

CHAPTER XIII.

JOHN'S BIRTHDAY.

"My dear Lillie," quoth John one morning, "next week Wednesday is my birthday."

"Is it? How charming! What shall we do?"

"Well, Lillie, it has always been our custom--Grace's and mine--to give a grand fête here to all our work-people. We invite them all over en masse, and have the house and grounds all open, and devote ourselves to giving them a good time."

Lillie's countenance fell.

"Now, really, John, how trying! what shall we do? You don't really propose to bring all those low, dirty, little factory children in Spindlewood through our elegant new house? Just look at that satin furniture, and think what it will be when a whole parcel of freckled, tow-headed, snubby-nosed children have eaten bread and butter and doughnuts over it! Now, John, there is reason in all things; this house is not made for a missionary asylum."

John, thus admonished, looked at his house, and was fain to admit that

there was the usual amount of that good, selfish, hard grit--called common sense--in Lillie's remarks.

Rooms have their atmosphere, their necessities, their artistic proprieties. Apartments à la Louis Quatorze represent the ideas and the sympathies of a period when the rich lived by themselves in luxury, and the poor were trodden down in the gutter; when there was only aristocratic contempt and domination on one side, and servility and smothered curses on the other. With the change of the apartments to the style of that past era, seemed to come its maxims and morals, as artistically indicated for its completeness. So John walked up and down in his Louis Quinze salon, and into his Pompadour boudoir, and out again into the Louis Quatorze dining-rooms, and reflected. He had had many reflections in those apartments before. Of all ill-adapted and unsuitable pieces of furniture in them, he had always felt himself the most unsuitable and ill-adapted. He had never felt at home in them. He never felt like lolling at ease on any of those elegant sofas, as of old he used to cast himself into the motherly arms of the great chintz one that filled the recess. His Lillie, with her smart paraphernalia of hoops and puffs and ruffles and pinkings and bows, seemed a perfectly natural and indigenous production there; but he himself seemed always to be out of place. His Lillie might have been any of Balzac's charming duchesses, with their "thirty-seven thousand ways of saying 'Yes;'" but, as to himself, he must have been taken for her steward or gardener, who had accidentally strayed in, and was fraying her satin surroundings with rough coats and heavy

boots. There was not, in fact, in all the reorganized house, a place where he felt himself to be at all the proper thing; nowhere where he could lounge, and read his newspaper, without a feeling of impropriety; nowhere that he could indulge in any of the slight Hottentot-isms wherein unrenewed male nature delights,--without a feeling of rebuke.

John had not philosophized on the causes of this. He knew, in a general and unconfessed way, that he was not comfortable in his new arrangements; but he supposed it was his own fault. He had fallen into rusty, old-fashioned, bachelor ways; and, like other things that are not agreeable to the natural man, he supposed his trim, resplendent, genteel house was good for him, and that he ought to like it, and by grace should attain to liking it, if he only tried long enough.

Only he took long rests every day while he went to Grace's, on Elm Street, and stretched himself on the old sofa, and sat in his mother's old arm-chair, and told Grace how very elegant their house was, and how much taste the architect had shown, and how much Lillie was delighted with it.

But this silent walk of John's, up and down his brilliant apartments, opened his eyes to another troublesome prospect. He was a Christian man, with a high aim and ideal in life. He believed in the Sermon on the Mount, and other radical preaching of that nature; and he was a very honest man, and hated humbug in every shape. Nothing seemed

meaner to him than to profess a sham. But it began in a cloudy way to appear to him that there is a manner of arranging one's houses that makes it difficult--yes, well-nigh impossible--to act out in them any of the brotherhood principles of those discourses.

There are houses where the self-respecting poor, or the honest laboring man and woman, cannot be made to enter or to feel at home. They are made for the selfish luxury of the privileged few. Then John reflected, uneasily, that this change in his house had absorbed that whole balance which usually remained on his accounts to be devoted to benevolent purposes, and with which this year he had proposed to erect a reading-room for his work-people.

