

# PATRONS MUST HELP IN RUNNING A HOTEL

## Many of Their Complaints Unjustified, Says Noted Hotel Man—Too Few Rooms Reserved Ahead.

ONE of the most-talked-of features of the recent convention here of the New York State Hotel Association was a paper by E. M. Statler of Buffalo, who has hotels in Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and St. Louis, on "How Poor Is a Good Hotel?" Mr. Statler says criticizing hotels was the most popular topic of conversation among traveling men with the possible exception of the weather. He maintains that it takes two to give good service—the patron and the servant; and asserts that the principal sources of dissatisfaction with good hotels are the patron's failure to reserve rooms in advance, his inability to realize that the hotel is a business institution selling fixed quantities of certain commodities, (i. e., rooms), and the illegibility of signatures on the register.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said, "that nine out of every ten of the men to whom the hotel sells its goods come to make the purchase at times when they are tired, or hungry, or both? How would a merchant like that condition? Wouldn't he feel that he was handicapped, particularly if he knew that he might not have exactly the thing his customer was going to ask for, and would have to try to please him with something else? And then suppose that the merchant's clerk was tired, or hungry, or otherwise not in the best of moods—would the customer recognize that, and make allowance for it?"

"The public doesn't knock willfully, nor because of a well-reasoned grudge; it knocks thoughtlessly, because it doesn't know that it is impossible to run a hotel that would be satisfactory to all patrons all the time, and because it doesn't recognize that when a good hotel gives poor service it is just as apt to be the patron's fault as the hotel's."

"I believe that the great majority of travelers' statements about the pooriness of good hotels originate in some experience at the room desk. Because we operate three hotels in a group I imagine we make as strong an effort as any to get patrons to reserve rooms in advance.

"We urge reservations in a booklet we distribute liberally; we put a little celluloid card on every guest room telephone, inviting the patron to let us make reservation—at no cost to him—at one of the other houses, and we urge him by word of mouth whenever we can without its being a nuisance. We give to the man who reserves an identification card to present on arrival at the other house—which prevents him from standing in line and taking his turn with other arrivals who have not reserved; in short, we do about everything we can think of. Yet reservations are only about 10 per cent. of arrivals in our three hotels.

"I wish somebody would tell me how we can make more plain to people the desirability of reserving. The hotel has only a certain number of rooms and cannot add more, as a train can add Pullmans. It is as unreasonable to expect a hotel to give you exactly what you want at any moment as it would be to expect a theatre to have for you exactly the seat you want at any moment. People reserve Pullman berths and steamship staterooms and theatre seats as a matter of course—but they won't recognize the simple fact that there is even more wisdom in reserving at hotels.

"Leaving out certain incidental and minor complications which antagonize a reasonable or an unreasonable patron, you'll see that the one big cause of complaint is antagonism which rests primarily on price or rates. So let us look at room rates in the good hotel.

"The good hotel has a minimum rate which is not fictitious; that is, it has enough room at the minimum rate to take care of a proper proportion of its business. In the case of our own organization we have a \$1.50 and \$2 rate on 44 per cent. of our rooms; there shouldn't be any more of these rooms—and I am not sure that there should be so many. The reasons are perfectly simple and don't admit of argument as to their justice.

"You can't conduct a good hotel without caring for travelers who want something better than that minimum rate will buy. The idea of the minimum rate is to bring the advantages of the good hotel in reach of the traveler who can't or won't pay more; those rooms are the hotel's bargains, and their number is fixed when the hotel is built.

"When the hotel is out of bargains it can sell only what is left; the better rooms, carried for those who want that grade of merchandise, and giving full value at their fixed prices—but, of course, interesting to the bargain hunter only in emergencies. And consider this well, for this is the kernel of the question: If it weren't for these better rooms the hotel would not have the tone and class which bring the very man who complains about not being always able to get a minimum rate.

"A hotel that has nothing but \$1.50 and \$2 rooms, let us say, is built and operated for the man who wants to spend less than he would in the hotels of the next higher class.

"The man who kicks loudest about not getting minimum rates probably would not patronize your hotel at all if it did not have those better rooms—which, however, he insists that some one else must buy.

"Now, a step further; a lot of the loose criticism we're talking about comes from the man who thinks that the room clerk has plenty of rooms at the minimum rate, but is trying to sell a higher-rate room if he can—a process which the talker usually characterizes as 'robbery' or a 'hold-up,' or by some such term. There are instances—but fewer by far than the traveler supposes—where that is true.

