

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. FOLLINGSBEE'S PARTY, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

Our vulgar idea of a party is a week or fortnight of previous discomfort and chaotic tergiversation, and the mistress of it all distracted and worn out with endless cares. Such a party bursts in on a well-ordered family state as a bomb bursts into a city, leaving confusion and disorder all around. But it would be a pity if such a life-long devotion to the arts and graces as Mrs. Follingsbee had given, backed by Dick Follingsbee's fabulous fortune, and administered by the exquisite Charlie Ferrola, should not have brought forth some appreciable results. One was, that the great Castle of Indolence was prepared for the fête with no more ripple of disturbance than if it had been a Nereid's bower, far down beneath the reach of tempests, where the golden sand is never ruffled, and the crimson and blue sea flowers never even dream of commotion.

Charlie Ferrola wore, it is true, a brow somewhat oppressed with care, and was kept tucked up on a rose-colored satin sofa, and served with lachrymae Christi, and Montefiascone, and all other substitutes for the dews of Hybla, while he draughted designs for the floral arrangements, which were executed by obsequious attendants in felt slippers; and the whole process of arrangement proceeded like a dream of the lotus-eaters' paradise.

Madame de Tullegig was of course retained primarily for the adornment of Mrs. Follingsbee's person. It was understood, however, on this occasion, that the composition of the costumes was to embrace both hers and Lillie's, that they might appear in a contrasted tableau, and bring out each other's points. It was a subject worthy a Parisian artiste, and drew so seriously on Madame de Tullegig's brain-power, that she assured Mrs. Follingsbee afterwards that the effort of composition had sensibly exhausted her.

Before we relate the events of that evening, as they occurred, we must give some little idea of the position in which the respective parties now stood.

Harry Endicott, by his mother's side, was related to Mrs. Van Astrachan. Mr. Van Astrachan had been, in a certain way, guardian to him; and his success in making his fortune was in consequence of capital advanced and friendly patronage thus accorded. In the family, therefore, he had the entrée of a son, and had enjoyed the opportunity of seeing Rose with a freedom and frequency that soon placed them on the footing of old acquaintanceship. Rose was an easy person to become acquainted with in an ordinary and superficial manner. She was like those pellucid waters whose great clearness deceives the eye as to their depth. Her manners had an easy and gracious frankness; and she spoke right on, with an apparent simplicity and fearlessness that produced at first the impression that

you knew all her heart. A longer acquaintance, however, developed depths of reserved thought and feeling far beyond what at first appeared.

Harry, at first, had met her only on those superficial grounds of banter and badinage where a gay young gentleman and a gay young lady may reconnoitre, before either side gives the other the smallest peep of the key of what Dr. Holmes calls the side-door of their hearts.

Harry, to say the truth, was in a bad way when he first knew Rose: he was restless, reckless, bitter. Turned loose into society with an ample fortune and nothing to do, he was in danger, according to the homely couplet of Dr. Watts, of being provided with employment by that undescribable personage who makes it his business to look after idle hands.

Rose had attracted him first by her beauty, all the more attractive to him because in a style entirely different from that which hitherto had captivated his imagination. Rose was tall, well-knit, and graceful, and bore herself with a sort of slender but majestic lightness, like a meadow-lily. Her well-shaped, classical head was set finely on her graceful neck, and she had a stag-like way of carrying it, that impressed a stranger sometimes as haughty; but Rose could not help that, it was a trick of nature. Her hair was of the glossiest black, her skin fair as marble, her nose a little, nicely-turned aquiline affair, her eyes of a deep violet blue and shadowed by long dark

lashes, her mouth a little larger than the classical proportion, but generous in smiles and laughs which revealed perfect teeth of dazzling whiteness. There, gentlemen and ladies, is Rose Ferguson's picture: and, if you add to all this the most attractive impulsiveness and self-unconsciousness, you will not wonder that Harry Endicott at first found himself admiring her, and fancied driving out with her in the park; and that when admiring eyes followed them both, as a handsome pair, Harry was well pleased.

