

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE meal proceeded in silence for a few minutes. Mrs. Cullom had said but little, but John noticed that her diction was more conventional than in her talk with David and himself in the morning, and that her manner at the table was distinctly refined, although she ate with apparent appetite, not to say hunger. Presently she said, with an air of making conversation, "I suppose you've always lived in the city, Mr. Lenox?"

"It has always been my home," he replied, "but I have been away a good deal."

"I suppose folks in the city go to theaters a good deal," she remarked.

"They have a great many opportunities," said John, wondering what she was leading up to. But he was not to discover, for David broke in with a chuckle.

"Ask Polly, Mis' Cullom," he said. "She c'n tell ye all about the theater, Polly kin." Mrs. Cullom looked from David to Mrs. Bixbee, whose face was suffused.

"Tell her," said David, with a grin.

"I wish you'd shet up," she exclaimed. "I sha'n't do nothin' of the sort."

"Ne' mind," said David cheerfully, "I'll tell ye, Mis' Cullom."

"Dave Harum!" expostulated Mrs. Bixbee, but he proceeded without heed of her protest.

"Polly an' I," he said, "went down to New York one spring some years ago. Her nerves was some wore out 'long of diff'rences with Sairy about clearin' up the woodshed, an' bread risin's, an' not bein' able to suit herself up to Purse's in the qual'ty of silk velvit she wanted fer a Sunday-go-to-meetin' gown, an' I thought a spell off 'd do her good. Wa'al, the day after we got there I says to her while we was havin' breakfast—it was picked-up el'phant on toast, near 's I c'n remember, wa'n't it, Polly?"

"That's as near the truth as most o' the rest on't so fur," said Polly with a sniff.

"Wa'al, I says to her," he proceeded, untouched by her scorn, "'How'd you like to go t' the theater? You hain't never ben,' I says, 'an' now you're down here you may jest as well see somethin' while you got a chanst,' I says. Up to that *time*," he remarked, as it were in passing, "she'd ben somewhat *prejuded* 'ginst theaters, an'—"

"Wa'al," Mrs. Bixbee broke in, "I guess what we see that night was cal'lated—"

"You hold on," he interposed. "I'm tellin' this story. You had a chanst to an' wouldn't. Anyway," he resumed, "she allowed she'd try it once, an' we agreed we'd go somewheres that night. But somethin' happened to put it out o' my mind, an' I didn't think on't agin till I got back to the hotel fer supper. So I went to the feller at the news-stand an' says, 'Got any show-tickets fer to-night?'"

"Theater?" he says.

"I reckon so," I says.

"Wa'al," he says, "I hain't got nothin' now but two seats fer 'Clyanthy.'"

"'Is it a good show?' I says—'moral, an' so on? I'm goin' to take my sister, an' she's a little pertic'ler about some things,' I says. He kind o' grinned, the feller did. 'I've took my wife twice, an' she's putty pertic'ler herself,' he says, laughin'."

"She must 'a' ben," remarked Mrs. Bixbee with a sniff that spoke volumes of her opinion of "the feller's wife." David emitted a chuckle.

"Wa'al," he continued, "I took the tickits on the feller's recommend, an' the fact of his wife's bein' so pertic'ler, an' after supper we went. It was a mighty handsome place inside, gilded an' carved all over like the outside of a cirkis wagin, an' when we went in the orchestry was playin' an' the people was comin' in, an' after we'd set a few minutes I says to Polly, 'What do you think on't?' I says.

"'I don't see anythin' very unbecomin' so fur, an' the people looks respectable enough,' she says.

"'No jail birds in sight fur 's ye c'n see so fur, be they?' I says. He, he, he, he!"

"You needn't make me out more of a gump 'n I was," protested Mrs. Bixbee. "An' you was jest as——" David held up his finger at her.

"Don't you sp'ile the story by discountin' the sequil. Wa'al, putty soon the band struck up some kind of a dancin' tune, an' the curt'in went up, an' a girl come prancin' down to the foot-lights an' begun singin' an' dancin', an', scat my——! to all human appearances you c'd 'a' covered ev'ry dum thing she had on with a postage stamp." John stole a glance at Mrs. Cullom. She was staring at the speaker with wide-open eyes of horror and amazement.

"I guess I wouldn't go very *fur* into pertic'lers," said Mrs. Bixbee in a warning tone.

