

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. JOHN SEYMOUR'S PARTY, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

Mrs. John Seymour's party marked an era in the annals of Springdale. Of this, you may be sure, my dear reader, when you consider that it was projected and arranged by Mrs. Lillie, in strict counsel with her friend Mrs. Follingsbee, who had lived in Paris, and been to balls at the Tuileries. Of course, it was a tip-top New-York-Paris party, with all the new, fashionable, unspeakable crinkles and wrinkles, all the high, divine, spick and span new ways of doing things; which, however, like the Eleusinian mysteries, being in their very nature incommunicable except to the elect, must be left to the imagination.

A French artiste, whom Mrs. Follingsbee patronized as "my confectioner," came in state to Springdale, with a retinue of appendages and servants sufficient for a circus; took formal possession of the Seymour mansion, and became, for the time being, absolute dictator, as was customary in the old Roman Republic in times of emergency.

Mr. Follingsbee was forward, fussy, and advisory, in his own peculiar free-and-easy fashion; and Mrs. Follingsbee was instructive and patronizing to the very last degree. Lillie had bewailed in her sympathizing bosom John's unaccountable and most singular moral

Quixotism in regard to the wine question, and been comforted by her appreciative discourse. Mrs. Follingsbee had a sort of indefinite faith in French phrases for mending all the broken places in life. A thing said partly in French became at once in her view elucidated, even though the words meant no more than the same in English; so she consoled Lillie as follows:--

"Oh, ma chère! I understand perfectly: your husband may be 'un peu borné' as they say in Paris, but still 'un homme très respectable' (Mrs. Follingsbee here scraped her throat emphatically, just as her French maid did),--a sublime example of the virtues; and let me tell you, darling, you are very fortunate to get such a man. It is not often that a woman can get an establishment like yours, and a good man into the bargain; so, if the goodness is a little ennuyeuse, one must put up with it. Then, again, people of old established standing may do about what they like socially: their position is made. People only say, 'Well, that is their way; the Seymours will do so and so.' Now, we have to do twice as much of every thing to make our position, as certain other people do. We might flood our place with champagne and Burgundy, and get all the young fellows drunk, as we generally do; and yet people will call our parties 'bourgeois' and yours 'recherché', if you give them nothing but tea and biscuit. Now, there's my Dick: he respects your husband; you can see he does. In his odious slang way, he says he's 'some,' and 'a brick;' and he's a little anxious to please him, though he professes not to care for anybody. Now, Dick has pretty sharp sense, after all, or he'd never

have been just where he is."

Our friend John, during these days preceding the party, the party itself, and the clearing up after it, enacted submissively that part of unconditional surrender which the master of the house, if well trained, generally acts on such occasions. He resembled the prize ox, which is led forth adorned with garlands, ribbons, and docility, to grace a triumphal procession. He went where he was told, did as he was bid, marched to the right, marched to the left, put on gloves and cravat, and took them off, entirely submissive to the word of his little general; and exhibited, in short, an edifying spectacle of that pleasant domestic animal, a tame husband. He had to make atonement for being a reformer, and for endeavoring to live like a Christian, by conceding to his wife all this latitude of indulgence; and he meant to go through it like a man and a philosopher. To be sure, in his eyes, it was all so much unutterable bosh and nonsense; and bosh and nonsense for which he was eventually to settle the bills: but he armed himself with the patient reflection that all things have their end in time,--that fireworks and Chinese lanterns, bands of music and kid gloves, ruffs and puffs, and pinkings and quillings, and all sorts of unspeakable eatables with French names, would ere long float down the stream of time, and leave their record only in a few bad colds and days of indigestion, which also time would mercifully cure.

So John steadied his soul with a view of that comfortable future, when all this fuss should be over, and the coast cleared for something

better. Moreover, John found this good result of his patience: that he learned a little something in a Christian way by it. Men of elevated principle and moral honesty often treat themselves to such large slices of contempt and indignation, in regard to the rogues of society, as to forget a common brotherhood of pity. It is sometimes wholesome for such men to be obliged to tolerate a scamp to the extent of exchanging with him the ordinary benevolences of social life.

John, in discharging the duty of a host to Dick Follingsbee, found himself, after a while, looking on him with pity, as a poor creature, like the rich fool in the Gospels, without faith, or love, or prayer; spending life as a moth does,--in vain attempts to burn himself up in the candle, and knowing nothing better. In fact, after a while, the stiff, tow-colored moustache, smart stride, and flippant air of this poor little man struck him somewhere in the region between a smile and a tear; and his enforced hospitality began to wear a tincture of real kindness. There is no less pathos in moral than in physical imbecility.

It is an observable social phenomenon that, when any family in a community makes an advance very greatly ahead of its neighbors in style of living or splendor of entertainments, the fact causes great searchings of spirit in all the region round about, and abundance of talk, wherein the thoughts of many hearts are revealed.