"A room clerk who at 10 A. M. had but a few minimum-rate and plenty of higher-grade rooms left would show very poor judgment if he did not try to balance his stock and take care of the regular customers who he knows will come later in the day and who would not want to pay a higher rate. He will not, if he can help it, disappoint these regulars; whose mail, perhaps, is already in the

house—to take care of a new traveler who wants a bargain but didn't want it badly enough to reserve. And I'll defend that proposition against all comers.

"Nothing in the Federal Constitution compels a man to buy a higher-priced article than he wants—or to submit to what he regards as a robbery. You never see a room clerk with a revolver in his hand demanding an extra dollar from a guest and showing him where to sign.

"What I'm trying to establish is that it isn't fair for a man to think that a hotel which has one price for all and is running practically full ought to have a minimum-rate room waiting for him at any time, and to feel privileged to abuse the hotel because it hasn't.

"The reason minimum-rate rooms in good hotels are hard to buy is because of the large class of travelers who want to stop at first-class hotels, but do not want to pay first-class prices.

"I have no hesitancy in saying that present-day hotel rates in first-class houses are not only just and fair, but, if anything, they are too low. It needs to be remembered that room rates have not been increased in the last three or four years to keep pace with the constantly rising cost of operation. The hotels are treating their patrons with more fairness than

are many other businesses which have raised prices, because of increased demand, far beyond increased costs. I know that practically all the first-class hotels of the country are doing a larger volume of business at a smaller percentage of profit, absorbing the increased cost of operation themselves instead of passing it on to their customers.

"About rates during conventions. Conventions, as a whole, are neither profitable nor desirable to a hotel doing a satisfactory normal capacity business, except as an advertising feature. The investment in extra bedding and furniture, (used only a few days in a year,) in extra help necessary to handle peak-load crowds for a short period, the disorganization consequent upon the confusion of a big convention, the loss on holding rooms vacant to care for conventions.

"That is, to know that such rooms will positively be available from the beginning of a convention; the loss on rooms vacated by convention delegates leaving in a body late in the day or evening without an opportunity to fill them up for the night—all of these things count against convention business and keep it from showing a direct profit. Yet the hotel must accommodate people invited to the city, and gladly does so.

"Here's a last word about kicks on room rates: Unless first-class

hotels can show a profit during the first ten or fifteen years of their operation it is certain that they never will. Therefore, the hotel has to make a rate based on rapid depreciation, and earn profits on its big investment before it is retired by newcomers. Is that fact taken into account by the good business men who talk about the pooriness of the good hotel?"

"Another difficulty that Mr. Statler took up, but only in a few words, was the question of the man whose signature is legible enough to himself but entirely unintelligible to anybody else. As to this he said only:

"All that can be done about it, I suppose, is to keep hammering the subject in season and out of season, and get all the checking devices on signatures that we can.

"I know of no one thing which interferes so much with the hotel's service to its guests as this of having the name wrong on the hotel's records. Right at the guest's arrival it starts an endless chain of troubles. Mail is delayed; the information clerk reports 'not here' to friends who call or telephone; everything goes wrong—both the guest and the hotel.

"The guest has written his name so often that he can see nothing in his signature except what he intends. But how will it look to the room clerk who is not familiar with it?"

"If any guest thinks this is a trivial

matter, let him undertake to read a single page of the average hotel register. The average hotel patron is not definite and specific in his order—either verbal or written. He is dealing with a class of employees who cannot be expected to be 100 per cent. efficient in every set of circumstances that may arise—yet he gives to the bellboy long and complicated instructions that should have been given to the porter, or takes up with a front clerk a matter which cannot get the attention it should have unless it is put to the manager or one of his assistants. We ought to educate the public to realize that it is always safe to go high enough—since, in theory, the higher you go the more ability you find and the more willingness and anxiety to see that you get exactly what you want the way you want it.

"We all have complaints, in our hotels, that would never have been made if the patron had used some judgment in giving his order. He gives hurried instructions—which are plain to him, since he knows just what he wants—to some employe who doesn't want to appear 'green' and accepts them without really understanding them as he should; the employe goes off and does just what the patron didn't want him to do—and in consequence the hotel and the service are 'roasted' unmercifully.

"Can't we, some way, get patrons to understand that it takes two to make good service; that the customer has to give an order properly if he wants to be sure that it will be properly cared for, and that he must give it to the right person, rather than to whoever happens to be at his elbow at the moment? We must try to teach them to go high enough—to reach some one in authority—and some of the most aggravating complaints will disappear."