

## CHAPTER IX.

MRS. TALBOT GIVES HER LITTLE DINNER PARTY, AND MR. BELCHER MAKES AN EXCEEDINGLY PLEASANT ACQUAINTANCE.

MRS. TALBOT had a very dear friend. She had been her dear friend ever since the two had roomed together at boarding-school. Sometimes she had questioned whether in reality Mrs. Helen Dillingham was her dear friend, or whether the particular friendship was all on the other side; but Mrs. Dillingham had somehow so manipulated the relation as always to appear to be the favored party. When, therefore, the dinner was determined upon, Mrs. Dillingham's card of invitation was the first one addressed. She was a widow and alone. She complemented Mr. Belcher, who was also alone.

Exactly the position Mrs. Dillingham occupied in society, it would be hard to define. Everybody invited her, and yet everybody, without any definite reason, considered her a little "off color." She was beautiful, she was accomplished, she talked wonderfully well, she was *au fait* in art, literature, society. She was superficially religious, and she formed the theatre of the struggle of a black angel and a white one, neither of whom ever won a complete victory, or held whatever advantage he gained for any considerable length of time. Nothing could be finer than Mrs. Dillingham in her fine moods; nothing coarser when the black angel was enjoying one of his victories, and the white angel had sat down to breathe. It was the impression given in these latter moments that fixed upon her the suspicion that she was not quite what she ought to be. The flowers bloomed where she walked, but there was dust on them. The cup she handed to her friends was pure to the eye, but

it had a muddy taste. She was a whole woman in sympathy, power, beauty, and sensibility, and yet one felt that somewhere within she harbored a devil—a refined devil in its play, a gross one when it had the woman at unresisting advantage.

Next came the Schoonmakers, an elderly gentleman and his wife, who dined out a great deal, and lived on the ancient respectability of their family. They talked much about "the old New Yorkers," and of the inroads and devastations of the parvenu. They were thoroughly posted on old family estates and mansions, the intermarriages of the Dutch aristocracy, and the subject of heraldry. Mr. Schoonmaker made a hobby of old Bibles, and Mrs. Schoonmaker of old lace. The two hobbies combined gave a mingled air of erudition and gentility to the pair that was quite impressive, while their unquestionably good descent was a source of social capital to all of humbler origin who were fortunate enough to draw them to their tables.

Next came the Tunbridges. Mr. Tunbridge was the president of a bank, and Mrs. Tunbridge was the president of Mr. Tunbridge—a large, billowy woman, who "brought him his money," according to the speech of the town. Mr. Tunbridge had managed his trust with great skill, and was glad at any time, and at any social sacrifice, to be brought into contact with men who carried large deposit accounts.

Next in order were Mr. and Mrs. Cavendish. Mr. Cavendish was a lawyer—a hook-nosed, hawk-eyed man, who knew a little more about everything than anybody else did, and was celebrated in the city for successfully managing the most intractable cases, and securing the most princely fees. If a rich criminal were brought into straits before the law, he always sent for Mr. Cavendish. If the unprincipled managers of a great corporation wished to ascertain just how closely before the wind they

could sail without being swamped, they consulted Mr. Cavendish. He was everywhere accounted a great lawyer by those who estimated acuteness to be above astuteness, strategy better than an open and fair fight, and success more to be desired than justice.

It would weary the reader to go through with a description of Mrs. Talbot's dinner party in advance. They were such people as Mr. and Mrs. Talbot naturally drew around them. The minister was invited, partly as a matter of course, and partly to occupy Mr. Schoonmaker on the subject of Bibles. The doctor was invited because Mrs. Talbot was fond of him, and because he always took "such an interest in the family."

When Mr. Belcher arrived at Talbot's beautiful but quiet house, the guests had all assembled, and, clothing their faces with that veneer of smile which hungry people who are about to dine at another man's expense feel compelled to wear in the presence of their host, they were chatting over the news of the day.

It is probable that the great city was never the scene of a personal introduction that gave more quiet amusement to an assemblage of guests than that of the presentation of Mr. Belcher. That gentleman's first impression as he entered the room was that Talbot had invited a company of clergymen to meet him. His look of surprise as he took a survey of the assembly was that of a knave who found himself for the first time in good company; but as he looked from the gentlemen to the ladies, in their gay costumes and display of costly jewelry, he concluded that they could not be the wives of clergymen. The quiet self-possession of the group, and the consciousness that he was not *en règle* in the matter of dress, oppressed him; but he was bold, and he knew that they knew that he was worth a million of dollars.

The "stiff upper lip" was placed at its stiffest in the

midst of his florid expanse of face, as, standing still, in the centre of the room, he greeted one after another to whom he was presented, in a way peculiarly his own.

He had never been in the habit of lifting his hat, in courtesy to man or woman. Even the touching its brim with his fingers had degenerated into a motion that began with a flourish toward it, and ended with a suave extension of his palm toward the object of his obeisance. On this occasion he quite forgot that he had left his hat in the hall, and so, assuming that it still crowned his head, he went through with eight or ten hand flourishes that changed the dignified and self-contained assembly into a merry company of men and women, who would not have been willing to tell Mr. Belcher what they were laughing at.

