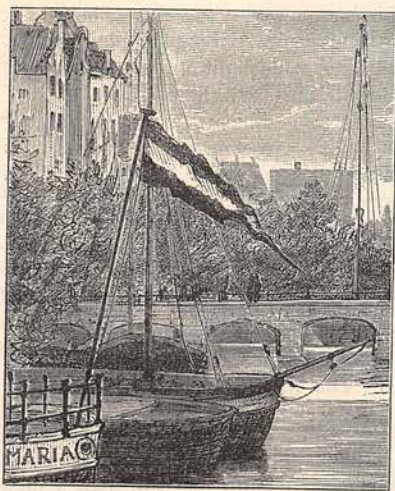


AT HOME WITH A DUTCH FAMILY.

BY A LATE VISITOR.



Y HAVE always been drawn to Dutch people whenever and wherever I have met them, because of their cultivation of mind and quiet, simple, good breeding; and I am tempted by a feeling of gratitude to my kind friends in

Holland to detail a few of the small points in their daily life which struck me as distinctively national. My experience has been chiefly gathered at the Hague; and in dwelling on the social life of any country, it is surely to the capital that we naturally look for first impressions: not that we necessarily find there the highest type of the national life, but rather that, for better or worse, we get there the concentrated essence, so to speak.

It was on a bright spring morning that I reached the Hague, and was conveyed in a neat, well-appointed brougham to my destination—a good-sized house on one of the canals which are so picturesque to English eyes, though the idea of *admiring* a canal affords infinite amusement to the Dutch. Kindness (let us be thankful for it!) flourishes on all soils, so I must not dwell on the cordial reception which greets me as distinctively Dutch; but although the words of welcome are spoken in French, there is a sincerity and straightforward simplicity in the manner of utterance, a freedom from all *gushing*, which gives me a home-like English feeling, and inspires a conviction, which only deepens as my visit continues, that of all Continental nations the Dutch are most like us in manner and character, and can best appreciate our national virtues, and sympathise with our national faults.

My room has little to distinguish it from an English bed-room, except the compromise between stove and open grate which usually obtains in the larger Dutch houses, and the inevitable French clock, ticking in state on the mantel-piece.

The sitting-rooms in this, as well as in all the other houses I saw, are more English in their arrangements than either French or German rooms; there is not the painful tidiness so noticeable in the latter, nor the careful obliteration of all signs of occupation; on the contrary, books, papers, and magazines lie about on the tables, just as with us. I noticed many of the

leading English periodicals, and I found that the newest English books were as well known and as intelligently discussed as in England—a contrast, indeed, to our very limited acquaintance with foreign literature.

Our meals began with breakfast at half-past eight, with meat, and eggs which were boiled in the bright copper urn on the table. As soon as breakfast was over, we read together a passage from the Bible, and then Luther's Commentary on it, and a German hymn. I spoke of our beautiful English custom of uniting the whole household in family prayer at the beginning of each day. My friend approved warmly, but added, "While we are reading together up-stairs, the servants are similarly employed down-stairs; and this is done in most of the houses I know."

At one we had luncheon, which was just like our English meal, except that tea and coffee were the beverages, though wine stood on the sideboard. At this meal no servant waited; all that was needed was on the table or sideboard, and we did what was necessary for ourselves or each other, as is now usually done in England at luncheon.

A housewifely duty which seems strange to our English eyes, but is always performed by Dutch ladies of all ranks, is the washing up of cups and saucers. After lunch and tea, a silver bowl is brought in, and the cups and saucers are daintily washed, and carefully dried with a delicately fine linen napkin, usually beautifully marked in white embroidery with the initials of the family, surmounted by the count's or baron's coronet, if the family be noble. This time-honoured custom is now, I think, retained rather as a cherished observance of an old national peculiarity, dating, no doubt, from the days when ladies in all countries took the personal supervision of their linen and china closets.

Afternoon tea is by no means unusual in Holland: any excuse for indulging in this, their national beverage, is gladly made use of; but as six, or half-past six, is the usual dinner hour, it is not regarded as a necessity. The white, evenly-cut lumps of sugar are brought to table in a square or oblong chased silver casket, which is often provided with lock and key.

Old silver of rare and beautiful design is much affected in Holland; nowhere have I seen such artistic specimens of this work as at a loan exhibition of old plate and jewellery at Amsterdam, and also in private houses in and near the Hague. The usual playthings for children in former generations were complete sets of miniature household furniture and utensils in silver; many such still exist. In the museum at the Hague is a large baby-house made in tortoiseshell, after the exact model of a Dutch house, fitted up entirely with silver, which was intended by Peter the Great of Russia as a present for his wife.

Dinner presents no novelty, either as to manner of serving or component parts; the *cuisine* is more

French than English. In every house where I dined a solemn pause was made before and after dinner, while each person with reverently-bowed head and folded hands repeated a private grace.