David bent his head down over his plate and shook from head to foot, and it was nearly a minute before he was able to go on. "Wa'al," he said, "I heard Polly give a kind of a gasp an' a snort, 's if some one 'd throwed water 'n her face. But she didn't say nothin', an', I swan! I didn't dast to look at her fer a spell; an' putty soon in come a hull crowd more girls that had left their clo'es in their trunks or somewhere, singin', an' dancin', an' weavin' 'round on the stage, an' after a few minutes I turned an' looked at Polly. He, he, he, he!"

"David Harum!" cried Mrs. Bixbee, "ef you're goin' to discribe any more o' them scand'lous goin's on I sh'll take my victuals into the kitchin. I didn't see no more of 'em," she added to Mrs. Cullom and John, "after that fust trollop appeared."

"I don't believe she did," said David, "fer when I turned she set there with her eys shut tighter 'n a drum, an' her mouth shut too so's her nose an' chin most come together, an' her face was red enough so 't a streak o' red paint 'd 'a' made a white mark on it. 'Polly,' I says, 'I'm afraid you ain't gettin' the wuth o' your money.'

"'David Harum,' she says, with her mouth shut all but a little place in the corner toward me, 'if you don't take me out o' this place, I'll go without ye,' she says.

"'Don't you think you c'd stan' it a little longer?' I says. 'Mebbe they've sent home fer their clo'es,' I says. He, he, he, he! But with that she jest give a hump to start, an' I see she

meant bus'nis. When Polly Bixbee," said David impressively, "puts that foot o' her'n *down* somethin's got to squish, an' don't you fergit it." Mrs. Bixbee made no acknowledgment of this tribute to her strength of character. John looked at David.

"Yes," he said, with a solemn bend of the head, as if in answer to a question, "I squshed. I says to her, 'All right. Don't make no disturbance more'n you c'n help, an' jest put your hank'chif up to your nose 's if you had the nose-bleed,' an' we squeezed out of the seats, an' sneaked up the aisle, an' by the time we got out into the entry I guess my face was as red as Polly's. It couldn't 'a' ben no redder," he added.

"You got a putty fair color as a gen'ral thing," remarked Mrs. Bixbee dryly.

"Yes, ma'am; yes, ma'am, I expect that's so," he assented, "but I got an extry coat o' tan follerin' you out o' that theater. When we got out into the entry one o' them fellers that stands 'round steps up to me an' says, 'Ain't your ma feelin' well?' he says. 'Her feelin's has ben a trifle rumbled up,' I says, 'an' that gen'ally brings on the nosebleed,' an' then," said David, looking over Mrs. Bixbee's head, "the feller went an' leaned up agin the wall."

"David Harum!" exclaimed Mrs. Bixbee, "that's a downright *lie*. You never spoke to a soul, an'—an'—ev'rybody knows 't I ain't more 'n four years older 'n you be."

"Wa'al, you see, Polly," her brother replied in a smooth tone of measureless aggravation, "the feller wa'n't acquainted with us, an' he only went by appearances."

Aunt Polly appealed to John: "Ain't he enough to—to—I d' know what?"

"I really don't see how you live with him," said John, laughing.

Mrs. Cullom's face wore a faint smile, as if she were conscious that something amusing was going on, but was not quite sure what. The widow took things seriously for the most part, poor soul.

"I reckon you haven't followed theater-goin' much after that," she said to her hostess.

"No, ma'am," Mrs. Bixbee replied with emphasis, "you better believe I hain't. I hain't never thought of it sence without tinglin' all over. I believe," she asserted, "that David 'd 'a' stayed the thing out if it hadn't ben fer me; but as true 's you live, Cynthy Cullom, I was so 'shamed at the little 't I did see that when I come to go to bed I took my clo'es off in the dark."

David threw back his head and roared with laughter. Mrs. Bixbee looked at him with unmixed scorn. "If I couldn't help makin' a——" she began, "I'd——"

"Oh, Lord! Polly," David broke in, "be sure 'n wrap up when you go out. If you sh'd ketch cold an' your sense o' the ridic'lous sh'd strike in you'd be a dead-'n'-goner sure." This was treated with the silent contempt which it deserved, and David fell upon his dinner with the remark that "he guessed he'd better make up fer lost time," though as a matter of fact while he had done most of the talking he had by no means suspended another function of his mouth while so engaged.