The last person to whom he was introduced was Mrs. Dillingham, the lady who stood nearest to him—so near that the hand flourish seemed absurd even to him, and half died in the impulse to make it. Mrs. Dillingham, in her black and her magnificent diamonds, went down almost upon the floor in the demonstration of her admiring and reverential courtesy, and pronounced the name of Mr. Belcher with a musical distinctness of enunciation that arrested and charmed the ears of all who heard it. It seemed as if every letter were swimming in a vehicle compounded of respect, veneration, and affection. The consonants flowed shining and smooth like gold-fish through a globe of crystal illuminated by the sun. The tone in which she spoke the name seemed to rob it of all vulgar associations, and to inaugurate it as the key-note of a fine social symphony.

Mr. Belcher was charmed, and placed by it at his ease. It wrought upon him and upon the company the effect which she designed. She was determined he should not only show at his best, but that he should be conscious of the favor she had won for him.

Before dinner was announced, Mr. Talbot made a little speech to his guests, ostensibly to give them the good news that Mr. Belcher had purchased the mansion, built and formerly occupied by Mr. Palgrave, but really to explain that he had caught him in town on business, and taken him at the disadvantage of distance from his evening dress, though, of course, he did not say it in such and so many words. The speech was unnecessary, Mrs. Dillingham had told the whole story in her own unapproachable way.

When dinner was announced Mr. Belcher was requested to lead Mrs. Talbot to her seat, and was himself placed between his hostess and Mrs. Dillingham. Mrs. Talbot was a stately, beautiful woman, and bore off her elegant toilet like a queen. In her walk into the dining-room, her shapely arm rested upon the proprietor's, and her brilliant eyes looked into his with an expression that flattered to its utmost all the fool there was in him. There was a little rivalry between the "dear friends;" but the unrestricted widow was more than a match for the circumspect and guarded wife, and Mr. Belcher was delighted to find himself seated side by side with the former.

He had not talked five minutes with Mrs. Dillingham before he knew her. The exquisite varnish that covered her person and her manners not only revealed, but made beautiful, the gnarled and stained wood beneath. Underneath the polish he saw the element that allied her with himself. There was no subject upon which she could not lead or accompany him with brilliant talk, yet he felt that there was a coarse under-current of sympathy by which he could lead her, or she could lead him—where?

The courtly manners of the table, the orderly courses that came and went as if the domestic administration were some automatic machine, and the exquisite ap-

pointments of the board, all exercised a powerful moral influence upon him; and though they did not wholly suppress him, they toned him down, so that he really talked well. He had a fund of small wit and drollery that was sufficient, at least, for a single dinner; and, as it was quaint and fresh, the guests were not only amused, but pleased. In the first place, much could be forgiven to the man who owned Palgrave's Folly. No small consideration was due to one who, in a quiet country town, had accumulated a million dollars. A person who had the power to reward attention with grand dinners and splendid receptions was certainly not a person to be treated lightly.

Mr. Tunbridge undertook to talk finance with him, but retired under the laugh raised by Mr. Belcher's statement that he had been so busy making money that he had had no time to consider questions of finance. Mr. Schoonmaker and the minister were deep in Bibles, and on referring some question to Mr. Belcher concerning "The Breeches Bible," received in reply the statement that he had never arrived any nearer a Breeches Bible than a pocket handkerchief with the Lord's Prayer on it. Mr. Cavendish simply sat and criticised the rest. He had never seen anybody yet who knew anything about finance. The Chamber of Commerce was a set of old women, the Secretary of the Treasury was an ass, and the Chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means was a person he should be unwilling to take as an office-boy. As for him, he never could see the fun of old Bibles. If he wanted a Bible he would get a new one.

Each man had his shot, until the conversation fell from the general to the particular, and at last Mr. Belcher found himself engaged in the most delightful conversation of his life with the facile woman at his side. He could make no approach to her from any quarter without being promptly met. She was quite as much at home,

and quite as graceful, in bandying badinage as in expatiating upon the loveliness of country life and the ritual of her church.

Mr. Talbot did not urge wine upon his principal, for he saw that he was excited and off his guard; and when, at length, the banquet came to its conclusion, the proprietor declined to remain with the gentlemen and the supplementary wine and cigars, but took coffee in the drawing-room with the ladies. Mrs. Dillingham's eye was on Mrs. Talbot, and when she saw her start toward them from her seat, she took Mr. Belcher's arm for a tour among the artistic treasures of the house.

"My dear Kate," said Mrs. Dillingham, "give me the privilege of showing Mr. Belcher some of your beautiful things."

"Oh, certainly," responded Mrs. Talbot, her face flushing, "and don't forget yourself, my child, among the rest."

Mrs. Dillingham pressed Mr. Belcher's arm, an action which said: "Oh, the jealous creature!"

