

Party was a very ridiculous one. I was secretary to the City company with about three hundred a-year. We had already sacrificed to the graces of London society—appearances—by taking a decent house at Notting Hill, and had hard work, what with Ned's schooling and the 'finishing' of my two daughters, to keep our heads fairly above water. So, like a sensible man, I had hitherto always insisted on dining at half-past one, and had never received my friends otherwise than at tea and supper, in the plainest of 'plain way.' If they liked to drop in at such times (and many of them did), we were always delighted to see them, and under the circumstances had many a pleasanter chat and laugh. I dare say than fall to the lot of grander houses. The very freedom of this kind of visiting, the knowledge that you can come and go when you like, do and talk as you like, and that the more you please yourself the better you will please your host, suit my constitution exactly; and I believe that in liking it I am only one of a vast majority of London gentlemen. For the ladies I dare not speak.

When we went to bed, however, my wife returned to the attack, and did not leave me till she was victorious. Her chief argument now was that we "ought to give Molly a chance; and Molly thought so herself. There was young Kelly looked very sweet at her; but how could we expect a respectable young fellow like him to come forward unless he saw we knew somebody and were not quite out of the pale of good society?"

"My dear," said I, "pray don't put these silly notions into Molly's head. Kelly always seemed to me to be rather spongy on Ellen Vyner and not at all on Molly."

"Ah, the Vyners always try to make out that he is quite devoted to them; but I flatter myself I know white from black when I see it.—yes, yes, I think so indeed."

"Well, if you really think we ought to give Molly this party," said I, reluctantly.

"Yes, that would be a good excuse for beginning. But I think we ought to give one every year for the future."

I groaned in spirit and said, "Pray, let us get safely over this before we talk of any more. I confess I think the old notion absurd—the expense, the trouble, the probability of a breakdown with such servants as ours. But I suppose you must have your way."

Accordingly, in the morning my wife and two daughters formed themselves into a permanent committee of ways and means. They decided that things could not possibly be got ready under a month, and for the whole of that time, we were in a state of disturbance. First, it was found out that the drawing-room curtains were old and shabby, and we must have new ones; then, that the dining-room carpet did not suit the furniture—"and you would not wish people to think we have no taste, dear?" said my wife. Now, it was my old book-case that had to be shoved into an unobtrusive corner, where I had to go and hunt for my papers in the dark; next, one nearly broke one's neck over a new music-stand which had arrived that morning and been left in the passage, "only just for a minute till the carpet was put down;" then if any friend came in there was scarcely a single place where one could sit down. In a word, all our quiet, homely, comfortable ways were at an end; and what with upholsterers, carpenters, piano-tuners, and others, it was just as bad as if we were "fitting." I was heartily glad, therefore, when they at last declared themselves ready to send out "the invitations."

Then the consultations there were about the day and what people we were to ask! Mr. Disraeli, forming a new cabinet for the government of a fourth part of the world, could not have pondered each name for a longer time, or more anxiously, and I am sure he would not have looked half so gravely important over it. For my part, I watched the proceedings with an amused eye, for my opinion, like an eminent physician's, was only taken as a very last resource.

The first name written down in "all the lists" was of course Fred Kelly's,—to catch whom (in plain English) our party was given.

I never could quite understand how this young Kelly, who was in the Civil Service, contrived to make so many mothers and daughters run after him. Perhaps (as quantity is often preferred to quality) it was only because there was so much of him, for he stood over six feet; but then he was as thin as a lath, and nearly as white, with feeble attempts at the "straw-colored moustache and hay-colored beard" that Theckeray speaks of. More probably the reason was that he had in perfection the cool Ojibbeway manner of the man about town—that affectation of stony indifference which passes for the height of fashion in all except the best circles, where people can dare to be natural. He was never genial—never animated—never even interested: indeed, to my mind he was more like a machine, that had been taught to talk a little, than a man; because, to save himself trouble, he seemed to have a pet phrase for everything. All persons below the Civil Service were "Haw, those eads"—the depth of his reprobation was "Not good form, you know"—the height of his approval was expressed by "Tol-loy," meaning "tolerable;" though once I certainly heard him go so far as to call a thing "rather jolly." My younger daughter, Patty, who is very observant, used to laugh and say that Kelly was very wise to be lachardaisical about everything, because, as he knew so little, and had no feelings and no ideas, if he was not lachardaisical he would be nothing. And from a pretty long acquaintance with him, I can safely say that, if he had any ideas, he was always admirably

successful in concealing them. In a word he was quite the hero of certain modern novelists; and the very difficulty of thawing this fashionable icicle made Molly and several other young ladies attempt the enterprise. But as yet the icicle remained an icicle, and would melt to no warmth they could apply.