Rose, too, liked Harry Endicott. A young girl of twenty is not a severe judge of a handsome, lively young man, who knows far more of the world than she does; and though Harry's conversation was a perfect Catherine-wheel of all sorts of wild talk,--sneering, bitter, and sceptical, and giving expression to the most heterodox sentiments, with the evident intention of shocking respectable authorities,--Rose rather liked him than otherwise; though she now and then took the liberty to stand upon her dignity, and opened her great blue eyes on him with a grave, inquiring look of surprise,--a look that seemed to challenge him to stand and defend himself. From time to time, too, she let fall little bits of independent opinion, well poised and well turned, that hit exactly where she meant they should; and Harry began to stand a little in awe of her.

Harry had never known a woman like Rose; a woman so poised and self-centred, so cultivated, so capable of deep and just reflections, and so religious. His experience with women had not been fortunate, as

has been seen in this narrative; and, insensibly to himself, Rose was beginning to exercise an influence over him. The sphere around her was cool and bright and wholesome, as different from the hot atmosphere of passion and sentiment and flirtation to which he had been accustomed, as a New-England summer morning from a sultry night in the tropics. Her power over him was in the appeal to a wholly different part of his nature,--intellect, conscience, and religious sensibility; and once or twice he found himself speaking to her quietly, seriously, and rationally, not from the purpose of pleasing her, but because she had aroused such a strain of thought in his own mind. There was a certain class of brilliant sayings of his, of a cleverly irreligious and sceptical nature, at which Rose never laughed: when this sort of firework was let off in her presence, she opened her eyes upon him, wide and blue, with a calm surprise intermixed with pity, but said nothing; and, after trying the experiment several times, he gradually felt this silent kind of look a restraint upon him.

At the same time, it must not be conjectured that, at present, Harry Endicott was thinking of falling in love with Rose. In fact, he scoffed at the idea of love, and professed to disbelieve in its existence. And, beside all this, he was gratifying an idle vanity, and the wicked love of revenge, in visiting Lillie; sometimes professing for days an exclusive devotion to her, in which there was a little too much reality on both sides to be at all safe or innocent; and then, when he had wound her up to the point where even her involuntary looks and words and actions towards him must have compromised her in the

eyes of others, he would suddenly recede for days, and devote himself exclusively to Rose; driving ostentatiously with her in the park, where he would meet Lillie face to face, and bow triumphantly to her in passing. All these proceedings, talked over with Mrs. Follingsbee, seemed to give promise of the most impassioned French romance possible.

Rose walked through all her part in this little drama, wrapped in a veil of sacred ignorance. Had she known the whole, the probability is that she would have refused Harry's acquaintance; but, like many another nice girl, she tripped gayly near to pitfalls and chasms of which she had not the remotest conception.

Lillie's want of self-control, and imprudent conduct, had laid her open to reports in certain circles where such reports find easy credence; but these were circles with which the Van Astrachans never mingled. The only accidental point of contact was the intimacy of Rose with the Seymour family; and Rose was the last person to understand an allusion if she heard it. The reading of Rose had been carefully selected by her father, and had not embraced any novels of the French romantic school; neither had she, like some modern young ladies, made her mind a highway for the tramping of every kind of possible fictitious character which a novelist might choose to draw, nor taken an interest in the dissections of morbid anatomy. In fact, she was old-fashioned enough to like Scott's novels; and though she was just the kind of girl Thackeray would have loved, she never could bring her

fresh young heart to enjoy his pictures of world-worn and decaying natures.

The idea of sentimental flirtations and love-making on the part of a married woman was one so beyond her conception of possibilities that it would have been very difficult to make her understand or believe it.