"Lillie," said John, as he walked uneasily up and down, "I wish you would try to help me in this thing. I always have done it,--my father and mother did it before me,--and I don't want all of a sudden to depart from it. It may seem a little thing, but it does a great deal of good. It produces kind feeling; it refines and educates and softens them."

"Oh, well, John! if you say so, I must, I suppose," said Lillie, with a sigh. "I can have the carpets and furniture all covered, I suppose; it'll be no end of trouble, but I'll try. But I must say, I think all this kind of petting of the working-classes does no sort of good; it only makes them uppish and exacting: you never get any gratitude for it."

"But you know, dearie, what is said about doing good, 'hoping for nothing again,'" said John.

"Now, John, please don't preach, of all things. Haven't I told you that I'll try my best? I am going to,--I'll work with all my strength,--you know that isn't much,--but I shall exert myself to the utmost if you say so."

"My dear, I don't want you to injure yourself!"

"Oh! I don't mind," said Lillie, with the air of a martyr. "The servants, I suppose, will make a fuss about it; and I shouldn't wonder if it was the means of sending them every one off in a body, and leaving me without any help in the house, just as the Follingsbees and the Simpkinses are coming to visit us."

"I didn't know that you had invited the Follingsbees and Simpkinses," said John.

"Didn't I tell you? I meant to," said Mrs. Lillie, innocently.

"I don't like those Follingsbees, Lillie. He is a man I have no respect for; he is one of those shoddy upstarts, not at all our sort of folks. I'm sorry you asked him."

"But his wife is my particular friend," said Lillie, "and they were very polite to mamma and me at Newport; and we really owe them some attention."

"Well, Lillie, since you have asked them, I will be polite to them; and I will try and do every thing to save you care in this entertainment. I'll speak to Bridget myself; she knows our ways, and has been used to managing."

And so, as John was greatly beloved by Bridget, and as all the domestic staff had the true Irish fealty to the man of the house, and would run themselves off their feet in his service any day,--it came to pass that the fête was holden, as of yore, in the grounds. Grace was there and helped, and so were Letitia and Rose Ferguson; and all passed off better than could be expected. But John did not enjoy it. He felt all the while that he was dragging Lillie as a thousand-pound weight after him; and he inly resolved that, once out of that day's festival, he would never try to have it again.

Lillie went to bed with sick headache, and lay two days after it, during which she cried and lamented incessantly. She "knew she was not the wife for John;" she "always told him he wouldn't be satisfied with her, and now she saw he wasn't; but she had tried her very best, and now it was cruel to think she should not succeed any better."

"My dearest child," said John, who, to say the truth, was beginning to

find this thing less charming than it used to be, "I am satisfied. I am much obliged to you. I'm sure you have done all that could be asked."

"Well, I'm sure I hope those folks of yours were pleased," quoth Lillie, as she lay looking like a martyr, with a cloth wet in ice-water bound round her head. "They ought to be; they have left grease-spots all over the sofa in my boudoir, from one end to the other; and cake and raisins have been trodden into the carpets; and the turf around the oval is all cut up; and they have broken my little Diana; and such a din as there was!--oh, me! it makes my head ache to think of it."

"Never mind, Lillie, I'll see to it, and set it all right."

"No, you can't. One of the children broke that model of the Leaning Tower too. I found it. You can't teach such children to let things alone. Oh, dear me! my head!"

"There, there, pussy! only don't worry," said John, in soothing tones.

"Don't think me horrid, please don't," said Lillie, piteously. "I did try to have things go right; didn't I?"

"Certainly you did, dearie; so don't worry. I'll get all the spots taken out, and all the things mended, and make every thing right."

So John called Rosa, on his way downstairs. "Show me the sofa that they spoiled," said he.

"Sofa?" said Rosa.

"Yes; I understand the children greased the sofa in Mrs. Seymour's boudoir."

"Oh, dear, no! nothing of the sort; I've been putting every thing to rights in all the rooms, and they look beautifully."

