

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A VENDETTA.

How it began, who began it, when the first note of battle was sounded, what were the scene, place, and occasion of the first exchange of hostilities, remains to this day a mystery. Some are inclined to think that at a certain dinner-party, Mrs. Highty, who belongs to a notoriously short-sighted family, trod unwittingly and unwarily on Mrs. Tightly's long velvet train as the latter lady was being conducted before her into the dining-room. But this theory would make the Highty faction decidedly the first aggressors. Now it is well known and even written in the chronicles of the Highty family—vide a long letter in the possession of the present compiler of this veracious history—that up to and even beyond the period of the lamentable accident before mentioned, and for which Mrs. Highty declares she made ample apology, the Hightys and Tightys were the closest of friends. Therefore the injury to the velvet train may be dismissed as irrelevant to the present inquiry.

But that a screw was loose somewhere between these two highly respected and hitherto united families was soon apparent to the most unobtrusive member of our Blankshire society. It may be necessary here to mention that Mrs. Tightly, being the daughter of a viscount, was naturally the guiding star of our dinner-parties, unless it chanced that a meteor in the person of an actual peeress sailed for a brief space across our firmament, or, as once happened, that a Von appeared to contest the claim to precedence of the Hon. The perplexity and embarrassment into which we were all thrown by this last complication I shall never forget. We knew the touchiness of the *real* foreign aristocracy when there was any danger of there being confounded with the sham counts and countesses whom we would have repudiated as haughtily as themselves. But though there was no doubt about our having now to deal with a genuine article, there was no end of doubt as to its claims to rival in pedigree our own indigenous production. Under these puzzling circumstances we were everlastingly grateful to Mrs. Tightly for the graceful manner in which she at once abdicated in favour of the stranger, remarking that the laws of hospitality must always supercede those of etiquette. This observation, especially as our German guest did not hear, or at least did not understand it, immediately relieved us from our dilemma, and also considerably increased Mrs. Tightly's popularity.

For we all liked her much better than we liked Mrs. Highty, who, as a baronet's daughter, and holding second, though only second rank in our society, was a much more sulphurous element in the composition of our dinner-parties. Mrs. Tightly's place was known and assured, always excepting under the before-mentioned circumstances, which did not often occur, besides, when they did occur, she had only to be taken down one peg lower, and all was right. But Mrs. Highty was always getting in the way. If we asked her to dinner, we must be sure that there was somebody to hand her, not inferior, or not much inferior, in consequence to the personage whose right it was to escort Mrs. Tightly. In the drawing-room there must be a sort of throne or seat, just half a step lower, as it were, ready for Mrs. Highty to sink into at the same moment that Mrs. Tightly took the chair of state reserved for her on the other side of the fireplace. The anxious hostess or her daughter had to be on the watch that coffee was handed to Mrs. Highty before any one of lower rank got a chance of it. The Highty and Tightly carriages must be announced as nearly as possible at the same moment; and in wishing her guests farewell, the hostess must be careful to measure out her gratitude for the favour conferred by their visit in nicely balanced proportion. In fact she had not a moment's peace until they were both safely out of the house.

It will be readily understood, therefore, that when it began to be seen that the two ladies declined to meet one another, the relief was immense. Formerly it was thought to be a necessary compliment to ask the other to bear her company, and hence all the tribulation which I have been describing. Now we were free from this obligation, and might eat our dinners and pass our evenings in comfort.

Alas! how short-lived was our joy! In the first place, we soon found that now we must give two parties in place of one. If Mrs. Highty was asked to dinner this week, her rival must be invited the next, and, which was still more troublesome, repasts of equal splendour and guests of equal distinction must be provided for both entertainments. For though the two ladies might pass each other when they did chance to meet with so slight a mutual recognition as might be supposed to denote the utmost indifference to each other's existence, we knew very well from authentic sources of intelligence, that each was devoured by a jealous curiosity to hear the smallest details of the party given in honour of the other. And as it was next to impossible that both parties should be precisely alike in their histories and combinations, we were constantly giving offence. The plot, in fact, was thickening, though not one of us could have told what was the thread of the story in which, as in a labyrinth of cross-purposes, we were becoming involved, and a feud which threatened to undermine the whole fabric of our society was slowly but surely spreading. For I need hardly point out that, whereas we had at one time laboriously but not unsuccessfully tried to be loyal to a joint monarchy, we now naturally took part with one or the other sovereign. The people invited to meet Mrs. Tightly were very apt to think their banquet was less sumptuous than that given a few days before to the hostile faction of Highty. And thus things went on until there was hardly a house in our part of the county in which the old pleasant relations had not been altered, and into which envy, malice, and uncharitableness had not found their way.