On the occasion of the Follingsbee party, therefore, Rose accepted Harry as an escort in simple good faith. She was by no means so wise as not to have a deal of curiosity about it, and not a little of dazed and dazzled sense of enjoyment in prospect of the perfect labyrinth of fairy-land which the Follingsbee mansion opened before her.

On the eventful evening, Mrs. Follingsbee and Lillie stood together to receive their guests,--the former in gold color, with magnificent point lace and diamond tiara; while Lillie in heavenly blue, with wreaths of misty tulle and pearl ornaments, seemed like a filmy cloud by the setting sun.

Rose, entering on Harry Endicott's arm, in the full bravery of a well-chosen toilet, caused a buzz of admiration which followed them through the rooms; but Rose was nothing to the illuminated eyes of Mrs. Follingsbee compared with the portly form of Mrs. Van Astrachan entering beside her, and spreading over her the wings of motherly protection. That much-desired matron, serene in her point lace and

diamonds, beamed around her with an innocent kindliness, shedding respectability wherever she moved, as a certain Russian prince was said to shed diamonds.

"Why, that is Mrs. Van Astrachan!"

"You don't tell me so! Is it possible?"

"Which?" "Where is she?" "How in the world did she get here?" were the whispered remarks that followed her wherever she moved; and Mrs. Follingsbee, looking after her, could hardly suppress an exulting *Te Deum*. It was done, and couldn't be undone.

Mrs. Van Astrachan might not appear again at a salon of hers for a year; but that could not do away the patent fact, witnessed by so many eyes, that she had been there once. Just as a modern newspaper or magazine wants only one article of a celebrated author to announce him as among their stated contributors for all time, and to flavor every subsequent issue of the journal with expectancy, so Mrs. Follingsbee exulted in the idea that this one evening would flavor all her receptions for the winter, whether the good lady's diamonds ever appeared there again or not. In her secret heart, she always had the perception, when striving to climb up on this kind of ladder, that the time might come when she should be found out; and she well knew the absolute and uncomprehending horror with which that good lady would regard the French principles and French practice of which Charlie

Ferrola and Co. were the expositors and exemplars.

This was what Charlie Ferrola meant when he said that the Van Astrachans were obtuse. They never could be brought to the niceties of moral perspective which show one exactly where to find the vanishing point for every duty.

Be that as it may, there, at any rate, she was, safe and sound; surrounded by people whom she had never met before, and receiving introductions to the right and left with the utmost graciousness. The arrangements for the evening had been made at the tea-table of the Van Astrachans with an innocent and trustful simplicity.

"You know, dear," said Mrs. Van Astrachan to Rose, "that I never like to stay long away from papa" (so the worthy lady called her husband); "and so, if it's just the same to you, you shall let me have the carriage come for me early, and then you and Harry shall be left free to see it out. I know young folks must be young," she said, with a comfortable laugh. "There was a time, dear, when my waist was not bigger than yours, that I used to dance all night with the best of them; but I've got bravely over that now."

"Yes, Rose," said Mr. Van Astrachan, "you mayn't believe it, but ma there was the spryest dancer of any of the girls. You are pretty nice to look at, but you don't quite come up to what she was in those days. I tell you, I wish you could have seen her," said the good man,

warming to his subject. "Why, I've seen the time when every fellow on the floor was after her."

"Papa," says Mrs. Van Astrachan, reprovingly, "I wouldn't say such things if I were you."

"Yes, I would," said Rose. "Do tell us, Mr. Van Astrachan."

"Well, I'll tell you," said Mr. Van Astrachan: "you ought to have seen her in a red dress she used to wear."

"Oh, come, papa! what nonsense! Rose, I never wore a red dress in my life; it was a pink silk; but you know men never do know the names for colors."

"Well, at any rate," said Mr. Van Astrachan, hardily, "pink or red, no matter; but I'll tell you, she took all before her that evening. There were Stuyvesants and Van Rennselaers and Livingstons, and all sorts of grand fellows, in her train; but, somehow, I cut 'em out. There is no such dancing nowadays as there was when wife and I were young. I've been caught once or twice in one of their parties; and I don't call it dancing. I call it draggle-tailing. They don't take any steps, and there is no spirit in it."