Next after Kelly in our common list came the names of the Vyners—father, mother, and two daughters—without whose eyes to observe our success in securing Fred the triumph would scarcely have been complete. All the rich people of our acquaintance followed; singularly enough, there was not a shadow of doubt about any of these, nor about that tawny young idiot Northcoat, who knew the younger son of a lord. Two budding barristers from the Temple were also passed *nem. con.*—"they moved in such good society." I suggested asking the Prince and Princess of Wales, but found my little joke received (for the first time, I must confess) with chilling silence, as the awful gravity of the occasion required.

There was also a charming unanimity about asking some of our less important acquaintance. Thus poor Miss Graham was asked, because she was so good-natured, and "never objected to play any quantity of dance-music." Then Tom-lins could carve, and Vickers talk so well. Mrs. Grubbins, too, and the three Miss Grubbinses, would be mortally offended if they were left out—so "there was no help for it, we must have them."

Other names caused more discussion. I was obstinate, when I found my wife and Molly were positively thinking of leaving out my old school-fellow, Dick Wotherspoon—the best of good fellows, only rather rough in his manners, as most of these enthusiastic artists are. It was not, however, on this account so much that my wife disliked him, as the fact that, though over thirty, he seemed to be making no headway at all in life, and was himself beginning to think he had mistaken his profession. Indeed, he was so poor that I had frequently lent him a five-pound note. But I now overruled my wife's objections to him and insisted on his being invited. With his name our list of forty-five was complete, that number being ten or fifteen people more than our rooms would really hold; but then, as my wife said "They would be sure, some of them, to be engaged; and so we might as well have the credit of inviting them all as not."

To be in proper form, we gave a ten days' invitation, and the interval was ruled over by the milliners. From morning to night there was nothing but consultations about blonde and muslin, mauve and magenta, or critical examination of patterns, or "fittings on." For my part, I undertook to look after the tea, supper, and attendance, for all of which it was absolutely necessary to contract, since we only kept a fat maid-servant of twenty (whom my wife, on the strength of her being able to boil potatoes hard and reduce mutton chops to cinders, dignified with the name of "cook") and one little slut of thirteen, scarcely able to lift a sleep-pail, whom we called our "housemaid."

I must say I never felt myself in such a ludicrously mean position as I did when I was bargaining with the unctuous upholsterer in the next street for a stylish supper on hired dishes, to be handed round by three imitation footmen, being the upholsterer's assistants. The whole thing did seem such a sham, like playing the peacock with borrowed feathers.

The all-important night arrived at last, and the fever of expectation and anxiety which had held my woman-kind all the month reached its height.

Long shall I be in forgetting the preparations and fuss of that dreary evening,—the hurried tea, the laborious dressing, the solemn single knock of the upholsterer's men, like the undertaker bringing a coffin; the frantic appeals to Sarah to "come and fasten me;" the rustle of skirts in the passages; the flying about of distracted cook and housemaid; the staid methodical movements of the long-visaged waiters. But as the clock struck the fatal hour of nine we were all assembled in state ready for the first corner, my wife buttoning her white kid gloves and still red in the face with her nervousness and exertions. As a proof that her exertions had been attended with some success, I may state that I overheard one of our young barristers telling Northcoat "She looked a very handsome Dutch Venus indeed."

I had scarcely taken my place on the hearth-rug when a loud rantan at the door and a hearty voice in the passage announced the first arrival. "Mr. Wotherspoon!" whispered my wife to me with a touch of annoyance in her tone; "he at any rate takes care to be punctual—knows no better, I suppose." When he was ushered in by one of the imitation footmen, he took much the same view of our proceedings as I took myself, and began chaffing me in his free and easy way; "Well, now, Miller, to think of you coming out in such a swell fashion! What on earth possessed you to begin giving state-parties, eh?" But Mrs. Miller—with that increase of dignity which the peach-colored satin always gives her—out his audacious levity short by asking sharply, "Well, and why shouldn't we give a party like any one else, Mr.—a—Mr. Wotherspoon?" The assumed forgetfulness of his name was a masterpiece, and capitally done, considering she had never practised the art of snubbing before. At all events poor Dick seemed to have the ground taken from under him at once, and he subsided into a corner near Patty, where he seemed to be better welcomed.