Tea is brought between eight and nine, and is made in the room. Two or three cups may be taken without any breach of etiquette, and visits from intimate friends are allowed and encouraged at this hour.

Dress on every-day occasions is certainly simpler than with us. Though some change is always made before dinner, it is not usual to put on in the family circle what we should consider evening dress, and at a small dinner of eight or ten persons such a toilette as we should wear in England would be out of place. This may probably be accounted for by the fact that an evening drive or visit is not unusual.

So far as I can judge, intercourse between ladies and gentlemen is very much what it is in England among well-bred people. I saw no undue affectation of prudery or want of ease; on the contrary, young men laughed and talked with the young girls just as they would with us. Though certainly the quite modern English development of seeking *tête-à-tête* on the stairs or in secluded corners would not be approved, yet in the presence of the general company, Dutch girls can carry on quite as bright and animated innocent conversations as those of their English sisters who keep within the bounds which innate womanly feeling and tact prescribe. The domestic and social position of women in Holland seemed to me as nearly as possible that which English women claim, and to which their education and training entitle them; they are neither domestic drudges nor upper servants, nor are they mere playthings and mechanical echoes of their husbands and fathers, but in all intellectual pursuits they are the cultivated and intelligent companions of the men. I am speaking now not of distinctly literary coteries, for of these I know nothing, but of the ordinary well-bred lady of the upper classes, and I have no hesitation in affirming that Dutch ladies can well hold their own in any conversation on politics, literature, art, or science. Their very unusual linguistic accomplishments have opened to them the literary treasures of other countries, and they have not been slow to avail themselves of this advantage. Although intensely patriotic, the Dutch are not narrowly national; they travel much, have an intelligent and appreciative knowledge of other countries, and value highly the outlet for their young men which even their comparatively small colonial possessions afford.

Country life has a large share in the affections of the upper classes; all who are rich enough have a town and a country house. At the latter, the men lead a life wonderfully like that of an English country gentleman. Riding and sport are enthusiastically pursued, and the ladies are as fond of riding as are the men. One of the most beautiful country houses I ever saw was within a short distance of the Hague. After a pleasant drive under beautiful trees, and within sight of many canals and windmills (the universal concomitants of a Dutch landscape), we turned in at a neat substantial lodge, and drove through pretty

grounds, where rhododendrons were blazing in all their brilliancy, and where copper beeches occurred with a frequency that surprised me. The house was large, and though modern, was built in the old style of Dutch domestic architecture (a sort of compromise between our Elizabethan houses and a Louis XV. château), in brick of a peculiarly pale pink colour, with stone copings. A wide flight of steps led up to a large portico, almost like an Italian *loggia*. Here I found basket-chairs and tables of a very familiar design, and was amused to recognise Minton's tiles round the door and windows and in the lofty hall, which was supported by pillars of magnificent Aberdeen granite. A light graceful stone gallery ran round the hall, and I conclude gave access to the bedrooms; but I did not go up-stairs. The dining-room and library were wainscoted throughout, and had oaken ceilings. Pediments of carved oak surmounted all the doors, and the handles and fittings were of oxydised silver. The drawing-rooms and boudoir were furnished in a tasteful French style, bright and light, but withal delicate and harmonious. The walls were in panels of delicate blue and fawn damask; the ceilings were painted, not stiffly, but with here a bird and there a butterfly. The curtains and furniture were of rich dark colours, almost like old tapestry. Having seen the house (not omitting a visit to the billiard-room), a thoroughly English-looking landau came round, with a pair of beautifully-groomed horses and a "smart" footman, and I was taken for a charming drive, passing through the grounds of several other places. Everywhere the same order and comfort prevailed, and the magnificent timber excited my warmest admiration: finer avenues I have never seen. We had our five o'clock tea under the portico, and returned to the Hague in the cool of the evening, having enjoyed a pleasant glimpse of Dutch country life.

One point of sympathy between English and Dutch ladies is that both are interested in the welfare of the poor, and in many instances work personally amongst them. A pretty young girl, whose home was in Rotterdam, seemed quite as well acquainted with the condition of the working classes, and as familiar with the practice of visiting them, as any English clergyman's daughter; and though the division between class and class is perhaps more strongly defined than with us, there is not the absolute bar which exists in other parts of the Continent, and the young men especially have much more opportunity of carving out their own fortunes without any loss of social position.

To sum up my impressions, I should say that the Dutch excel their French neighbours in thoroughness, sincerity, and gravity of character, and are superior to their German cousins in breadth of sympathy and grasp of mind, though deficient in their poetry and imaginative qualities. They are simpler and less self-conscious than the English, but resemble them very closely. Indeed, in looks, manners, ways of thought and of life, household arrangements, education, relative position of men and women, and ideas of government, I see little difference.