

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SEWING CIRCLE.

"WELL, girls, you are all invited to attend the First Congregational Sewing Circle, at Dr. Manning's, this afternoon. Would you like to go?" said Emily one morning, entering the parlor where her guests were seated.

The announcement was received very differently by the persons addressed. "I shall like it, of all things!" exclaimed Virginia, who was arranging her curls before a mirror. Esther replied that it was a matter of indifference to her, and Maria, who had thrown herself at full length upon the sofa, holding a book which she was professedly reading, but which, for the most part, hung negligently between her fingers, yawned, and said, "she guessed she would stay at home."

"Poh, Maria!" replied Virginia, "you shan't do any such thing. We won't excuse you."

"You had all better go," said Aunt Mary, who was sewing, "as you are particularly invited, it would be quite a disappointment to Mrs. Manning, if you did not attend."

"Very well, then," replied Maria, and went on reading.

At two o'clock the party started for Mrs. Manning's. The walk was rather a long one but very pleasant. The Doctor's house stood upon a hill which commanded a fine view of the bay; this was now open, though it was winter, as it was very rarely frozen over. The dwelling was surrounded by trees, which, covered with icicles, glittered and sparkled in the sun.

"It must be a delightful residence in the summer!" said Esther.

"It is, indeed," replied Emily, "and this hill also has its charms in winter; it is a fine place for sliding, as you see. Take care, girls," she cried out, as a whole troop of sleds, whose owners cried "Lulla!" as an admonition to people to get out of the way, came swiftly down the hill. "It would have been wiser in us to have remained on the side-walk. But here we are at last," said Emily.

A girl met them at the door, directing them to the front chamber, where, already, laid piles of clothing, shawls and bonnets heaped up in confusion.

"How do I look?" asked Virginia, when she had given the final brush to her hair, had shaken out the flounces of her black silk, and arranged her underhandkerchief to her satisfaction.

"Remarkably well," replied Maria.

Emily coolly said, "she would do nicely, as nearly all of the people whom she would see were old ladies, and rather blind."

"I think that I do look nicely," repeated Virginia, taking no notice of Emily's remark, and glancing at

herself in the mirror. And she spoke truly. The walk had given color to her cheeks, and her eyes, not usually very expressive, were now quite animated.

"Come, Em," she exclaimed, "lead the way to the lower regions!" There was breathless silence as they entered the large parlor, for all present were anxious to see Emily Sidney's company.

The lady of the house was not present; and Emily, after introducing her friends to a few who were near her, seated herself and her companions on a vacant sofa.

The president of the society, a tall thin woman, wearing spectacles, sat near a square table, where piles of work were spread out; and, on Emily's application to her for work, busied herself in looking it over, to see if she could find any suitable.

There were about twenty already assembled, most of them middle aged and quite old ladies. The matrons were gathered in little groups, knitting with wonderful rapidity, rattling their needles as if they were accomplishing wonders, and talking equally as fast; for they had resumed the conversation, which had been interrupted by the entrance of Emily and her friends. They were discussing, with great earnestness, the merits of their last pastor, who had just left them, as well as those of his successor, when the quiet entrance of a slight, pale, and blue-eyed woman, who had a little girl, of some two years of age, by the hand, suddenly checked the tide of discourse.

She approached the group of old ladies, who had that painfully conscious air that usually marks the

interruption of a choice bit of gossip, by the sudden entrance of the very person who has been the subject of remark, but she did not appear to notice this. She extended her hand cordially to each in turn, asking one of her rheumatism, another of the health of some member of the family who had been sick, and passing none without some pleasant remark.

"Wall, I'm real glad to see ye, Miss Hammond," said more than one. "I was afeard you wouldn't walk so fur."

"Mrs. Manning was so kind as to send for me," replied the new minister's wife, for it was she; "her sleigh met me, when I had walked about half way;" and passing on, she addressed all present in her sweet and simple manner.

Emily sprang forward to meet her, and, after introducing her friends, entered into an animated conversation with her.

