

Sunday Lunch

SUNDAY LUNCH

by Katherine Mansfield

RHYTHM - October 1912

Sunday lunch is the last of the cannibal feasts. It is the wild, tremendous orgy of the upper classes, the hunting, killing, eating ground of all the George-the-Fifth-and-Mary English artists. Pray do not imagine that I consider it to be ever so dimly related to Sunday dinner. Never!

Sunday dinner consists of a number of perfectly respectable dead ladies and gentlemen eating perfectly respectable funeral baked meats with all those fine memories of what the British beef and blood has stood for, with all that delicate fastidiousness as to the fruit in season, of the eternal and comfortable pie. Sunday lunch is followed by a feeling of excessive excitement, by a general flush, a wild glitter of the eye, a desire to sit close to people, to lean over backs of chairs, to light your cigarette at some one else's cigarette, to look up and thank them while doing so. And above all there is that sense of agitating intimacy—that true esprit de corps of the cannibal gathering. Different indeed is the close to the Sunday dinner. It has never been known to come to a decided finish, but it dies down and dwindles and fades away like a village glee singing Handel's "Largo," until finally it drops into sofas and chairs and creeps to box-ottomans and beds, with illustrated magazines, digesting itself asleep until tea time. The Society for the Cultivation of Cannibalism waxes most fat and kicks hardest (strictly under the table) in Chelsea, in St John's Wood, in certain select squares, and (God help them) gardens. Its members are legion, for there is no city in this narrow world which contains so vast a number of artists as London. Why, in London you cannot read the books for the authors, you cannot see the pictures for the studios, you simply cannot hear the music for the musicians' photographs. And they are so careless-so proud of their calling. "Look at me! Behold me, I am an artist!" Mark their continued generosity of speech—"We artists; artists like ourselves." See them make sacrifice to their Deity—not with wreath or garland or lovely words or fragrant spices. They will not demand of her as of old time the gift of true vision and the grace of truth. "Ah, no," they say, "we shall give her of ourselves. The stuffs of our most expensive dresses, our furniture, our butcher's bills, our divorce cases, our thrilling adulteries. We

men shall have her into the smoking room and split her sides with our dirty stories, we women shall sit with her on the bedside brushing our side curls and talking of sex until the dawn kisses to tearful splendour the pink rose of morning. And we shall always remain great friends for we shall never tell the truth to each other.”

From half-past one until two of the clock the cannibal artists gather together. They are shown into drawing rooms by marionettes in white aprons and caps or marionettes in black suits and foreign complexions. The form of greeting is expansive, critical and reminding. Hostess to female cannibal: “You dear! How glad I am to see you!” They kiss. Hostess glances rapidly over guest, narrows her eyes and nods. “Sweet!” Raises her eyebrows. “New? From the little French shop?” Takes the guest’s arm. “Now I want to introduce you to Kaila Scarrotski. He’s Hungarian. And he’s been doing those naked backs for that cafe. And I know you know all about Hungary, and those extraordinary places. He’s just read your ‘Pallors of Passion’ and he swears you’ve Slav blood.” She presses the guest’s hand thereby conveying: “Prove you have. Remember I didn’t ask you to my lunch to wait until the food was served and then eat it and go. Beat your tomtom, dear.” When male meets male the greeting is shorter. “Glad you came.” Takes guest aside. “I say, that French dancing woman’s here. Over there—on the leopard skin—with the Chinese fan. Pitch into her, there’s a good chap.” The marionette reappears. “Lunch is served.” They pay no attention whatever to the marionette, but walk defiantly into the dining-room as though they knew the fact perfectly well and had no need of the telling. They seat themselves, still with this air of immense unconcern, and a sort of “Whatever you give me to eat and the forks and knives thereof will not surprise me, I’m absolutely indifferent to food. I haven’t the faintest idea of what there is on the table.” And then, quite suddenly, with most deliberate lightness, a victim is seized by the cannibals. “S’pose you’ve read Fanton’s ‘Grass Widower!’” “Yes.” “Not as good as the ‘Evergreen Petals.’” “No,” “I did not think so either.” “Tailed off.” “So long-winded.” “Fifty pounds.” “But there were bits, half lines, you know, and adjectives.” The knife pauses. “Oh, but have you read his latest?” “Nothing. All about ships or something. Not a hint of passion.” Down comes the knife, James Fanton is handed round. “I haven’t read it yet.” “Not like ‘The Old Custom.’ Well, it can’t be as good.” “... Writing in the Daily Mail...” “Three to four thousand a year.” “A middle-class mind but interesting.” The knife wavers. “But can’t keep the big mould for more than a paragraph.” His bones are picked.

This obvious slaughter of the absentees is only a preliminary to a finer, more

keen and difficult doing to death of each other. With kind looks and little laughs and questions the cannibals prick with the knife. ” I liked your curtain-raiser frightfully. But when are you going to give us a really long play? Why are you so against plot? Of course I’m old-fashioned. I’m ashamed. I still like action on the stage... ” “I went to your show yesterday. There were the funniest people there. People absolutely ignorant—you know the kind. And trying to be facetious, not to be able to distinguish a cabbage from a baby. I boiled with rage....” “But if they offered you eighty pounds in America for a short poem, why ever didn’t you write it?” ” I think it’s brave of you to advertise so much, I really do, I wish I had the courage—but at the last moment I can’t. I never shall be able.”

With ever greater skill and daring the cannibals draw blood, or the stuff like blood that flows in their veins. But the horrible tragedy of the Sunday lunch is this: However often the Society kills and eats itself, it is never real enough to die, it is never brave enough to consider itself well eaten.

THE TIGER.