

# **Last Days in a Dutch Hotel (from Literature and Life) eBook**

## **Last Days in a Dutch Hotel (from Literature and Life) by William Dean Howells**

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## LAST DAYS IN A DUTCH HOTEL

(1897)

When we said that we were going to Scheveningen, in the middle of September, the portier of the hotel at The Hague was sure we should be very cold, perhaps because we had suffered so much in his house already; and he was right, for the wind blew with a Dutch tenacity of purpose for a whole week, so that the guests thinly peopling the vast hostelry seemed to rustle through its chilly halls and corridors like so many autumn leaves. We were but a poor hundred at most where five hundred would not have been a crowd; and, when we sat down at the long tables d'hote in the great dining-room, we had to warm our hands with our plates before we could hold our spoons. From time to time the weather varied, as it does in Europe (American weather is of an exemplary constancy in comparison), and three or four times a day it rained, and three or four times it cleared; but through all the wind blew cold and colder. We were promised, however, that the hotel would not close till October, and we made shift, with a warm chimney in one room and three gas-burners in another, if not to keep warm quite, yet certainly to get used to the cold.

### I.

In the mean time the sea-bathing went resolutely on with all its forms. Every morning the bathing machines were drawn down to the beach from the esplanade, where they were secured against the gale every night; and every day a half-dozen hardy invalids braved the rigors of wind and wave. At the discreet distance which one ought always to keep one could not always be sure whether these bold bathers were mermen or mermaids; for the sea costume of both sexes is the same here, as regards an absence of skirts and a presence of what are, after the first plunge, effectively tights. The first time I walked down to the beach I was puzzled to make out some object rolling about in the low surf, which looked like a barrel, and which two bathing-machine men were watching with apparently the purpose of fishing it out. Suddenly this object reared itself from the surf and floundered towards the steps of a machine; then I saw that it was evidently not a barrel, but a lady, and after that I never dared carry my researches so far. I suppose that the bathing-tights are more becoming in some cases than in others; but I hold to a modest preference for skirts, however brief, in the sea-gear of ladies. Without them there may sometimes be the effect of beauty, and sometimes the effect of barrel.

For the convenience and safety of the bathers there were, even in the last half of September, some twenty machines, and half as many bath-men and bath-women, who waded into the water and watched that the bathers came to no harm, instead of a solitary lifeguard showing his statuesque shape as he paced the shore beside the



lifelines, or cynically rocked in his boat beyond the breakers, as the custom is on Long Island. Here there is no need of life-lines, and, unless one held his head resolutely under water, I do not see how he could drown within quarter of a mile of the shore. Perhaps it is to prevent suicide that the bathmen are so plentifully provided.

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They are a provision of the hotel, I believe, which does not relax itself in any essential towards its guests as they grow fewer. It seems, on the contrary, to use them with a more tender care, and to console them as it may for the inevitable parting near at hand. Now, within three or four days of the end, the kitchen is as scrupulously and vigilantly perfect as it could be in the height of the season; and our dwindling numbers sit down every night to a dinner that we could not get for much more love or vastly more money in the month of August, at any shore hotel in America. It is true that there are certain changes going on, but they are going on delicately, almost silently. A strip of carpeting has come up from along our corridor, but we hardly miss it from the matting which remains. Through the open doors of vacant chambers we can see that beds are coming down, and the dismantling extends into the halls at places. Certain decorative carved chairs which repeated themselves outside the doors have ceased to be there; but the pictures still hang on the walls, and within our own rooms everything is as conscientious as in midsummer. The service is instant, and, if there is some change in it, the change is not for the worse. Yesterday our waiter bade me good-bye, and when I said I was sorry he was going he alleged a boil on his cheek in excuse; he would not allow that his going had anything to do with the closing of the hotel, and he was promptly replaced by another who speaks excellent English. Now that the first is gone, I may own that he seemed not to speak any foreign language long, but, when cornered in English, took refuge in French, and then fled from pursuit in that to German, and brought up in final Dutch, where he was practically inaccessible.