"What did you say her name was?" asked Esther, when Mrs. Hammond rose to get some work.

"Mrs. Arthur Hammond," replied Emily, "our new minister's wife. Isn't she sweet? They have only been settled here about two months. A part of the people were much opposed to her husband's settlement here, and were determined not to like either of them; but she has won everybody's heart since she came. Mr. Hammond will be here this afternoon; he always comes just before tea."

Mrs. Manning now entered, bearing a babe in her arms, and sinking into the first chair that came in her way. She was rather an ordinary looking person, and

evidently much embarrassed. She blushed deeply, when she was undergoing the ordeal of introduction to the strangers; and, merely remarking that "it was a fine day," returned to her seat in the corner again.

Virginia, tired of sewing, now threw down her work, and began to play with little Agnes Hammond, and had soon carried her to "Banbury-Cross" an indefinite number of times, to the young lady's great amusement. She was in the midst of the wonderful story of "Jacky Horner," when the door opened, and the Rev. Arthur Hammond entered.

Esther gazed with no little curiosity upon him, and did not wonder that Margaret had loved him so well. "So that is Arthur Hammond," said she, to herself; "he is certainly a fine looking man."

He was indeed; for though his features were too strongly marked to be regularly handsome, there was a certain something in his appearance that involuntarily attracted one's attention. His figure was somewhat above the middle height, erect and vigorous, having none of that worn and fragile look that is too apt to characterize the student. His forehead, which was high and white, was shaded by clustering masses of silky brown hair; his eyes were deep and earnest, and gave a spiritual expression to his face; but there was less of that determined look, expressive of an indomitable will, than Esther had expected to see, from Margaret's description of his character. This was her thought, as she looked at the upper part of his face; but as her eye rested on the lower part of his countenance she altered her opinion, for she read inflexi-

bility in the lines of his mouth, and perceived the general effect of it also in his independent and self-reliant carriage. It was evident that he possessed talent, and, without any disagreeable self-conceit, it was equally evident that he was aware of his attainments.

"Just the one for Margaret," she thought, as she watched his movements, and admired the graceful ease of his manners.

Passing around the room, with a few words to each, he came at last to Emily, and talked pleasantly with her companions. He glanced at Virginia, who had assumed a very graceful attitude, and still continued her occupation, that of amusing Miss Agnes.

"Let me present you to a third of my friends," said Emily, who had followed the direction of his eyes; and soon Virginia and the minister were gayly conversing together.

"I must carry my work to the President," said Esther, "for I have finished it;" and folding her pillowcase, she carried it to the table. The President and Second Directress were examining some work which had just been brought in.

"Who gave this work to Miss Billins to sew on? Did you, Miss Smith?"

"No," replied the Second Directress; "I guess she took it herself. I never give her no nice work to do. I have had too much fuss with her for that."

"Wall! it's done awfully, and no mistake," said the President. "It must be picked out; then I spose she'll be as mad as a hop; but I can't help it, it's got to come out. Give it to Mary Smiley, she'll do it

well," continued the good lady; "and tell her not to let Miss Billins see it, if she can help it."

The Second Directress did as she was commanded; but, unfortunately, Mrs. Billings, a sharp-featured, bright-eyed woman, had seen the manœuvre, and angrily began talking to her next neighbor. "I guess I can sew as well as Miss Wilcox," said she, "or Mary Smiley either; but she's got a spite against me, and has been and picked out lots and lots of my work. I vow I won't put up with it. I'll take my name off from the Society. Miss Wilcox feels mighty nice since she got to be President; I wonder who she is, that she need to be so grand and stuck up. Why, you can't tech her with a forty foot pole now. 'Set a beggar on horseback,' you know. Lord! I've seen some of her work; her boys wears clothes patched so bad, that I wouldn't let my young ones wear um into the woods. I should be ashamed to let anybody see um, if I was her. I'll agree to sew with her any time."

She contented herself with casting glances of defiance at the President, who bore them with great coolness.