Springdale was a country town, containing a choice knot of the old,

respectable, true-blue, Boston-aristocracy families. Two or three of them had winter houses in Beacon Street, and went there, after Christmas, to enjoy the lectures, concerts, and select gayeties of the modern Athens; others, like the Fergusons and Seymours, were in intimate relationship with the same circle.

Now, it is well known that the real old true-blue, Simon-pure, Boston family is one whose claims to be considered "the thing," and the only thing, are somewhat like the claim of apostolic succession in ancient churches. It is easy to see why certain affluent, cultivated, and eminently well-conducted people should be considered "the thing" in their day and generation; but why they should be considered as the "only thing" is the point insoluble to human reason, and to be received by faith alone; also, why certain other people, equally affluent, cultivated, and well-conducted are not "the thing" is one of the divine mysteries, about which whoso observes Boston society will do well not too curiously to exercise his reason.

These "true-blue" families, however, have claims to respectability; which make them, on the whole, quite a venerable and pleasurable feature of society in our young, topsy-turvy, American community. Some of them have family records extending clearly back to the settlement of Massachusetts Bay; and the family estate is still on grounds first cleared up by aboriginal settlers. Being of a Puritan nobility, they have an ancestral record, affording more legitimate subject of family self-esteem than most other nobility. Their history runs back to

an ancestry of unworldly faith and prayer and self-denial, of incorruptible public virtue, sturdy resistance of evil, and pursuit of good.

There is also a literary aroma pervading their circles. Dim suggestions of "The North American Review," of "The Dial," of Cambridge,--a sort of vague "miel-fleur" of authorship and poetry,--is supposed to float in the air around them; and it is generally understood that in their homes exist tastes and appreciations denied to less favored regions. Almost every one of them has its great man,--its father, grandfather, cousin, or great uncle, who wrote a book, or edited a review, or was a president of the United States, or minister to England, whose opinions are referred to by the family in any discussion, as good Christians quote the Bible.

It is true that, in some few instances, the pleroma of aristocratic dignity undergoes a sort of acetic fermentation, and comes out in ungenial qualities. Now and then, at a public watering-place, a man or woman appears no otherwise distinguished than by a remarkable talent for being disagreeable; and it is amusing to find, on inquiry, that this repulsiveness of demeanor is entirely on account of belonging to an ancient family.

Such is the tendency of democracy to a general mingling of elements, that this frigidity is deemed necessary by these good souls to prevent the commonalty from being attracted by them, and sticking to them,

as straws and bits of paper do to amber. But more generally the "true-blue" old families are simple and urbane in their manners; and their pretensions are, as Miss Edgeworth says, presented rather *intaglio* than in *cameo*. Of course, they most thoroughly believe in themselves, but in a bland and genial way. "Noblesse oblige" is with them a secret spring of gentle address and social suavity. They prefer their own set and their own ways, and are comfortably sure that what they do not know is not worth knowing, and what they have not been in the habit of doing is not worth doing; but still they are indulgent of the existence of human nature outside of their own circle.

The Seymours and the Fergusons belonged to this sort of people; and, of course, Mr. John Seymour's marriage afforded them opportunity for some wholesome moral discipline. The Ferguson girls were frank, social, magnanimous young women; of that class, to whom the saying or doing of a rude or unhandsome thing by any human being was an utter impossibility, and whose cheeks would flush at the mere idea of asserting personal superiority over any one. Nevertheless, they trod the earth firmly, as girls who felt that they were born to a certain position. Judge Ferguson was a gentleman of the old school, devoted to past ideas, fond of the English classics, and with small faith in any literature later than Dr. Johnson. He confessed to a toleration for Scott's novels, and had been detected by his children both laughing and crying over the stories of Charles Dickens; for the amiable weaknesses of human nature still remain in the best regulated mind. To women and children, the judge was benignity itself, imitating the

Grand Monarque, who bowed even to a chambermaid. He believed in good, orderly, respectable, old ways and entertainments, and had a quiet horror of all that is loud or noisy or pretentious; which sometimes made his social duties a trial to him, as was the case in regard to the Seymour party.

The arrangements of the party, including the preparations for an extensive illumination of the grounds, and fireworks, were on so unusual a scale as to rouse the whole community of Springdale to a fever of excitement; of course, the Wilcoxes and the Lennoxes were astonished and disgusted. When had it been known that any of their set had done any thing of the kind? How horribly out of taste! Just the result of John Seymour's marrying into that class of society! Mrs. Lennox was of opinion that she ought not to go. She was of the determined and spicy order of human beings, and often, like a certain French countess, felt disposed to thank Heaven that she generally succeeded in being rude when the occasion required. Mrs. Lennox regarded "snubbing" in the light of a moral duty devolving on people of condition, when the foundations of things were in danger of being removed by the inroads of the vulgar commonalty. On the present occasion, Mrs. Lennox was of opinion that quiet, respectable people, of good family, ought to ignore this kind of proceeding, and not think of encouraging such things by their presence.