The elevator runs regularly, if not rapidly; the papers arrive unfailingly in the reading-room, including a solitary London Times, which even I do not read, perhaps because I have no English-reading rival to contend for it with. Till yesterday, an English artist sometimes got it; but he then instantly offered it to me; and I had to refuse it because I would not be outdone in politeness. Now even he is gone, and on all sides I find myself in an unbroken circle of Dutch and German, where no one would dispute the Times with me if he could.

Every night the corridors are fully lighted, and some mornings swept, while the washing that goes on all over Holland, night and morning, does not always spare our unfrequented halls and stairs. I note these little facts, for the contrast with those of an American hotel which we once assisted in closing, and where the elevator stopped two weeks before we left, and we fell from electricity to naphtha-gas, and even this died out before us except at long intervals in the passages; while there were lightning changes in the service, and a final failure of it till we had to go down and get our own ice-water of the lingering room-clerk, after the last bell-boy had winked out.

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### II.

But in Europe everything is permanent, and in America everything is provisional. This is the great distinction which, if always kept in mind, will save a great deal of idle astonishment. It is in nothing more apparent than in the preparation here at Scheveningen for centuries of summer visitors, while at our Long Island hotel there was a losing bet on a scant generation of them. When it seemed likely that it might be a winning bet the sand was planked there in front of the hotel to the sea with spruce boards. It was very handsomely planked, but it was never afterwards touched, apparently, for any manner of repairs. Here, for half a mile the dune on which the hotel stands is shored up with massive masonry, and bricked for carriages, and tiled for foot-passengers; and it is all kept as clean as if wheel or foot had never passed over it. I am sure that there is not a broken brick or a broken tile in the whole length or breadth of it. But the hotel here is not a bet; it is a business. It has come to stay; and on Long Island it had come to see how it would like it.

Beyond the walk and drive, however, the dunes are left to the winds, and to the vegetation with which the Dutch planting clothes them against the winds. First a coarse grass or rush is sown; then a finer herbage comes; then a tough brushwood, with flowers and blackberry-vines; so that while the seaward slopes of the dunes are somewhat patched and tattered, the landward side and all the pleasant hollows between are fairly held against such gales as on Long Island blow the lower dunes hither and yon. The sheep graze in the valleys at some points; in many a little pocket of the dunes I found a potato-patch of about the bigness of a city lot, and on week-days I saw wooden-shod men slowly, slowly gathering in the crop. On Sundays I saw the pleasant nooks and corners of these sandy hillocks devoted, as the dunes of Long Island were, to whispering lovers, who are here as freely and fearlessly affectionate as at home. Rocking there is not, and cannot be, in the nature of things, as there used to be at Mount Desert; but what is called Twoing at York Harbor is perfectly practicable.

It is practicable not only in the nooks and corners of the dunes, but on discreeter terms in those hooded willow chairs, so characteristic of the Dutch sea-side. These, if faced in pairs towards each other, must be as favorable to the exchange of vows as of opinions, and if the crowd is ever very great, perhaps one chair could be made to hold two persons. It was distinctly a pang, the other day, to see men carrying them up from the beach, and putting them away to hibernate in the basement of the hotel. Not all, but most of them, were taken; though I dare say that on fine days throughout October they will go trooping back to the sands on the heads of the same men, like a procession of monstrous, two-legged crabs. Such a day was last Sunday, and then the beach offered a

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lively image of its summer gayety. It was dotted with hundreds of hooded chairs, which foregathered in gossiping groups or confidential couples; and as the sun shone quite warm the flaps of the little tents next the dunes were let down against it, and ladies in summer white saved themselves from sunstroke in their shelter. The wooden booths for the sale of candies and mineral waters, and beer and sandwiches, were flushed with a sudden prosperity, so that when I went to buy my pound of grapes from the good woman who understands my Dutch, I dreaded an indifference in her which by no means appeared. She welcomed me as warmly as if I had been her sole customer, and did not put up the price on me; perhaps because it was already so very high that her imagination could not rise above it.