For a time nothing more was said which did not relate to the replenishment of plates, glasses,

and cups. Finally David cleaned up his plate with his knife blade and a piece of bread, and pushed it away with a sigh of fullness, mentally echoed by John.

"I feel 's if a child could play with me," he remarked. "What's comin' now, Polly?"

"The's a mince pie, an' Injun puddin' with maple sugar an' cream, an' ice cream," she replied.

"Mercy on us!" he exclaimed. "I guess I'll have to go an' jump up an' down on the verandy. How do you feel, John? I s'pose you got so used to them things at the Eagle 't you won't have no stomach fer 'em, eh? Wa'al, fetch 'em along. May 's well die fer the ole sheep 's the lamb, but, Polly Bixbee, if you've got designs on my life, I may 's well tell ye right now 't I've left all my prop'ty to the Institution fer Disappointed Hoss Swappers."

"That's putty near next o' kin, ain't it?" was the unexpected rejoinder of the injured Polly.

"Wa'al, scat my ——!" exclaimed David, hugely amused, "if Polly Bixbee hain't made a joke! You'll git yourself into the almanic, Polly, fust thing you know." Sairy brought in the pie and then the pudding.

"John," said David, "if you've got a pencil an' a piece o' paper handy I'd like to have ye take down a few of my last words 'fore we proceed to the pie an' puddin' bus'nis. Any more 'hoss-redish' in that bottle?" holding out his glass. "Hi! hi! that's enough. You take the rest on't," which John did, nothing loath.

David ate his pie in silence, but before he made up his mind to attack the pudding, which was his favorite confection, he gave an audible chuckle, which elicited Mrs. Bixbee's notice.

"What you gigglin' 'bout now?" she asked.

David laughed. "I was thinkin' of somethin' I heard up to Purse's last night," he said as he covered his pudding with the thick cream sauce. "Amri Shapless has ben gittin' married."

"Wa'al, I declare!" she exclaimed. "That ole shack! Who in creation could he git to take him?"

"Lize Annis is the lucky woman," replied David with a grin.

"Wa'al, if that don't beat all!" said Mrs. Bixbee, throwing up her hands, and even from Mrs. Cullom was drawn a "Well, I never!"

"Fact," said David, "they was married yestidy forenoon. Squire Parker done the job. Dominie White wouldn't have nothin' to do with it!"

"Squire Parker 'd ortter be 'shamed of himself," said Mrs. Bixbee indignantly.

"Don't you think that trew love had ought to be allowed to take its course?" asked David with an air of sentiment.

"I think the squire 'd ortter be 'shamed of himself," she reiterated. "S'pose them two old skinamulinks was to go an' have children?"

"Polly, you make me blush," protested her brother. "Hain't you got no respect fer the holy institution of matrimony?—and—at cet'ry?" he added, wiping his whole face with his napkin.

"Much as you hev, I reckon," she retorted. "Of all the amazin' things in this world, the amazinist to me is the kind of people that gits married to each other in gen'ral; but this here performance beats ev'rythin' holler."

"Amri give a very good reason for't," said

David with an air of conviction, and then he broke into a laugh.

"Ef you got anythin' to tell, tell it," said Mrs. Bixbee impatiently.

"Wa'al," said David, taking the last of his pudding into his mouth, "if you insist on't, painful as 't is. I heard Dick Larrabee tellin' 'bout it. Amri told Dick day before yestiday that he was thinkin' of gettin' married, an' ast him to go along with him to Parson White's an' be a witness, an' I reckon a kind of moral support. When it comes to moral supportin'," remarked David in passing, "Dick's as good 's a professional, an' he'd go an' see his gran'mother hung sooner 'n miss anythin', an' never let his cigar go out durin' the performance. Dick said he congratulated Am on his choice, an' said he reckoned they'd be putty ekally yoked together, if nothin' else."

Here David leaned over toward Aunt Polly and said, protestingly, "Don't gi' me but jest a teasp'nful o' that ice cream. I'm so full now 't I can't hardly reach the table." He took a taste of the cream and resumed: "I can't give it jest as Dick did," he went on, "but this is about the gist on't. Him, an' Lize, an' Am went to Parson White's about half after seven o'clock an' was showed into the parler, an' in a minute he come in, an' after sayin' 'Good evenin'' all 'round, he says, 'Well, what c'n I do for ye?' lookin' at Am an' Lize, an' then at Dick.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, 'me an' Mis' Annis here has ben thinkin' fer some time as how we'd ought to git married.'