They went from painting to painting, and sculpture to sculpture, and then, over a cabinet of bric-à-brac, she quietly led the conversation to Mr. Belcher's prospective occupation of the Palgrave mansion. She had nothing in the world to do. She should be so happy to assist poor Mrs. Belcher in the adjustment of her housekeeping. It would be a real pleasure to her to arrange the furniture, and do anything to help that quiet country lady in inaugurating the splendors of city life. She knew all the caterers, all the confectioners, all the modistes, all the city ways, and all the people worth knowing. She was willing to become, for Mrs. Belcher's sake, city-director, commissionaire, adviser, director, everything. She would take it as a great kindness if she could be permitted to make herself useful.

All this was honey to the proprietor. How Mrs. Dil-

lingham would shine in his splendid mansion! How she would illuminate his landau! How she would save his quiet wife, not to say himself, from the *gaucheries* of which both would be guilty until the ways of the polite world could be learned! How delightful it would be to have a sympathetic friend whose intelligent and considerate advice would be always ready!

When the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room, and disturbed the confidential *tête-à-tête* of these new friends, Mrs. Dillingham declared it was time to go, and Mr. Belcher insisted on seeing her home in his own carriage.

The dinner party broke up with universal hand-shakings. Mr. Belcher was congratulated on his magnificent purchase and prospects. They would all be happy to make Mrs. Belcher's acquaintance, and she really must lose no time in letting them know when she would be ready to receive visitors.

Mr. Belcher saw Mrs. Dillingham home. He held her pretty hands at parting, as if he were an affectionate older brother who was about to sail on a voyage around the world. At last he hurriedly relinquished her to the manservant who had answered her summons, then ran down the steps and drove to his hotel.

Mounting to his rooms, he lit every burner in his parlor, and then surveyed himself in the mirror.

"Where did she find it, old boy? Eh? Where did she find it? Was it the figure? Was it the face? Hang the swallow tails! Must you, sir, come to such a humiliation? How are the mighty fallen! The lion of Sevenoaks in the skin of an ass! But it must be. Ah! Mrs. Belcher—Mrs. Belcher—Mrs. Belcher! You are good, but you are lumpy. You were pretty once, but you are no Mrs. Dillingham. By the gods! Wouldn't she swim around my house like a queen! Far in azure depths of space, I behold a star! Its light shines for me. It

doesn't? It must not? Who says that? Did you address that remark to me, sir? By the way, how do you think you got along? Did you make a fool of yourself, or did you make a fool of somebody? Honors are easy. Let Robert Belcher alone! Is Toll making money a little too fast? What do you think? Perhaps you will settle that question by and by. You will keep him while you can use him. Then Toll, my boy, you can drift. In the meantime, splendor! and in the meantime let Sevenoaks howl, and learn to let Robert Belcher alone."

From these dizzy heights of elation Mr. Belcher descended to his bed and his heavy dreams, and the next morning found him whirling away at the rate of thirty miles an hour, but not northward. Whither was he going?

## CHAPTER X.

WHICH TELLS HOW A LAWYER SPENT HIS VACATION IN CAMP, AND TOOK HOME A SPECIMEN OF GAME THAT HE HAD NEVER BEFORE FOUND IN THE WOODS.

IT was a bright moonlight night when Mike Conlin and Jim started off from Sevenoaks for home, leaving Mr. Balfour and his boy to follow. The old horse had a heavy load, and it was not until an hour past midnight that Mike's house was reached. There Jim made the new clothes, comprising a complete outfit for his boarders at Number Ten, into a convenient package, and swinging it over his shoulders, started for his distant cabin on foot. Mike, after resting himself and his horse, was to follow in the morning with the tools and stores, so as to arrive at the river at as early an hour as Mr. Balfour

could complete the journey from Sevenoaks, with his lighter load and swifter horses.

Jim Fenton, who had lain still for several days, and was full of his schemes for Mr. Balfour and his *protégés* in camp, and warm with his memories of Miss Butterworth, simply gloried in his moonlight tramp. The accumulated vitality of his days of idleness was quite enough to make all the fatigues before him light and pleasant. At nine o'clock the next morning he stood by the side of his boat again. The great stillness of the woods, responding in vivid color to the first kisses of the frost, half intoxicated him. No world-wide wanderer, returning after many years to the home of his childhood, could have felt more exulting gladness than he, as he shoved his boat from the bank and pushed up the shining stream in the face of the sun.

Benedict and Harry had not been idle during his absence. A deer had been shot and dressed; trout had been caught and saved alive; a cave had been dug for the preservation of vegetables; and when Jim shouted, far down the stream, to announce his approach, there were three happy persons on shore, waiting to welcome him—Turk being the third, and apparently oblivious of the fact that he was not as much a human being as any of the party. Turk added the "tiger" to Harry's three cheers, and Jim was as glad as a boy when his boat touched the shore, and he received the affectionate greetings of the party.

A choice meal was nearly in readiness for him, but not a mouthful would he taste until he had unfolded his treasures, and displayed to the astonished eyes of Mr. Benedict and the lad the comfortable clothing he had brought for them.

"Take 'em to Number Ten and put 'em on," said Jim. "I'm a goin' to eat with big folks to-day, if clo'es can make 'em. Them's yer stockin's and them's