"Well," said Rose, "I know we moderns are very much to be pitied. Papa always tells me the same story about mamma, and the days when he was

young. But, dear Mrs. Van Astrachan, I hope you won't stay a moment, on my account, after you get tired. I suppose if you are just seen with me there in the beginning of the evening, it will matronize me enough; and then I have engaged to dance the 'German' with Mr. Endicott, and I believe they keep that up till nobody knows when. But I am determined to see the whole through."

"Yes, yes! see it all through," said Mr. Van Astrachan. "Young people must be young. It's all right enough, and you won't miss my Polly after you get fairly into it near so much as I shall. I'll sit up for her till twelve o'clock, and read my paper."

Rose was at first, to say the truth, bewildered and surprised by the perfect labyrinth of fairy-land which Charlie Ferrola's artistic imagination had created in the Follingsbee mansion.

Initiated people, who had travelled in Europe, said it put them in mind of the "Jardin Mabile;" and those who had not were reminded of some of the wonders of "The Black Crook." There were apartments turned into bowers and grottoes, where the gas-light shimmered behind veils of falling water, and through pendant leaves of all sorts of strange water-plants of tropical regions. There were all those wonderful leaf-plants of every weird device of color, which have been conjured up by tricks of modern gardening, as Rappacini is said to have created his strange garden in Padua. There were beds of hyacinths and crocuses and tulips, made to appear like living gems by the jets of gas-light

which came up among them in glass flowers of the same form. Far away in recesses were sofas of soft green velvet turf, overshadowed by trailing vines, and illuminated with moonlight-softness by hidden alabaster lamps. The air was heavy with the perfume of flowers, and the sound of music and dancing from the ball-room came to these recesses softened by distance.

The Follingsbee mansion occupied a whole square of the city; and these enchanted bowers were created by temporary enlargements of the conservatory covering the ground of the garden. With money, and the Croton Water-works, and all the New-York greenhouses at disposal, nothing was impossible.

There was in this reception no vulgar rush or crush or jam. The apartments opened were so extensive, and the attractions in so many different directions, that there did not appear to be a crowd anywhere.

There was no general table set, with the usual liabilities of rush and crush; but four or five well-kept rooms, fragrant with flowers and sparkling with silver and crystal, were ready at any hour to minister to the guest whatever delicacy or dainty he or she might demand; and light-footed waiters circulated with noiseless obsequiousness through all the rooms, proffering dainties on silver trays.

Mrs. Van Astrachan and Rose at first found themselves walking

everywhere, with a fresh and lively interest. It was something quite out of the line of the good lady's previous experience, and so different from any thing she had ever seen before, as to keep her in a state of placid astonishment. Rose, on the other hand, was delighted and excited; the more so that she could not help perceiving that she herself amid all these objects of beauty was followed by the admiring glances of many eyes.

It is not to be supposed that a girl so handsome as Rose comes to her twentieth year without having the pretty secret made known to her in more ways than one, or that thus made known it is any thing but agreeable; but, on the present occasion, there was a buzz of inquiry and a crowd of applicants about her; and her dancing-list seemed in a fair way to be soon filled up for the evening, Harry telling her laughingly that he would let her off from every thing but the "German;" but that she might consider her engagement with him as a standing one whenever troubled with an application which for any reason she did not wish to accept.

Harry assumed towards Rose that air of brotherly guardianship which a young man who piques himself on having seen a good deal of the world likes to take with a pretty girl who knows less of it. Besides, he rather valued himself on having brought to the reception the most brilliant girl of the evening.

