

CHAPTER XI.

NEWPORT; OR, THE PARADISE OF NOTHING TO DO.

Behold, now, our Lillie at the height of her heart's desire, installed in fashionable apartments at Newport, under the placid chaperonship of dear mamma, who never saw the least harm in any earthly thing her Lillie chose to do.

All the dash and flash and furbelow of upper-tendom were there; and Lillie now felt the full power and glory of being a rich, pretty, young married woman, with oceans of money to spend, and nothing on earth to do but follow the fancies of the passing hour.

This was Lillie's highest ideal of happiness; and didn't she enjoy it?

Wasn't it something to flame forth in wondrous toilets in the eyes of Belle Trevors and Margy Silloway and Lottie Cavers, who were not married; and before the Simpkinses and the Tomkinses and the Jenkinses, who, last year, had said hateful things about her, and intimated that she had gone off in her looks, and was on the way to be an old maid?

And wasn't it a triumph when all her old beaux came flocking round her, and her parlors became a daily resort and lounging-place for all

the idle swains, both of her former acquaintance and of the newcomers, who drifted with the tide of fashion? Never had she been so much the rage; never had she been declared so "stunning." The effect of all this good fortune on her health was immediate. We all know how the spirits affect the bodily welfare; and hence, my dear gentlemen, we desire it to be solemnly impressed on you, that there is nothing so good for a woman's health as to give her her own way.

Lillie now, from this simple cause, received enormous accessions of vigor. While at home with plain, sober John, trying to walk in the quiet paths of domesticity, how did her spirits droop! If you only could have had a vision of her brain and spinal system, you would have seen how there was no nervous fluid there, and how all the fine little cords and fibres that string the muscles were wilting like flowers out of water; but now she could bathe the longest and the strongest of any one, could ride on the beach half the day, and dance the German into the small hours of the night, with a degree of vigor which showed conclusively what a fine thing for her the Newport air was. Her dancing-list was always over-crowded with applicants; bouquets were showered on her; and the most superb "turn-outs," with their masters for charioteers, were at her daily disposal.

All this made talk. The world doesn't forgive success; and the ancients informed us that even the gods were envious of happy people. It is astonishing to see the quantity of very proper and rational moral reflection that is excited in the breast of society, by any

sort of success in life. How it shows them the vanity of earthly enjoyments, the impropriety of setting one's heart on it! How does a successful married flirt impress all her friends with the gross impropriety of having one's head set on gentlemen's attentions!

"I must say," said Belle Trevors, "that dear Lillie does astonish me. Now, I shouldn't want to have that dissipated Danforth lounging in my rooms every day, as he does in Lillie's: and then taking her out driving day after day; for my part, I don't think it's respectable."

"Why don't you speak to her?" said Lottie Cavers.

"Oh, my dear! she wouldn't mind me. Lillie always was the most imprudent creature; and, if she goes on so, she'll certainly get awfully talked about. That Danforth is a horrid creature; I know all about him."

As Miss Belle had herself been driving with the "horrid creature" only the week before Lillie came, it must be confessed that her opportunities for observation were of an authentic kind.

Lillie, as queen in her own parlor, was all grace and indulgence. Hers was now to be the sisterly rôle, or, as she laughingly styled it, the maternal. With a ravishing morning-dress, and with a killing little cap of about three inches in extent on her head, she enacted the young matron, and gave full permission to Tom, Dick, and Harry to

make themselves at home in her room, and smoke their cigars there in peace. She "adored the smell;" in fact, she accepted the present of a fancy box of cigarettes from Danforth with graciousness, and would sometimes smoke one purely for good company. She also encouraged her followers to unveil the tender secrets of their souls confidentially to her, and offered gracious mediations on their behalf with any of the flitting Newport fair ones. When they, as in duty bound, said that they saw nobody whom they cared about now she was married, that she was the only woman on earth for them,--she rapped their knuckles briskly with her fan, and bid them mind their manners. All this mode of proceeding gave her an immense success.

But, as we said before, all this was talked about; and ladies in their letters, chronicling the events of the passing hour, sent the tidings up and down the country; and so Miss Letitia Ferguson got a letter from Mrs. Wilcox with full pictures and comments; and she brought the same to Grace Seymour.

"I dare say," said Letitia, "these things have been exaggerated; they always are: still it does seem desirable that your brother should go there, and be with her."

"He can't go and be with her," said Grace, "without neglecting his business, already too much neglected. Then the house is all in confusion under the hands of painters; and there is that young artist up there,--very elegant gentleman,--giving orders to right and left,

every one of which involves further confusion and deeper expense; for my part, I see no end to it. Poor John has got 'the Old Man of the Sea' on his back in the shape of this woman; and I expect she'll be the ruin of him yet. I can't want to break up his illusion about her; because, what good will it do? He has married her, and must live with her; and, for Heaven's sake, let the illusion last while it can! I'm going to draw off, and leave them to each other; there's no other way."

"You are, Gracie?"

