

CHAPTER XX.

THE VAN ASTRACHANS.

The Van Astrachans, a proud, rich old family, who took a certain defined position in New-York life on account of some ancestral passages in their family history, had invited Rose to spend a month or two with them; and she was therefore moving as a star in a very high orbit.

Now, these Van Astrachans were one of those cold, glittering, inaccessible pinnacles in Mrs. Follingsbee's fashionable Alp-climbing which she would spare no expense to reach if possible. It was one of the families for whose sake she had Mrs. John Seymour under her roof; and the advent of Rose, whom she was pleased to style one of Mrs. Seymour's most intimate friends, was an unhoped-for stroke of good luck; because there was the necessity of calling on Rose, of taking her out to drive in the park, and of making a party on her account, from which, of course, the Van Astrachans could not stay away.

It will be seen here that our friend, Mrs. Follingsbee, like all ladies whose watch-word is "Excelsior," had a peculiar, difficult, and slippery path to climb.

The Van Astrachans were good old Dutch-Reformed Christians,

unquestioning believers in the Bible in general, and the Ten Commandments in particular,--persons whose moral constitutions had been nourished on the great stocky beefsteaks and sirloins of plain old truths which go to form English and Dutch nature. Theirs was a style of character which rendered them utterly hopeless of comprehending the etherealized species of holiness which obtained in the innermost circles of the Follingsbee illuminati. Mr. Van Astrachan buttoned under his coat not only many solid inches of what Carlyle calls "good Christian fat," but also a pocket-book through which millions of dollars were passing daily in an easy and comfortable flow, to the great advantage of many of his fellow-creatures no less than himself; and somehow or other he was pig-headed in the idea that the Bible and the Ten Commandments had something to do with that stability of things which made this necessary flow easy and secure.

He was slow-moulded, accurate, and fond of security; and was of opinion that nineteen centuries of Christianity ought to have settled a few questions so that they could be taken for granted, and were not to be kept open for discussion.

Moreover, Mr. Van Astrachan having read the accounts of the first French revolution, and having remarked all the subsequent history of that country, was confirmed in his idea, that pitching every thing into pi once in fifty years was no way to get on in the affairs of this world.

He had strong suspicions of every thing French, and a mind very ill adapted to all those delicate reasonings and shadings and speculations of which Mr. Charlie Ferrola was particularly fond, which made every thing in morals and religion an open question.

He and his portly wife planted themselves, like two canons of the sanctuary, every Sunday, in the tip-top highest-priced pew of the most orthodox old church in New York; and if the worthy man sometimes indulged in gentle slumbers in the high-padded walls of his slip, it was because he was so well assured of the orthodoxy of his minister that he felt that no interest of society would suffer while he was off duty. But may Heaven grant us, in these days of dissolving views and general undulation, large armies of these solid-planted artillery on the walls of our Zion!

Blessed be the people whose strength is to sit still! Much needed are they when the activity of free inquiry seems likely to chase us out of house and home, and leave us, like the dove in the deluge, no rest for the sole of our foot.

Let us thank God for those Dutch-Reformed churches; great solid breakwaters, that stand as the dykes in their ancestral Holland to keep out the muddy waves of that sea whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

But let us fancy with what quakings and shakings of heart Mrs. Follingsbee must have sought the alliance of these tremendously solid old Christians. They were precisely what she wanted to give an air of solidity to the cobweb glitter of her state. And we can also see how necessary it was that she should ostentatiously visit Charlie Ferfola's wife, and speak of her as a darling creature, her particular friend, whom she was doing her very best to keep out of an early grave.

Charlie Ferrola said that the Van Astrachans were obtuse; and so, to a certain degree, they were. In social matters they had a kind of confiding simplicity. They were so much accustomed to regard positive morals in the light of immutable laws of Nature, that it would not have been easy to have made them understand that sliding scale of estimates which is in use nowadays. They would probably have had but one word, and that a very disagreeable one, to designate a married woman who was in love with anybody but her husband. Consequently, they were the very last people whom any gossip of this sort could ever reach, or to whose ears it could have been made intelligible.

Mr. Van Astrachan considered Dick Follingsbee a swindler, whose proper place was the State's prison, and whose morals could only be mentioned with those of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Nevertheless, as Mrs. Follingsbee made it a point of rolling up her eyes and sighing deeply when his name was mentioned,--as she attended

church on Sunday with conspicuous faithfulness, and subscribed to charitable societies and all manner of good works,--as she had got appointed directress on the board of an orphan asylum where Mrs. Van Astrachan figured in association with her, that good lady was led to look upon her with compassion, as a worthy woman who was making the best of her way to heaven, notwithstanding the opposition of a dissolute husband.

As for Rose, she was as fresh and innocent and dewy, in the hot whirl and glitter and glare of New York, as a waving spray of sweet-brier, brought in fresh with all the dew upon it.

She really had for Lillie a great deal of that kind of artistic admiration which nice young girls sometimes have for very beautiful women older than themselves; and was, like almost every one else, somewhat bejuggled and taken in by that air of infantine sweetness and simplicity which had survived all the hot glitter of her life, as if a rose, fresh with dew, should lie unwilted in the mouth of a furnace.

Moreover, Lillie's face had a beauty this winter it had never worn: the softness of a real feeling, the pathos of real suffering, at times touched her face with something that was always wanting in it before. The bitter waters of sin that she would drink gave a strange feverish color to her cheek; and the poisoned perfume she would inhale gave a strange new brightness to her eyes.

Rose sometimes looked on her and wondered; so innocent and healthy and light-hearted in herself, she could not even dream of what was passing. She had been brought up to love John as a brother, and opened her heart at once to his wife with a sweet and loyal faithfulness.

When she told Mrs. Van Astrachan that Mrs. John Seymour was one of her friends from Springdale, married into a family with which she had grown up with great intimacy, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to the good lady that Rose should want to visit her; that she should drive with her, and call on her, and receive her at their house; and with her of course must come Mrs. Follingsbee.

Mr. Van Astrachan made a dead halt at the idea of Dick Follingsbee. He never would receive that man under his roof, he said, and he never would enter his house; and when Mr. Van Astrachan once said a thing of this kind, as Mr. Hosea Biglow remarks, "a meeting-house wasn't sotter."

But then Mrs. Follingsbee's situation was confidentially stated to Lillie, and by Lillie confidentially stated to Rose, and by Rose to Mrs. Van Astrachan; and it was made to appear how Dick Follingsbee had entirely abandoned his wife, going off in the ways of Balaam the son of Bosor, and all other bad ways mentioned in Scripture, habitually leaving poor Mrs. Follingsbee to entertain company alone, so that he was never seen at her parties, and had nothing to do with her.

"So much the better for them," remarked Mr. Van Astrachan.

"In that case, my dear, I don't see that it would do any harm for you to go to Mrs. Follingsbee's party on Rose's account. I never go to parties, as you know; and I certainly should not begin by going there. But still I see no objection to your taking Rose."

If Mr. Van Astrachan had seen objections, you never would have caught Mrs. Van Astrachan going; for she was one of your full-blooded women, who never in her life engaged to do a thing she didn't mean to do: and having promised in the marriage service to obey her husband, she obeyed him plumb, with the air of a person who is fulfilling the prophecies; though her chances in this way were very small, as Mr. Van Astrachan generally called her "ma," and obeyed all her orders with a stolid precision quite edifying to behold. He took her advice always, and was often heard naively to remark that Mrs. Van Astrachan and he were always of the same opinion,--an expression happily defining that state in which a man does just what his wife tells him to.