Mrs. Wilcox generally shaped her course by Mrs. Lennox: still she had promised Letitia Ferguson to be gracious to the Seymours in their

exigency, and to call on the Follingsbees; so there was a confusion all round. The young people of both families declared that they were going, just to see the fun. Bob Lennox, with the usual vivacity of Young America, said he didn't "care a hang who set a ball rolling, if only something was kept stirring." The subject was discussed when Mrs. Lennox and Mrs. Wilcox were making a morning call upon the Fergusons.

"For my part," said Mrs. Lennox, "I'm principled on this subject. Those Follingsbees are not proper people. They are of just that vulgar, pushing class, against which I feel it my duty to set my face like a flint; and I'm astonished that a man like John Seymour should go into relations with them. You see it puts all his friends in a most embarrassing position."

"Dear Mrs. Lennox," said Rose Ferguson, "indeed, it is not Mr. Seymour's fault. These persons are invited by his wife."

"Well, what business has he to allow his wife to invite them? A man should be master in his own house."

"But, my dear Mrs. Lennox," said Mrs. Ferguson, "such a pretty young creature, and just married! of course it would be unhandsome not to allow her to have her friends."

"Certainly," said Judge Ferguson, "a gentleman cannot be rude to his wife's invited guests; for my part, I think Seymour is putting the

best face he can on it; and we must all do what we can to help him. We shall all attend the Seymour party."

"Well," said Mrs. Wilcox, "I think we shall go. To be sure, it is not what I should like to do. I don't approve of these Follingsbees. Mr. Wilcox was saying, this morning, that his money was made by frauds on the government, which ought to have put him in the State Prison."

"Now, I say," said Mrs. Lennox, "such people ought to be put down socially: I have no patience with their airs. And that Mrs. Follingsbee, I have heard that she was a milliner, or shop-girl, or some such thing; and to see the airs she gives herself! One would think it was the Empress Eugenie herself, come to queen it over us in America. I can't help thinking we ought to take a stand. I really do."

"But, dear Mrs. Lennox, we are not obliged to cultivate further relations with people, simply from exchanging ordinary civilities with them on one evening," said Judge Ferguson.

"But, my dear sir, these pushing, vulgar, rich people take advantage of every opening. Give them an inch, and they will take an ell," said Mrs. Lennox. "Now, if I go, they will be claiming acquaintance with me in Newport next summer. Well, I shall cut them,--dead."

"Trust you for that," said Miss Letitia, laughing; "indeed, Mrs. Lennox, I think you may go wherever you please with perfect safety."

People will never saddle themselves on you longer than you want them; so you might as well go to the party with the rest of us."

"And besides, you know," said Mrs. Wilcox, "all our young people will go, whether we go or not. Your Tom was at my house yesterday; and he is going with my girls: they are all just as wild about it as they can be, and say that it is the greatest fun that has been heard of this summer."

In fact, there was not a man, woman, or child, in a circle of fifteen miles round, who could show shade or color of an invitation, who was not out in full dress at Mrs. John Seymour's party. People in a city may pick and choose their entertainments, and she who gives a party there may reckon on a falling off of about one-third, for various other attractions; but in the country, where there is nothing else stirring, one may be sure that not one person able to stand on his feet will be missing. A party in a good old sleepy, respectable country place is a godsend. It is equal to an earthquake, for suggesting materials of conversation; and in so many ways does it awaken and vivify the community, that one may doubt whether, after all, it is not a moral benefaction, and the giver of it one to be ranked in the noble army of martyrs.

Everybody went. Even Mrs. Lennox, when she had sufficiently swallowed her moral principles, sent in all haste to New York for an elegant spick and span new dress from Madame de Tullegig's, expressly for the

occasion. Was she to be outshone by unprincipled upstarts? Perish the thought! It was treason to the cause of virtue, and the standing order of society. Of course, the best thing to be done is to put certain people down, if you can; but, if you cannot do that, the next best thing is to outshine them in their own way. It may be very naughty for them to be so dressy and extravagant, and very absurd, improper, immoral, unnecessary, and in bad taste; but still, if you cannot help it, you may as well try to do the same, and do a little more of it.

Mrs. Lennox was in a feverish state till all her trappings came from New York. The bill was something stunning; but, then, it was voted by the young people that she had never looked so splendidly in her life; and she comforted herself with marking out a certain sublime distance and reserve of manner to be observed towards Mrs. Seymour and the Follingsbees.

The young people, however, came home delighted. Tom, aged twenty-two, instructed his mother that Follingsbee was a brick, and a real jolly fellow; and he had accepted an invitation to go on a yachting cruise with him the next month. Jane Lennox, moreover, began besetting her mother to have certain details in their house rearranged, with an eye to the Seymour glorification.