The hotel showed the same admirable constancy. The restaurant was thronged with new-comers, who spread out even over the many-tabled esplanade before it; but it was in no wise demoralized. That night we sat down in multiplied numbers to a table d'hôte of serenely unconscious perfection; and we permanent guests—alas! we are now becoming transient, too—were used with unfaltering recognition of our superior worth. We shared the respect which, all over Europe, attaches to establishment, and which sometimes makes us poor Americans wish for a hereditary nobility, so that we could all mirror our ancestral value in the deference of our inferiors. Where we should get our inferiors is another thing, but I suppose we could import them for the purpose, if the duties were not too great under our tariff.

We have not yet imported the idea of a European hotel in any respect, though we long ago imported what we call the European plan. No travelled American knows it in the extortionate prices of rooms when he gets home, or the preposterous charges of our restaurants, where one portion of roast beef swimming in a lake of lukewarm juice costs as much as a diversified and delicate dinner in Germany or Holland. But even if there were any proportion in these things the European hotel will not be with us till we have the European portier, who is its spring and inspiration. He must not, dear home-keeping reader, be at all imagined in the moral or material figure of our hotel porter, who appears always in his shirt-sleeves, and speaks with the accent of Cork or of Congo. The European portier wears a uniform, I do not know why, and a gold-banded cap, and he inhabits a little office at the entrance of the hotel. He speaks eight or ten languages, up to certain limit, rather better than people born to them, and his presence commands an instant reverence softening to affection under his universal helpfulness. There is nothing he cannot tell you, cannot do for you; and you may trust yourself implicitly to him. He has the priceless gift of making each nationality, each personality, believe that he is devoted to its service alone. He turns lightly from one language to another, as if he had each under his tongue, and he answers simultaneously a fussy French woman, an angry English tourist, a stiff Prussian major, and a thin-voiced American girl in behalf of a timorous mother, and he never mixes the replies. He is an inexhaustible bottle of dialects; but this is the least of his merits, of his miracles.



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Our portier here is a tall, slim Dutchman (most Dutchmen are tall and slim), and in spite of the waning season he treats me as if I were multitude, while at the same time he uses me with the distinction due the last of his guests. Twenty times in as many hours he wishes me good-day, putting his hand to his cap for the purpose; and to oblige me he wears silver braid instead of gilt on his cap and coat. I apologized yesterday for troubling him so often for stamps, and said that I supposed he was much more bothered in the season.

“Between the first of August and the fifteenth,” he answered, “you cannot think. All that you can do is to say, Yes, No; Yes, No.” And he left me to imagine his responsibilities.

I am sure he will hold out to the end, and will smile me a friendly farewell from the door of his office, which is also his dining-room, as I know from often disturbing him at his meals there. I have no fear of the waiters either, or of the little errand-boys who wear suits of sailor blue, and touch their foreheads when they bring you your letters like so many ancient sea-dogs. I do not know why the elevator-boy prefers a suit of snuff-color; but I know that he will salute us as we step out of his elevator for the last time as unfalteringly as if we had just arrived at the beginning of the summer.

## IV

It is our last day in the hotel at Scheveningen, and I will try to recall in their pathetic order the events of the final week.

Nothing has been stranger throughout than the fluctuation of the guests. At times they have dwindled to so small a number that one must reckon chiefly upon their quality for consolation; at other times they swelled to such a tide as to overflow the table, long or short, at dinner, and eddy round a second board beside it. There have been nights when I have walked down the long corridor to my seaward room through a harking solitude of empty chambers; there have been mornings when I have come out to breakfast past door-mats cheerful with boots of both sexes, and door-post hooks where dangling coats and trousers peopled the place with a lively if a somewhat flaccid semblance of human presence. The worst was that, when some one went, we lost a friend, and when some one came we only won a stranger.

Among the first to go were the kindly English folk whose acquaintance we made across the table the first night, and who took with them so large a share of our facile affections that we quite forgot the ancestral enmities, and grieved for them as much as if they had been Americans. There have been, in fact, no Americans here but ourselves, and we have done what we could with the Germans who spoke English. The nicest of these were a charming family from F-----, father and mother, and son and daughter, with whom we had a pleasant week of dinners. At the very first we disagreed with the parents so amicably about

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Ibsen and Sudermann that I was almost sorry to have the son take our modern side of the controversy and declare himself an admirer of those authors with us. Our frank literary difference established a kindness between us that was strengthened by our community of English, and when they went they left us to the sympathy of another German family with whom we had mainly our humanity in common. They spoke no English, and I only a German which they must have understood with their hearts rather than their heads, since it consisted chiefly of good-will. But in the air of their sweet natures it flourished surprisingly, and sufficed each day for praise of the weather after it began to be fine, and at parting for some fond regrets, not unmixed with philosophical reflections, sadly perplexed in the genders and the order of the verbs: with me the verb will seldom wait, as it should in German, to the end. Both of these families, very different in social tradition, I fancied, were one in the amiability which makes the alien forgive so much militarism to the German nation, and hope for its final escape from the drill-sergeant. When they went, we were left for some meals to our own American tongue, with a brief interval of that English painter and his wife with whom we spoke, our language as nearly like English as we could. Then followed a desperate lunch and dinner where an unbroken forest of German, and a still more impenetrable morass of Dutch, hemmed us in. But last night it was our joy to be addressed in our own speech by a lady who spoke it as admirably as our dear friends from F-----. She was Dutch, and when she found we were Americans she praised our historian Motley, and told us how his portrait is gratefully honored with a place in the Queen's palace, The House in the Woods, near Scheveningen.

## V.

She had come up from her place in the country, four hours away, for the last of the concerts here, which have been given throughout the summer by the best orchestra in Europe, and which have been thronged every afternoon and evening by people from The Hague.

One honored day this week even the Queen and the Queen Mother came down to the concert, and gave us incomparably the greatest event of our waning season. I had noticed all the morning a floral perturbation about the main entrance of the hotel, which settled into the form of banks of autumnal bloom on either side of the specially carpeted stairs, and put forth on the roof of the arcade in a crown, much bigger round than a barrel, of orange-colored asters, in honor of the Queen's ancestral house of Orange. Flags of blue, white, and red fluttered nervously about in the breeze from the sea, and imparted to us an agreeable anxiety not to miss seeing the Queens, as the Dutch succinctly call their sovereign and her parent; and at three o'clock we saw them drive up to the hotel. Certain officials in civil dress stood at the door of the concert-room to usher the

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Queens in, and a bareheaded, bald-headed dignity of military figure backed up the stairs before them. I would not rashly commit myself to particulars concerning their dress, but I am sure that the elder Queen wore black, and the younger white. The mother has one of the best and wisest faces I have seen any woman wear (and most of the good, wise faces in this imperfectly balanced world are women's) and the daughter one of the sweetest and prettiest. Pretty is the word for her face, and it showed pink through her blond veil, as she smiled and bowed right and left; her features are small and fine, and she is not above the middle height.

As soon as she had passed into the concert-room, we who had waited to see her go in ran round to another door and joined the two or three thousand people who were standing to receive the Queens. These had already mounted to the royal box, and they stood there while the orchestra played one of the Dutch national airs. (One air is not enough for the Dutch; they must have two.) Then the mother faded somewhere into the background, and the daughter sat alone in the front, on a gilt throne, with a gilt crown at top, and a very uncomfortable carved Gothic back. She looked so young, so gentle, and so good that the rudest Republican could not have helped wishing her well out of a position so essentially and irreparably false as a hereditary sovereign's. One forgot in the presence of her innocent seventeen years that most of the ruling princes of the world had left it the worse for their having been in it; at moments one forgot her altogether as a princess, and saw her only as a charming young girl, who had to sit up rather stiffly.

At the end of the programme the Queens rose and walked slowly out, while the orchestra played the other national air.

## VI.

I call them the Queens, because the Dutch do; and I like Holland so much that I should hate to differ with the Dutch in anything. But, as a matter of fact, they are neither of them quite Queens; the mother is the regent and the daughter will not be crowned till next year.

But, such as they are, they imparted a supreme emotion to our dying season, and thrilled the hotel with a fulness of summer life. Since they went, the season faintly pulses and respire, so that one can just say that it is still alive. Last Sunday was fine, and great crowds came down from The Hague to the concert, and spread out on the seaward terrace of the hotel, around the little tables which I fancied that the waiters had each morning wiped dry of the dew, from a mere Dutch desire of cleaning something. The hooded chairs covered the beach; the children played in the edges of the surf and dived in the sand; the lovers wandered up into the hollows of the dunes.

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There was only the human life, however. I have looked in vain for the crabs, big and little, that swarm on the Long Island shore, and there are hardly any gulls, even; perhaps because there are no crabs for them to eat, if they eat crabs; I never saw gulls doing it, but they must eat something. Dogs there are, of course, wherever there are people; but they are part of the human life. Dutch dogs are in fact very human; and one I saw yesterday behaved quite as badly as a bad boy, with respect to his muzzle. He did not like his muzzle, and by dint of turning somersaults in the sand he got it off, and went frolicking to his master in triumph to show him what he had done.

### VII.

It is now the last day, and the desolation is thickening upon our hotel. This morning the door-posts up and down my corridor showed not a single pair of trousers; not a pair of boots flattered the lonely doormats. In the lower hall I found the tables of the great dining-room assembled, and the chairs inverted on them with their legs in the air; but decently, decorously, not with the reckless abandon displayed by the chairs in our Long Island hotel for weeks before it closed. In the smaller dining-room the table was set for lunch as if we were to go on dining there forever; in the breakfast-room the service and the provision were as perfect as ever. The coffee was good, the bread delicious, the butter of an unfaltering sweetness; and the glaze of wear on the polished dress-coats of the waiters as respectable as it could have been on the first day of the season. All was correct, and if of a funereal correctness to me, I am sure this effect was purely subjective.

The little bell-boys in sailor suits (perhaps they ought to be spelled bell-buoys) clustered about the elevator-boy like so many Roman sentinels at their posts; the elevator-boy and his elevator were ready to take us up or down at any moment.

The portier and I ignored together the hour of parting, which we had definitely ascertained and agreed upon, and we exchanged some compliments to the weather, which is now settled, as if we expected to enjoy it long together. I rather dread going in to lunch, however, for I fear the empty places.

### VIII.

All is over; we are off. The lunch was an heroic effort of the hotel to hide the fact of our separation. It was perfect, unless the boiled beef was a confession of human weakness; but even this boiled beef was exquisite, and the horseradish that went with it was so mellowed by art that it checked rather than provoked the parting tear. The table d'hôte had reserved a final surprise for us; and when we sat down with the fear of nothing but German around us, we heard the sound of our own speech from the

pleasantest English pair we had yet encountered; and the travelling English are pleasant; I will say it, who am said by Sir Walter

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Besant to be the only American who hates their nation. It was really an added pang to go, on their account, but the carriage was waiting at the door; the 'domestique' had already carried our baggage to the steam-tram station; the kindly menial train formed around us for an ultimate 'douceur', and we were off, after the 'portier' had shut us into our vehicle and touched his oft-touched cap for the last time, while the hotel facade dissembled its grief by architecturally smiling in the soft Dutch sun.

I liked this manner of leaving better than carrying part of my own baggage to the train, as I had to do on Long Island, though that, too, had its charm; the charm of the whole fresh, pungent American life, which at this distance is so dear.