Our friend Lillie, however, was in her own way as entrancingly

beautiful this evening as the most perfect mortal flesh and blood could be made; and Harry went back to her when Rose went off with her partners as a moth flies to a candle, not with any express intention of burning his wings, but simply because he likes to be dazzled, and likes the bitter excitement. He felt now that he had power over her,--a bad, a dangerous power he knew, with what of conscience was left in him; but he thought, "Let her take her own risk." And so, many busy gossips saw the handsome young man, his great dark eyes kindled with an evil light, whirling in dizzy mazes with this cloud of flossy mist; out of which looked up to him an impassioned woman's face, and eyes that said what those eyes had no right to say.

There are times, in such scenes of bewilderment, when women are as truly out of their own control by nervous excitement as if they were intoxicated; and Lillie's looks and words and actions towards Harry were as open a declaration of her feelings as if she had spoken them aloud to every one present.

The scandals about them were confirmed in the eyes of every one that looked on; for there were plenty of people present in whose view of things the worst possible interpretation was the most probable one.

Rose was in the way, during the course of the evening, of hearing remarks of the most disagreeable and startling nature with regard to the relations of Harry and Lillie to each other. They filled her with a sort of horror, as if she had come to an unwholesome place;

while she indignantly repelled them from her thoughts, as every uncontaminated woman will the first suspicion of the purity of a sister woman. In Rose's view it was monstrous and impossible. Yet when she stood at one time in a group to see them waltzing, she started, and felt a cold shudder, as a certain instinctive conviction of something not right forced itself on her. She closed her eyes, and wished herself away; wished that she had not let Mrs. Van Astrachan go home without her; wished that somebody would speak to Lillie and caution her; felt an indignant rising of her heart against Harry, and was provoked at herself that she was engaged to him for the "German."

She turned away; and, taking the arm of the gentleman with her, complained of the heat as oppressive, and they sauntered off together into the bowery region beyond.

"Oh, now! where can I have left my fan?" she said, suddenly stopping.

"Let me go back and get it for you," said he of the whiskers who attended her. It was one of the dancing young men of New York, and it is no particular matter what his name was.

"Thank you," said Rose: "I believe I left it on the sofa in the yellow drawing-room." He was gone in a moment.

Rose wandered on a little way, through the labyrinth of flowers and shadowy trees and fountains, and sat down on an artificial rock where

she fell into a deep reverie. Rising to go back, she missed her way, and became quite lost, and went on uneasily, conscious that she had committed a rudeness in not waiting for her attendant.

At this moment she looked through a distant alcove of shrubbery, and saw Harry and Lillie standing together,--she with both hands laid upon his arm, looking up to him and speaking rapidly with an imploring accent. She saw him, with an angry frown, push Lillie from him so rudely that she almost fell backward, and sat down with her handkerchief to her eyes; he came forward hurriedly, and met the eyes of Rose fixed upon him.

"Mr. Endicott," she said, "I have to ask a favor of you. Will you be so good as to excuse me from the 'German' to-night, and order my carriage?"

"Why, Miss Ferguson, what is the matter?" he said: "what has come over you? I hope I have not had the misfortune to do any thing to displease you?"

Without replying to this, Rose answered, "I feel very unwell. My head is aching violently, and I cannot go through the rest of the evening. I must go home at once." She spoke it in a decided tone that admitted of no question.

Without answer, Harry Endicott gave her his arm, accompanied her

through the final leave-takings, went with her to the carriage, put her in, and sprang in after her.

Rose sank back on her seat, and remained perfectly silent; and Harry, after a few remarks of his had failed to elicit a reply, rode by her side equally silent through the streets homeward.

He had Mr. Van Astrachan's latch-key; and, when the carriage stopped, he helped Rose to alight, and went up the steps of the house.

"Miss Ferguson," he said abruptly, "I have something I want to say to you."

"Not now, not to-night," said Rose, hurriedly. "I am too tired; and it is too late."

"To-morrow then," he said: "I shall call when you will have had time to be rested. Good-night!"