"Now, Jane dear, that's just the result of allowing you to visit in this flash, vulgar genteel society," said the troubled mamma.

"Bless your heart, mamma, the world moves on, you know; and we must

move with it a little, or be left behind. For my part, I'm perfectly ashamed of the way we let things go at our house. It really is not respectable. Now, I like Mrs. Follingsbee, for my part: she's clever and amusing. It was fun to hear all about the balls at the Tuileries, and the opera and things in Paris. Mamma, when are we going to Paris?"

"Oh! I don't know, my dear; you must ask your father. He is very unwilling to go abroad."

"Papa is so slow and conservative in his notions!" said the young lady. "For my part, I cannot see what is the use of all this talk about the Follingsbees. He is good-natured and funny; and, I am sure, I think she's a splendid woman: and, by the way, she gave me the address of lots of places in New York where we can get French things. Did you notice her lace? It is superb; and she told me where lace just like it could be bought one-third less than they sell at Stewart's."

Thus we see how the starting-out of an old, respectable family in any new ebullition of fancy and fashion is like a dandelion going to seed. You have not only the airy, fairy globe; but every feathery particle thereof bears a germ which will cause similar feather bubbles all over the country; and thus old, respectable grass-plots become, in time, half dandelion. It is to be observed that, in all questions of life and fashion, "the world and the flesh," to say nothing of the third partner of that ancient firm, have us at decided advantage. It is easy to see the flash of jewelry, the dazzle of color, the rush and glitter

of equipage, and to be dizzied by the babble and gayety of fashionable life; while it is not easy to see justice, patience, temperance, self-denial. These are things belonging to the invisible and the eternal, and to be seen with other eyes than those of the body.

Then, again, there is no one thing in all the items which go to make up fashionable extravagance, which, taken separately and by itself, is not in some point of view a good or pretty or desirable thing; and so, whenever the forces of invisible morality begin an encounter with the troops of fashion and folly, the world and the flesh, as we have just said, generally have the best of it.

It may be very shocking and dreadful to get money by cheating and lying; but when the money thus got is put into the forms of yachts, operas, pictures, statues, and splendid entertainments, of which you are freely offered a share if you will only cultivate the acquaintance of a sharper, will you not then begin to say, "Everybody is going, why not I? As to countenancing Dives, why he is countenanced; and my holding out does no good. What is the use of my sitting in my corner and sulking? Nobody minds me." Thus Dives gains one after another to follow his chariot, and make up his court.

Our friend John, simply by being a loving, indulgent husband, had come into the position, in some measure, of demoralizing the public conscience, of bringing in luxury and extravagance, and countenancing people who really ought not to be countenanced. He had a sort of

uneasy perception of this fact; yet, at each particular step, he seemed to himself to be doing no more than was right or reasonable. It was a fact that, through all Springdale, people were beginning to be uneasy and uncomfortable in houses that used to seem to them nice enough, and ashamed of a style of dress and entertainment and living that used to content them perfectly, simply because of the changes of style and living in the John-Seymour mansion.

Of old, the Seymour family had always been a bulwark on the side of a temperate self-restraint and reticence in worldly indulgence; of a kind that parents find most useful to strengthen their hands when children are urging them on to expenses beyond their means: for they could say, "The Seymours are richer than we are, and you see they don't change their carpets, nor get new sofas, nor give extravagant parties; and they give simple, reasonable, quiet entertainments, and do not go into any modern follies." So the Seymours kept up the Fergusons, and the Fergusons the Seymours; and the Wilcoxes and the Lennoxes encouraged each other in a style of quiet, reasonable living, saving money for charity, and time for reading and self-cultivation, and by moderation and simplicity keeping up the courage of less wealthy neighbors to hold their own with them.

The John-Seymour party, therefore, was like the bursting of a great dam, which floods a whole region. There was not a family who had not some trouble with the inundation, even where, like Rose and Letitia Ferguson, they swept it out merrily, and thought no more of it.

"It was all very pretty and pleasant, and I'm glad it went off so well," said Rose Ferguson the next day; "but I have not the smallest desire to repeat any thing of the kind. We who live in the country, and have such a world of beautiful things around us every day, and so many charming engagements in riding, walking, and rambling, and so much to do, cannot afford to go into this sort of thing: we really have not time for it."

"That pretty creature," said Mrs. Ferguson, speaking of Lillie, "is really a charming object. I hope she will settle down now to domestic life. She will soon find better things to care for, I trust: a baby would be her best teacher. I am sure I hope she will have one."

"A baby is mamma's infallible recipe for strengthening the character," said Rose, laughing.

"Well, as the saying is, they bring love with them," said Mrs. Ferguson; "and love always brings wisdom."