"'Ought to git married?' says Parson White, scowlin' fust at one an' then at t'other.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, givin' a kind o' shuffle

with his feet, 'I didn't mean *ortter* exac'ly, but jest as *well*—kinder comp'ny,' he says. 'We hain't neither on us got nobody, an' we thought we might 's well.'

"'What have you got to git married on?' says the dominie after a minute. 'Anythin'?' he says.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, droppin' his head sideways an' borin' into his ear 'ith his middle finger, 'I got the promise mebbe of a job o' work fer a couple o' days next week.' 'H'm'm'm,' says the dominie, lookin' at him. 'Have *you* got anythin' to git married on?' the dominie says, turnin' to Lize. 'I've got ninety cents comin' to me fer some work I done last week,' she says, wiltin' down onto the sofy an' beginnin' to snivvle. Dick says that at that the dominie turned round an' walked to the other end of the room, an' he c'd see he was dyin' to laugh, but he come back with a straight face.

"'How old air you, Shapless?' he says to Am. 'I'll be fifty-eight or mebbe fifty-nine come next spring,' says Am.

"'How old air *you*?' the dominie says, turnin' to Lize. She wriggled a minute an' says, 'Wa'al, I reckon I'm all o' thirty,' she says."

"All o' thirty!" exclaimed Aunt Polly. "The woman 's most 's old 's I be."

David laughed and went on with, "Wa'al, Dick said at that the dominie give a kind of a choke, an' Dick he bust right out, an' Lize looked at him as if she c'd eat him. Dick said the dominie didn't say anythin' fer a minute or two, an' then he says to Am, 'I suppose you c'n find somebody that'll marry you, but I cert'inly won't, an' what possesses you to commit such a piece o'

folly,' he says, 'passes my understandin'. What earthly reason have you fer wantin' to marry? On your own showin',' he says, 'neither one on you 's got a cent o' money or any settled way o' gettin' any.'

"That's jest the very reason,' says Am, 'that's jest the *very reason*. I hain't got nothin', an' Mis' Annis hain't got nothin', an' we figured that we'd jest better git married an' settle down, an' make a good home fer us both,' an' if that ain't good reasonin'," David concluded, "I don't know what is."

"An' be they actially married?" asked Mrs. Bixbee, still incredulous of anything so preposterous.

"So Dick says," was the reply. "He says Am an' Lize come away f'm the dominie's putty down in the mouth, but 'fore long Amri braced up an' allowed that if he had half a dollar he'd try the squire in the mornin', an' Dick let him have it. I says to Dick, 'You're out fifty cents on that deal,' an' he says, slappin' his leg, 'I don't give a dum,' he says; 'I wouldn't 'a' missed it fer double the money.'"

Here David folded his napkin and put it in the ring, and John finished the cup of clear coffee which Aunt Polly, rather under protest, had given him. Coffee without cream and sugar was incomprehensible to Mrs. Bixbee.

CHAPTER XXV.

Two or three days after Christmas John was sitting in his room in the evening when there came a knock at the door, and to his "Come in" there entered Mr. Harum, who was warmly welcomed and entreated to take the big chair, which, after a cursory survey of the apartment and its furnishings, he did, saying, "Wa'al, I thought I'd come in an' see how Polly'd got you fixed; whether the baskit [casket?] was worthy of the jew'l, as I heard a feller say in a theater once."

"I was never more comfortable in my life," said John. "Mrs. Bixbee has been kindness itself, and even permits me to smoke in the room. Let me give you a cigar."

"Heh! You got putty well 'round Polly, I reckon," said David, looking around the room as he lighted the cigar, "an' I'm glad you're comf'table—I reckon 't is a shade better 'n the Eagle," he remarked, with his characteristic chuckle.

"I should say so," said John emphatically, "and I am more obliged than I can tell you."

"All Polly's doin's," asserted David, holding the end of his cigar critically under his nose. "That's a trifle better article 'n I'm in the habit of smokin'," he remarked.

"I think it's my one extravagance," said John