unrestrained criticism, harsh judgment, and envious jealousy. Unfortunately, however, it is not entirely a mental habit; but we can exercise at least a certain control over innate tendencies of this character which we find in our natures.

GOOD APPETITES PREFERRED.

Mrs. Skinner.—I'm glad to hear you say you have such a good appetite.

Mr. Newboarder.—Landladies generally fear a good appetite.

Mrs. Skinner.—I don't. When a man has a good appetite he can eat almost anything.

JUST WHAT SHE MEANT.

I don't think he's a man of much discernment, said the girl in blue.

Why, he proposed to me only last evening, returned the girl in pink.

Yes; I said he wasn't a man of much discernment, repeated the girl in blue.

CITADEL OF THE TRANSVAAL.

The District Where the Boers Are Expected to Withstand the British.

A correspondent at Lorenzo Marques gives a graphic description of the district north of Lydenburg in the Transvaal where it is reported great preparations are being made to carry on the resistance to the British. The centre of the district is at Ohrigstad, about thirty miles north of Lydenburg. The Ohrigstad Laager is so called because it is the oldest and strongest position taken up by the Boers of the first trek going north from Cape Colony and Natal.

From sixty to a hundred years back the Transvaal was inhabited in districts by Basutos who were raided by the Zulus and other tribes. The Boer immigrants took advantage of this condition of things and established themselves in the country against all comers. When hard pressed by large impis of natives the Boers retreated to Ohrigstad Valley, where the positions are impregnable if well defended, being a series of volcanic fortifications, interminable kopjes extending for miles. Inside these natural defences is a beautiful and fertile valley about seventy-five miles square, protected on the east by the Drakensberg and on the north and east by the broad and deep Oliphant's River with Forts Oliphant and Weber. From the south the valley narrows to Lydenburg, the only gate, the transport station for which is at Nelsprint on the railway from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay.

Six or eight thousand Boers or even fewer with artillery could defy the whole British army now in South Africa for an indefinite period. No army, no matter how many thousand in number, could climb those giant ridges or pass the multitudinous death traps of boulder-built kopjes intersected with dongas. The force inside the natural citadel would be safe so long as ammunition and food lasted. Three beautiful rivers, the Blyde, Ohrigstad and Steelport, run into the Oliphant's River and are fed by hundreds of springs and rivulets. The nature and aspect of the valley is that of one continuous garden capable of irrigation from streams in all directions. The soil is alluvial, producing with the present primitive methods of cultivation, grain, forage, tobacco, and almost anything required, and the hill sides afford excellent pasturage for horses, cattle and sheep, summer and winter.

The valley is even now fairly populated by Boers and well-to-do natives, all of whom have fruit gardens. The natural advantages for a defending force cannot be overstimated. The length of the resistance would depend on the supplies of food and ammunition, and to stop those it would be necessary for the British Government to obtain possession of Koomatiport, which would require some fighting.

A SILENT RHINOCEROS.

A Hunter's Experience in the Wilds of Africa.

Still-hunting at night in Africa has its drawbacks and surprises. These are sometimes in the form of snakes, sometimes of larger things. What it was that surprised Mr. C. V. A. Peel during a night hunt in Somaliland, is told by himself. He was stalking oryx, a kind of antelope.

We could not see more than ten feet before us, he says. I tiptoed, in my tennis shoes, over the stony ground toward the oryx. Not a sound was heard. Suddenly, on turning a bush, I became aware of an enormous head and horn within three feet of my face.

I had literally walked into a big rhinoceros, which stood rigid. My shikari, who had my rifle, seemed petrified. I gave a glance each way, and backed out slowly and noiselessly, and got behind the bush.

As I turned to take my rifle, I saw the shikair farther back, behind another bush, pointing at the "rhino." I turned back and there was the great beast advancing toward me without a sound.

It was now my turn to run. When I reached my servant, I took the rifle and proceeded to look for the rhinoceros. We could find it nowhere. Hearing two oryx close by, I started to stalk them, when my shikari again stopped. His face was as white as if he had seen a ghost. He pointed and whispered.

There, within a few yards, stood the rhinoceros which I could not find a moment before. I was unceremoniously dragged from the spot by my shikari, who was superstitious. "Leave him!" he implored. "It am de debil—you no kill him!"

With much persuasion I got the men to go back, as I wanted to shoot the animal. I found him standing with his side toward me. I levelled my big rifle and was on the point of pulling the trigger, when he gave one wriggle of his huge form and vanished in the jungle. That was too much for my men. They ran for their lives.

I am not superstitious, but it was a curious fact that during all that adventure not a sound was made by the rhinoceros; not even a stone rolled under his feet as he moved. And in the morning we could find no tracks.