"There's Miss Somers," said Mrs. Wilcox to Miss Smith; "she always comes dreadful late; I guess there wouldn't be much done, if everybody did the same."

"Good afternoon, Miss Wilcox," said Mrs. Somers, pleasantly, coming up to the table. The officers greeted her with respect, and, taking the work which they gave her, she seated herself near Esther, and saying that she presumed she was addressing one of

Miss Sidney's friends, she introduced herself, and commenced a conversation.

Esther was charmed with her new acquaintance, who, though somewhat advanced in life, retained all the sprightliness and vivacity of her youth. They soon found that they had a number of mutual friends; and Mrs. Somers discovered that Esther's father was one of her old, and, she said, "most highly valued acquaintances."

Tea was now announced to be in readiness, by the Doctor, a hale, hearty looking man, and very gentlemanly in his manners.

"The Society will please lay aside their work, and walk out to tea," said the President, as she followed, with much dignity, the minister and his wife into the large dining room.

After a blessing had been pronounced by Mr. Hammond, the Doctor invited Emily to assist in passing round the plates. All the company were standing rigidly against the walls, except Mrs. Hammond, who came to Emily's assistance, and, passing round, gave each a plate; while Emily followed, bearing a plate of buttered biscuits, and Virginia brought up the rear, with cheese and preserved damsons. Mrs. Manning was, in the meantime, pouring out tea, at a side-table, aided by one or two of her friends, so that soon all were supplied.

The Doctor, now declaring that he never knew where to put his plate when he stood up, as he always spilt its contents, or those of his tea-cup, invited Mr.

Hammond to follow his example and seat himself at the table.

Mrs. Somers and Esther still stood together, and were conversing with no lack of spirit.

"I have found an old friend, or rather, the daughter of an old friend in Miss Hastings," said Mrs. Somers as Emily approached them. "The father I knew long before his residence in Bangor, and with his first wife I have spent many a pleasant hour, though I never knew his second. Let me see," she continued musingly, "what was the maiden name of your step-mother?"

"Margaret Wilton," replied Esther.

"I saw her once at a party," rejoined Mrs. Somers. "I remember her perfectly; she was an uncommonly beautiful woman."

At the name of Margaret Wilton, Mr. Hammond looked up, but betrayed no emotion, for Esther watched him narrowly.

He helped himself to another biscuit and praised the bread, to Mrs. Manning's evident satisfaction.

After supper was over, they returned to the parlor. Mr. Hammond now approached Esther and remarked that he as well as Mrs. Somers had made a discovery, that her step-mother had been an old friend of his. He spoke easily, and, without embarrassment, asked where she now was, and listened with interest to Esther's account of her second marriage.

"She is a noble woman," he said after a pause. "When you next write her, please present my regards to her. Alice," he said, as his wife came near and

stood with her hand upon her husband's chair, "do you not remember meeting Mrs. Hastings once in Bangor at a party?"

"Yes," replied his wife after a moment's pause, "she was a very gay and brilliant person."

"This is her step-daughter," continued Mr. Hammond.

"Indeed," said his wife, and, after praising Mrs. Hastings' beauty, in which Esther joined warmly, though declaring that it was the least of her charms, the conversation turned on different subjects, and Esther sat thinking how strangely people altered!

She could not see that the mention of one he had so fondly loved had produced the least effect on Arthur Hammond. Margaret too had ceased to love him. "Well," thought she, "all this talk about undying love must be nonsense." But the vision of Aunt Mary's lost but cherished affection rose before her, and she revoked her hasty decision.

The old ladies now made preparations for departure; the President and directors rolled up the work, and one by one they retired; but young people now began to take their places. Several young girls, neatly and prettily dressed, now came in, closely followed by a number of young gentlemen. Among these was the only son of Mrs. Somers, Frederick, a fine looking fellow, now at home for a short time from Cambridge, where he had been attending the law school. Ned Sidney accompanied him and introduced him to the guests of his sister.

Maria seemed as listless as ever; she was sitting in