But hark! the roll of wheels—"the brazen thunders of the door"—soon not intermitted, but continuous—and we are presently in the

thick of it. Kelly came about ten, a little stiffer than usual; but not till half-past did the Vyners sweep into the room, M. s. Vyner overwhelmingly courteous and patronising in her black velvet dress. But she soon contrived (without saying so) to make us understand that she wondered we could venture to invite her, and that she considered it no little condescension on her part to come.

There could be no doubt that my daughter Molly and Ellen Vyner were the prettiest girls in the room. Yet it was amusing to note the difference in their style and appearance. Molly, whose good-natured rosy face above her light blue dress seemed like a cherub's floating in the sky, was radiant, full of life, and sweet as a new blown rose; but she was a little too eager to please, and tried too evidently to make everything go off well. Miss Vyner on the other hand—pale, slight, and with finely-chiselled features—moved through the rooms a very statue of dignity and self-possession. Quiet, perfectly well-bred, and polite, she rather discouraged the advances of her admirers, including Kelly; but her very discouragement seemed only to make them more attentive. If she had a fault, it was that she evidently knew her own value so well; she might have been a duke's daughter instead of a brewer's—though, indeed, I believe, Vyner and many of his business think a brewer or a banker now-a-days a greater grandee than any nobleman.

I am glad to say the party itself, notwithstanding our misgivings, went off without any particular hitch. In fact, it seemed very like thousands of similar affairs given by people of the middle classes who know no better. There was the same stiffness and reserve at first, since in such a miscellaneous gathering very few of the guests were acquainted with each other; the same gradual thawing as we got up a little dance (which, with hypocrisy that deceived nobody, we pretended to extemporise); the same intense heat in the rooms, the same jamming in the doorways, the same forlorn groups in the corners, groups that looked as if they knew they ought to be enjoying themselves and were not.

And when the novelty of the position wore off, I did not find it very difficult to play the part of host. So I tried to say a pleasant word to any guest that seemed dull, arranged a couple of whist tables for the elderly people, and in fact worked hard generally at amusing everybody. My wife, however, as the hours went on without mishap, grew prouder and prouder of her hired grandeur, and indeed, like old Weller's Shepherd, "swelled wisely" in magnificence of deportment and manner. In my hearing alone she told six different persons that "there were forty-five invited; but unfortunately so many were engaged."

"I think you ought rather to say fortunately," replied that disagreeable Mrs. Vyner, as my wife made this remark to her. "My dear Mrs. Miller, how could you get any more people into these rooms? And a crowd is so very unpleasant," she added, fanning herself vigorously.

When I took Mrs. Vyner in to supper she said, blandly, "I did not know, Mr. Miller—yes, champagne, please—I never knew before that you kept a footman;" looking hard at one of the upholsterer's mutes.

"Why, he is like Vyner's small ale—for very occasional use only," I replied, determined she should not have all the sarcasms to herself, and knowing she hated any reference to her husband's business.

She took her revenge, however, on my wife by saying to her soon afterwards across the table. "How very nice these whips are, Mrs. Miller! I must get you to give me the receipt." Of course, the odious woman knew very well that the creams, like everything else, were furnished by the upholsterer "who did for us;" but she succeeded in making my wife blush and feel very uncomfortable for the time.

The dance was kept up with spirit till four or five o'clock, and the young people at any rate, especially my daughters Molly and Patty, enjoyed this part of the business most thoroughly. Towards the end, however, Molly became rather sulky because Fred danced so much with Miss Vyner; and my wife was highly indignant at Dick Wotherspoon's hanging about Patty. Indeed, she would almost have proceeded to open hostilities if I had not stopped her; and, as it was, Wotherspoon evidently guessed her motive in always disturbing his confabulations with Patty, and left early.

When our guests were gone we were soon in bed, from which we did not rise till noon. Even then Patty was very tired, and Molly had a headache—due to Miss Vyner, I suspected. I too was disgusted with the hypocritical pretences and bother of the whole thing. My wife alone was radiant, and thought the party a great success owing to her own admirable management. She was sure, too, that Kelly on leaving had thanked her and pressed her hand with a cordiality most unusual with him; and on this ground she told Molly to take courage, and all would come right.

And her exultation was increased by several of our guests who called in the afternoon and lipped the usual phrases on such occasions. "Delightful gathering." "Enjoyed ourselves so much." "Quite a success."

When Mrs. Vyner called, however, she threw a little damp on my wife's ardor. She pretended to praise—she was always more malicious when she did that.