"Yes; you see John came to me, all stammering and embarrassment, about this making over of the old place; but I put him at ease at once. 'The most natural thing in the world, John,' said I. 'Of course Lillie has her taste; and it's her right to have the house arranged to suit it.' And then I proposed to take all the old family things, and furnish the house that I own on Elm Street, and live there, and let John and Lillie keep house by themselves. You see there is no helping the thing. Married people must be left to themselves; nobody can help them. They must make their own discoveries, fight their own battles, sink or swim, together; and I have determined that not by the winking of an eye will I interfere between them."

"Well, but do you think John wants you to go?"

"He feels badly about it; and yet I have convinced him that it's best."

Poor fellow! all these changes are not a bit to his taste. He liked the old place as it was, and the old ways; but John is so unselfish. He has got it in his head that Lillie is very sensitive and peculiar, and that her spirits require all these changes, as well as Newport air."

"Well," said Letitia, "if a man begins to say A in that line, he must say B."

"Of course," said Grace; "and also C and D, and so on, down to X, Y, Z. A woman, armed with sick-headaches, nervousness, debility, presentiments, fears, horrors, and all sorts of imaginary and real diseases, has an eternal armory of weapons of subjugation. What can a man do? Can he tell her that she is lying and shamming? Half the time she isn't; she can actually work herself into about any physical state she chooses. The fortnight before Lillie went to Newport, she really looked pale, and ate next to nothing; and she managed admirably to seem to be trying to keep up, and not to complain,--yet you see how she can go on at Newport."

"It seems a pity John couldn't understand her."

"My dear, I wouldn't have him for the world. Whenever he does, he will despise her; and then he will be wretched. For John is no hypocrite, any more than I am. No, I earnestly pray that his soap-bubble may not break."

"Well, then," said Letitia, "at least, he might go down to Newport for a day or two; and his presence there might set some things right: it might at least check reports. You might just suggest to him that unfriendly things were being said."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," said Grace.

So, by a little feminine tact in suggestion, Grace despatched her brother to spend a day or two in Newport.

His coming and presence interrupted the lounging hours in Lillie's room; the introduction to "my husband" shortened the interviews. John was courteous and affable; but he neither smoked nor drank, and there was a mutual repulsion between him and many of Lillie's habitués.

"I say, Dan," said Bill Sanders to Danforth, as they were smoking on one end of the veranda, "you are driven out of your lodgings since Seymour came."

"No more than the rest of you," said Danforth.

"I don't know about that, Dan. I think you might have been taken for master of those premises. Look here now, Dan, why didn't you take little Lill yourself? Everybody thought you were going to last year."

"Didn't want her; knew too much," said Danforth. "Didn't want to keep her; she's too cursedly extravagant. It's jolly to have this sort of concern on hand; but I'd rather Seymour'd pay her bills than I."

"Who thought you were so practical, Dan?"

"Practical! that I am; I'm an old bird. Take my advice, boys, now: keep shy of the girls, and flirt with the married ones,--then you don't get roped in."

"I say, boys," said Tom Nichols, "isn't she a case, now? What a head she has! I bet she can smoke equal to any of us."

"Yes; I keep her in cigarettes," said Danforth; "she's got a box of them somewhere under her ruffles now."

"What if Seymour should find them?" said Tom.

"Seymour? pooh! he's a muff and a prig. I bet you he won't find her out; she's the jolliest little humbugger there is going. She'd cheat a fellow out of the sight of his eyes. It's perfectly wonderful."

"How came Seymour to marry her?"

"He? Why, he's a pious youth, green as grass itself; and I suppose she talked religion to him. Did you ever hear her talk religion?"

A roar of laughter followed this, out of which Danforth went on. "By George, boys, she gave me a prayer-book once! I've got it yet."

"Well, if that isn't the best thing I ever heard!" said Nichols.

"It was at the time she was laying siege to me, you see. She undertook the part of guardian angel, and used to talk lots of sentiment. The girls get lots of that out of George Sand's novels about the holiness of doing just as you've a mind to, and all that," said Danforth.

"By George, Dan, you oughtn't to laugh. She may have more good in her than you think."

"Oh, humbug! don't I know her?"

"Well, at any rate she's a wonderful creature to hold her looks. By George! how she does hold out! You'd say, now, she wasn't more than twenty."

"Yes; she understands getting herself up," said Danforth, "and touches up her cheeks a bit now and then."

"She don't paint, though?"

"Don't paint! Don't she? I'd like to know if she don't; but she does it like an artist, like an old master, in fact."

"Or like a young mistress," said Tom, and then laughed at his own wit.

Now, it so happened that John was sitting at an open window above, and heard occasional snatches of this conversation quite sufficient to impress him disagreeably. He had not heard enough to know exactly what had been said, but enough to feel that a set of coarse, low-minded men were making quite free with the name and reputation of his Lillie; and he was indignant.

"She is so pretty, so frank, and so impulsive," he said. "Such women are always misconstrued. I'm resolved to caution her."

"Lillie," he said, "who is this Danforth?"