"Didn't they break something?"

"Oh, no, nothing! The little things were good as could be."

"That Leaning Tower, and that little Diana," suggested John.

"Oh, dear me, no! I broke those a month ago, and showed them to Mrs. Seymour, and promised to mend them. Oh! she knows all about that."

"Ah!" said John, "I didn't know that. Well, Rosa, put every thing up nicely, and divide this money among the girls for extra trouble," he added, slipping a bill into her hand.

"I'm sure there's no trouble," said Rosa. "We all enjoyed it; and

I believe everybody did; only I'm sorry it was too much for Mrs. Seymour; she is very delicate."

"Yes, she is," said John, as he turned away, drawing a long, slow sigh.

That long, slow sigh had become a frequent and unconscious occurrence with him of late. When our ideals are sick unto death; when they are slowly dying and passing away from us, we sigh thus. John said to himself softly,--no matter what; but he felt the pang of knowing again what he had known so often of late, that his Lillie's word was not golden. What she said would not bear close examination. Therefore, why examine?

"Evidently, she is determined that this thing shall not go on," said John. "Well, I shall never try again; it's of no use;" and John went up to his sister's, and threw himself down upon the old chintz sofa as if it had been his mother's bosom. His sister sat there, sewing. The sun came twinkling through a rustic frame-work of ivy which it had been the pride of her heart to arrange the week before. All the old family pictures and heirlooms, and sketches and pencillings, were arranged in the most charming way, so that her rooms seemed a reproduction of the old home.

"Hang it all!" said John, with a great flounce as he turned over on the sofa. "I'm not up to par this morning."

Now, Grace had that perfect intuitive knowledge of just what the matter was with her brother, that women always have who have grown up in intimacy with a man. These fine female eyes see farther between the rough cracks and ridges of the oak bark of manhood than men themselves. Nothing would have been easier, had Grace been a jealous exigente woman, than to have passed a fine probe of sisterly inquiry into the weak places where the ties between John and Lillie were growing slack, and untied and loosened them more and more. She could have done it so tenderly, so conscientiously, so pityingly,--encouraging John to talk and to complain, and taking part with him,--till there should come to be two parties in the family, the brother and sister against the wife.

How strong the temptation was, those may feel who reflect that this one subject caused an almost total eclipse of the life-long habit of confidence which had existed between Grace and her brother, and that her brother was her life and her world.

But Grace was one of those women formed under the kindly severe discipline of Puritan New England, to act not from blind impulse or instinct, but from high principle. The habit of self-examination and self-inspection, for which the religious teaching of New England has been peculiar, produced a race of women who rose superior to those mere feminine caprices and impulses which often hurry very generous and kindly-natured persons into ungenerous and dishonorable conduct.

Grace had been trained, by a father and mother whose marriage union was an ideal of mutual love, honor, and respect, to feel that marriage was the holiest and most awful of obligations. To her, the idea of a husband or a wife betraying each other's weaknesses or faults by complaints to a third party seemed something sacrilegious; and she used all her womanly tact and skill to prevent any conversation that might lead to such a result.

"Lillie is entirely knocked up by the affair yesterday; she had a terrible headache this morning," said John.

"Poor child! She is a delicate little thing," said Grace.

"She couldn't have had any labor," continued John, "for I saw to every thing and provided every thing myself; and Bridget and Rosa and all the girls entered into it with real spirit, and Lillie did the best she could, poor girl! but I could see all the time she was worrying about her new fizzes and folderols in the house. Hang it! I wish they were all in the Red Sea!" burst out John, glad to find something to vent himself upon. "If I had known that making the house over was going to be such a restraint on a fellow, I would never have done it."

"Oh, well! never mind that now," said Grace. "Your house will get rubbed down by and by, and the new gloss taken off; and so will your wife, and you will all be cosey and easy as an old shoe. Young mistresses, you see, have nerves all over their house at first. They

tremble at every dent in their furniture, and wink when you come near it, as if you were going to hit it a blow; but that wears off in time, and they learn to take it easy."