Matters were in this condition when a modest little villa in our neighbourhood, which was usually let to summer lodgers, was taken by a lady of whom nothing more was known than that her name was Mrs. Smith. Soon, however, our ignorance was dispelled. At first some of us had

thought of even calling on her. But a certain old lady who, if she had not been too old and infirm to go out visiting, would rightly have taken precedence even of the Hon. Mrs. Tightly, and who sometimes saw company at home, invited us all to a great luncheon party, at which, to our amazement and even consternation, we beheld a modest-looking, shabbily-dressed little woman, banded to the luncheon-table by our hostess herself. This was her way of indicating the personage whom she considered of most consequence amongst her guests; and so well versed was she known to be in the laws of etiquette, that her preference of any one to such an honour was always accepted as a sort of social diploma or rank. And on this occasion, who should the upstart be before whom even Mesdames Highty and Tightly had to veil their haughty crests, but this most insignificant and unknown Mrs. Smith!

We were all stupefied. Was the stranger a duchess or princess in disguise, or—could our benevolent but slightly eccentric hostess design to teach us all a lesson on vanity of human greatness? If so, she had woefully mistaken her women. Already Mrs. Highty's brow was black, and even the less combustible Mrs. Tightly was beginning to swell with injured dignity. We onlookers were perhaps inclined, after the first shock, to enjoy the joke; but we all felt sorry for poor Mrs. Smith, on whom had been thrust this perilous distinction. If the idea of calling on the solitary denizen of Ivy Cottage had been about to suggest itself to any one, seeing that Lady—had already taken compassion on her, it must now be completely abandoned. We had enough to do with our two factions. Which of us would venture to tackle this third bone of contention? As for Lady—'s unaccountable caprice, we could only ascribe it to the weakness of advancing age.

But we were wrong. The old lady knew what she was about, and guessed, moreover, what was in our minds. When luncheon was over, but before we rose from table, she claimed silence, and announced that she was going to propose a toast. We were accustomed to her kindly, old-fashioned ways, but we now felt that something more was coming than the usual health to absent friends, or mention of the brave son in India, of whose glories we were scarcely less proud than his fond old mother. We had seen some whispering between her and her unknown guest, and some putting aside, as it seemed, on Lady—'s part of an argument of remonstrance from Mrs. Smith. "Nonsense, nonsense, my dear," she was heard to say, "I want everybody to know." Then she took her glass in hand and spoke:

"My good friends, you know you never leave my table without kindly joining his old mother in wishing health to my dear son, who is still far away from us. But to-day I want you to drink health—even before we speak of John—to Major Smith, the husband of this lady whom I've now the pleasure of introducing to you. And I'm sure you'll do so heartily when I tell you that he's the Major Smith who distinguished himself so at the battle of—; and he's the man who saved my boy's life, and who got the Victoria cross; and he's been made a C.B.—and he'll be a K.C.B., I haven't a doubt, if—" but her words were drowned in a tempest of applause. To be sure, we had all heard of the brave Major Smith, and we were all delighted to drink his health and see his wife. And after this there could be no doubt about our calling on her and asking her to our parties and everything.

This was all very well, and through the following week carriages and cards poured down on Ivy Cottage. But human nature remains human nature, and etiquette remains etiquette, and precedence is a prize not to be relinquished. So, could it be expected that Mrs. Tightly, not to speak of Mrs. Highty, could merely resign the honours hitherto held so undisputedly—except between themselves—without a struggle?

I need not say with what untiring zeal we discussed the question amongst ourselves as to whether a C.B.'s wife ought or ought not to walk before a baronet's or a peer's daughter. "Peerages" are expensive books, as everybody knows, and none of us were very rich. But to my certain knowledge there was a sudden importation of red books into the country; and those who had none, and grudging buying them, made long pilgrimages, as in olden times, to some shrine where a sight might be procured of the sacred volume. Yet even then we were not quite happy. The V.C. complicated the matter. Also, did not the service done to Lady—'s gallant son, our own county hero, increase the weight of our responsibilities? We thought and talked, we studied tables of precedence, we wrote to the *Quinn*, getting back snubbing answers for our pains, and being dreadfully afraid lest our friends should pierce the mystery of our pseudonym, and laugh at us for doing what they were perhaps going to do themselves. We tried to invent new ways of paying due reverence to our three luminaries, and keeping them from falling foul of each other and producing general chaos. And in the midst of all this commotion we heard that Mrs. Highty and Mrs. Tightly had been reconciled to each other, and were making common cause against the intruder on their rights. This, at least, was one good thing, even though it did not help us much in our difficulties.

As for Mrs. Smith, she seemed strangely indifferent to the honours thrust upon her. This was a little exasperating, considering the trouble she was giving us. On the whole, we did not care much for her, though she was inoffensive enough. It was inconvenient, too, to be obliged often to include her little girl in our invitations. Mrs. Smith would not come either to luncheon or garden party without bringing her little daughter. She excused this on the ground that she had no nurse or governess with whom to leave the child, who was, I must also say, a well-behaved, good little thing, easily amused, and perfectly happy if allowed to sit quietly by her mother's knee. The two were devoted to each other, and if we thought Mrs. Smith rather stupid and common-place, we could not but commend her training of her child. After some little time the ferment of our hospitality subsided, much, I think, to Mrs. Smith's relief. She was allowed to remain quietly with little Bessie at Ivy Cottage, and make herself happy with the child in her own way. Then as no third neutralising element interposed between the two previously contending forces, we began to be afraid

of a resumption of hostilities. But Mrs. Highty and Mrs. