

Essay on The People Next Door

"Bob, your naughty boy, why do you always go for Liz? She is a poor darling. Mummy told you not to pester her. Look here, if you harry her any more, Mummy won't take you out for a walk. And Liz, come here darling, makeup with Bob; he won't bother you anymore; and don't you harass him. If you two quarrels any more, Mummy will whack both of you."

Pottering about in the garden of her spacious compound, Mrs Rodrigues was admonishing her sweet darlings, Bob, a Pekinese dog and Lizzie, a Siamese cat. This is a scene very familiar to me, for this repeats almost every evening. Sitting in our garden, I often listen to this sort of tete-a-tete between Mrs Rodrigues and her darlings. It is really amusing to watch this old lady going on chatting away endlessly with Bob and Liz in this one-sided conversation.

I have no idea how long Mrs Rodrigues had been living next door to us. My parents say that she was there when our family moved into this neighbourhood some twenty years ago; that is, three years before I born. She was widowed, I understand, in her forties. Now she is well over sixty and childless. In that large bungalow that sprawls over almost half the area of a one-acre plot, Mrs Rodrigues lives with a live-in amah, a short, stout Javanese woman. Over the compound which is surrounded on all sides by a well-kept, weekly trimmed hedge, hangs an atmosphere of blessed peace and serenity. Here the tall, stately casuarinas and the graceful bamboos sway gently in the afternoon breeze, creating an almost silent symphony that adds more to the absolute quiet of the premises. The well-trimmed hedge, the spick and span compound where one can never see litter lying about, the neatly mown lawn, the well-cared-for garden and flower beds and above all that air of heavenly peace that seems to reign over the whole place all these, in silent eloquence, declare the character and

personality of Mrs Rodrigues.

She is an ideal neighbour. For one thing, she does not go about gossiping, as many women of her age do. She is talkative, it must be admitted; but the beauty is that she does not make you a 'victim' of her conversation, as many inconsiderate people do with their stale tales. She talks, but she does not crave for the company to talk to. She herself is company enough for her, or at the most her darlings, Bob and Liza. She talks either to herself or to her cat and dog. This, mind you, is not because she is a misanthrope. My grandfather, a widower, now well over seventy, will swear on his life that Mrs Rodrigues is the wisest and the most lovable person he has ever come across. Often the two can be seen seated together, chatting away long hours of the evenings either in her garden or in ours. I often wonder what these two, after having journeyed through the ups and downs of life, are thinking of the younger generation. Relaxing in the twilight of their lives, they, like amused and disinterested spectators, would be passing comments that come from the depth of their ripe age and experiences.

Direct in contrast is the family next door to us on the opposite side. The Wee's are a large family. Mr Wee "I have only thirteen children' is a bit worried about the unlucky number of his children. The youngest of the Wee's is now turning three. Mr Wee works in a shipping firm. "My boss pays me more than what I deserve," admits Mr Wee grate-fully. Yet he finds it difficult to give enough pocket money to all his school-going children every day. Mrs Wee suspects that Mr Wee keeps a concubine or two. "Otherwise, how is all his money spent?" A very sensible question according to a woman's logic! But Mr Wee alone knows how hard he struggles to feed the thirteen children and their mother, let alone keep a concubine.

They live in a wooden house that stands on stilts. The Wee's seem to

enjoy radio programmes immensely. Their radio set switched on from the day it was bought, has never been switched off. The set is turned on to such a high volume that the whole neighbourhood is forced to listen to it. They seem to enjoy making noise and they do not realise that they are being a nuisance to others. Mr Wee is a gentleman and a very considerate neighbour, but Mrs Wee has little sense of good neighbourliness. She can hardly control all her children. The little imps run about the wild, shouting and screaming, hooting and crying, throwing stones, climbing trees and falling down. They are really a troublesome lot.

These and other people, living next door remind me that it takes all sorts to make the world. Tolerance and an attitude of living and let live, and above all, the ability to see ourselves as others see us and to see others from their viewpoint all these become essential if we want to get along with the people next door.