"How very good of you to take all this trouble—so unexpected, too!" she said. "And how very well you did manage, considering you were quite unaccustomed to this sort of thing! It must have been a most formidable undertaking, I'm sure. And I hope you, Mr. Miller, were

not very much behind-hand with your work in consequence."

Generally I could give Mrs. Vyner a Roland for her Oliver, but on the present occasion my conscience sided so much with her in her politely-veiled sarcasms,—I mean, I thought them so just—that I really could only mutter out some commonplace answer.

"I'm afraid you are a little tired with your exertions, Mrs. Miller; indeed, they must have been immense," continued the merciless virago, seeing that I was in no mood for reply. "But, I'm sure, it was very kind of you to try so hard to give us a pleasant evening. And as you are such very old friends, I think I may tell you a little secret, just to show you how much we are indebted to you. Ah, I daresay you know what it is. Fred Kelly proposed to Ellen last night, and it is all arranged—so kind of you, I'm sure, to give him the opportunity. And we think it will be a very nice match, don't you, Molly?"

Poor Molly held out till Mrs. Vyner was gone, when she made a rush to her own room, with a tear in each eye. She had scarcely left us when a double knock announced the postman.

"It is from Wotherspoon," I said, opening the letter. "Do you know I think our new splendors, Jane, made you seem a little rude to him yesterday?"

"Ah well! if I am never rude to anyone of more consequence than Mr. Wotherspoon, it will be no great matter," she replied, contemptuously. "But I am grieved and vexed beyond measure about this young Kelly. Ellen Vyner, indeed!"

"Dear me!" said I, as I glanced over Wotherspoon's letter: "you'll like to hear this, I think, Jane." So I read it to her.

"DEAR MILLER,

"I am sorry to be obliged to leave without calling to bid you good-bye, but have just met some friends who are going to Italy, and I have decided to accompany them. As we start tomorrow I am in an awful hurry, and I shall be away at least two years."

"And a very good thing too," interrupted my wife. "Do you know I am quite sure he would have made Patty an offer last night, if I had not looked so well after her that I never gave him the chance? I have always wondered, James, you never would see the depth of that man. However, we shall be safe from him for some time, it seems."

"Quite safe," said I.

"There were one or two things that I particularly wished to tell you last night; but in such a crowd I had no opportunity, and"—

"There, I told you, James!" broke in my wife again. "One of those things, you may depend on it, was a proposal, and I'm glad I stopped it."

"All right, only do let me finish:

"—and, to tell you the truth, I was a little nettled (you know I was always too sensitive) because I thought Mrs. Miller last night scarcely treated me with quite the kindness due to an old friend. So I ran away early and did not say what I intended. Perhaps it is as well. One bit of news about me, however, I am sure you will all be glad to hear, and I feel that I ought not to go away without telling you. A few days ago, to my immense delight and astonishment, I received a lawyer's letter informing me that I was heir-at-law to a distant relative who had died in Jamaica; so that I have dropped all at once into five thousand a year. Rather jolly, isn't it? But I won't forget all your five-pound notes; and if ever you want a little cash, old fellow, just you ask your old and obliged friend

"R. WOTHERSPOON."

"Five thousand a year!" groaned my wife now. "But how could I know, James? Why didn't Mr. Wotherspoon tell us?"

"Well, probably, dear, because you stopped him so adroitly," said I, laughing maliciously, "and perhaps he first wished to see whether we cared for him without his money?"

"Oh dear, oh dear! couldn't I write a note of apology and bring him back?"

"No; if I know Wotherspoon, it is too late. As you said, Jane, he is too deep for that."

"Ah well," said she, quite piteously. "And this is all the reward one gets for putting oneself out of the way and going to all this expense to give one's friends a treat."

Our motives, I could not help thinking, had not been quite so disinterested as my wife now wished to make out. Few people do give parties, I fear, on the pure principles of Pickwickian benevolence. However, we had got a lesson, and I am happy to say our first evening party was our last.

A REFORMED gambler was about to die, and sent for a minister, when the following conversation occurred:

"Pastor, do you think I am near death?"

"I regret to say I believe you are."

"Do you think since I am converted, I will go to heaven?"

"I do."

"Do you expect to go there, too?"

"Yes, I believe I will."

"Well, we'll be angels, won't we, and have wings to fly with?"

"Yes, I'm sure we'll be like angels."

"Well, then," said the dying man, "I'll bet you five dollars I will beat you flying."