"Charlie Danforth--oh! he's a millionaire that I refused. He was wild about me,--is now, for that matter. He perfectly haunts my rooms, and is always teasing me to ride with him."

"Well, Lillie, if I were you, I wouldn't have any thing to do with him."

"John, I don't mean to, any more than I can help. I try to keep him off all I can; but one doesn't want to be rude, you know."

"My darling," said John, "you little know the wickedness of the world, and the cruel things that men will allow themselves to say of women who are meaning no harm. You can't be too careful, Lillie."

"Oh! I am careful. Mamma is here, you know, all the while; and I never receive except she is present."

John sat abstractedly fingering the various objects on the table; then he opened a drawer in the same mechanical manner.

"Why, Lillie! what's this? what in the world are these?"

"O John! sure enough! well, there is something I was going to ask you about. Danforth used always to be sending me things, you know, before we were married,--flowers and confectionery, and one thing or other; and, since I have been here now, he has done the same, and I really didn't know what to do about it. You know I didn't want to quarrel with him, or get his ill-will; he's a high-spirited fellow, and a man one doesn't want for an enemy; so I have just passed it over easy as I could."

"But, Lillie, a box of cigarettes!--of course, they can be of no use to you."

"Of course: they are only a sort of curiosity that he imports from

Spain with his cigars."

"I've a great mind to send them back to him myself," said John.

"Oh, don't, John! why, how it would look! as if you were angry, or thought he meant something wrong. No; I'll contrive a way to give 'em back without offending him. I am up to all such little ways."

"Come, now," she added, "don't let's be cross just the little time you have to stay with me. I do wish our house were not all torn up, so that I could go home with you, and leave Newport and all its bothers behind."

"Well, Lillie, you could go, and stay with me at Gracie's," said John, brightening at this proposition.

"Dear Gracie,--so she has got a house all to herself; how I shall miss her! but, really, John, I think she will be happier. Since you would insist on revolutionizing our house, you know"--

"But, Lillie, it was to please you."

"Oh, I know it! but you know I begged you not to. Well, John, I don't think I should like to go in and settle down on Grace; perhaps, as I am here, and the sea-air and bathing strengthens me so, we may as well put it through. I will come home as soon as the house is done."

"But perhaps you would want to go with me to New York to select the furniture?"

"Oh, the artist does all that! Charlie Ferrola will give his orders to Simon & Sauls, and they will do every thing up complete. It's the way they all do--saves lots of trouble."

John went home, after three days spent in Newport, feeling that Lillie was somehow an injured fair one, and that the envious world bore down always on beauty and prosperity.

But incidentally he heard and overheard much that made him uneasy. He heard her admired as a "bully" girl, a "fast one;" he heard of her smoking, he overheard something about "painting."

The time was that John thought Lillie an embryo angel,--an angel a little bewildered and gone astray, and with wings a trifle the worse for the world's wear,--but essentially an angel of the same nature with his own revered mother.

Gradually the mercury had been falling in the tube of his estimation. He had given up the angel; and now to himself he called her "a silly little pussy," but he did it with a smile. It was such a neat, white, graceful pussy; and all his own pussy too, and purred and rubbed its little head on no coat-sleeve but his,--of that he was certain. Only

a bit silly. She would still fib a little, John feared, especially when he looked back to the chapter about her age,--and then, perhaps, about the cigarettes.

Well, she might, perhaps, in a wild, excited hour, have smoked one or two, just for fun, and the thing had been exaggerated. She had promised fairly to return those cigarettes,--he dared not say to himself that he feared she would not. He kept saying to himself that she would. It was necessary to say this often to make himself believe it.

As to painting--well, John didn't like to ask her, because, what if she shouldn't tell him the truth? And, if she did paint, was it so great a sin, poor little thing? he would watch, and bring her out of it. After all, when the house was all finished and arranged, and he got her back from Newport, there would be a long, quiet, domestic winter at Springdale; and they would get up their reading-circles, and he would set her to improving her mind, and gradually the vision of this empty, fashionable life would die out of her horizon, and she would come into his ways of thinking and doing.

But, after all, John managed to be proud of her. When he read in the columns of "The Herald" the account of the Splendangerous ball in Newport, and of the entrancingly beautiful Mrs. J.S., who appeared in a radiant dress of silvery gauze made à la nuage, &c., &c., John was

rather pleased than otherwise. Lillie danced till daylight,--it showed that she must be getting back her strength,--and she was voted the belle of the scene. Who wouldn't take the comfort that is to be got in any thing? John owned this fashionable meteor,--why shouldn't he rejoice in it?

Two years ago, had anybody told him that one day he should have a wife that told fibs, and painted, and smoked cigarettes, and danced all night at Newport, and yet that he should love her, and be proud of her, he would have said, Is thy servant a dog? He was then a considerate, thoughtful John, serious and careful in his life-plans; and the wife that was to be his companion was something celestial. But so it is. By degrees, we accommodate ourselves to the actual and existing. To all intents and purposes, for us it is the inevitable.