John looked relieved; but after a minute broke out again:--

"I say, Gracie, Lillie has gone and invited the Simpkinses and the Follingsbees here this fall. Just think of it!"

"Well, I suppose you expect your wife to have the right of inviting her company," said Grace.

"But, you know, Gracie, they are not at all our sort of folks," said John. "None of our set would ever think of visiting them, and it'll seem so odd to see them here. Follingsbee is a vulgar sharper, who has made his money out of our country by dishonest contracts during the war. I don't know much about his wife. Lillie says she is her intimate friend."

"Oh, well, John! we must get over it in the quietest way possible. It wouldn't be handsome not to make the agreeable to your wife's company; and if you don't like the quality of it, why, you are a good deal nearer to her than any one else can be,--you can gradually detach her from them."

"Then you think I ought to put a good face on their coming?" said

John, with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, certainly! of course. What else can you do? It's one of the things to be expected with a young wife."

"And do you think the Wilcoxes and the Fergusons and the rest of our set will be civil?"

"Why, of course they will," said Grace. "Rose and Letitia will, certainly; and the others will follow suit. After all, John, perhaps we old families, as we call ourselves, are a little bit pharisaical and self-righteous, and too apt to thank God that we are not as other men are. It'll do us good to be obliged to come a little out of our crinkles."

"It isn't any old family feeling about Follingsbee," said John. "But I feel that that man deserves to be in State's prison much more than many a poor dog that is there now."

"And that may be true of many another, even in the selectest circles of good society," said Grace; "but we are not called on to play Providence, nor pronounce judgments. The common courtesies of life do not commit us one way or the other. The Lord himself does not express his opinion of the wicked, but allows all an equal share in his kindness."

"Well, Gracie, you are right; and I'll constrain myself to do the thing handsomely," said John.

"The thing with you men," said Grace, "is, that you want your wives to see with your eyes, all in a minute, what has got to come with years and intimacy, and the gradual growing closer and closer together. The husband and wife, of themselves, drop many friendships and associations that at first were mutually distasteful, simply because their tastes have grown insensibly to be the same."

John hoped it would be so with himself and Lillie; for he was still very much in love with her; and it comforted him to have Grace speak so cheerfully, as if it were possible.

"You think Lillie will grow into our ways by and by?"--he said inquiringly.

"Well, if we have patience, and give her time. You know, John, that you knew when you took her that she had not been brought up in our ways of living and thinking. Lillie comes from an entirely different set of people from any we are accustomed to; but a man must face all the consequences of his marriage honestly and honorably."

"I know it," said John, with a sigh. "I say, Gracie, do you think the Fergusons like Lillie? I want her to be intimate with them."

"Well, I think they admire her," said Grace, evasively, "and feel disposed to be as intimate as she will let them."

"Because," said John, "Rose Ferguson is such a splendid girl; she is so strong, and so generous, and so perfectly true and reliable,--it would be the joy of my heart if Lillie would choose her for a friend."

"Then, pray don't tell her so," said Grace, earnestly; "and don't praise her to Lillie,--and, above all things, never hold her up as a pattern, unless you want your wife to hate her."

John opened his eyes very wide.

"So!" said he, slowly, "I never thought of that. You think she would be jealous?" and John smiled, as men do at the idea that their wives may be jealous, not disliking it on the whole.

"I know I shouldn't be in much charity with a woman my husband proposed to me as a model; that is to say, supposing I had one," said Grace.

"That reminds me," said John, suddenly rising up from the sofa.

"Do you know, Gracie, that Colonel Sydenham has come back from his cruise?"

"I had heard of it," said Grace, quietly. "Now, John, don't interrupt

me. I'm just going to turn this corner, and must count,--'one, two, three, four, five, six,'"--

John looked at his sister. "How handsome she looks when her cheeks have that color!" he thought. "I wonder if there ever was any thing in that affair between them."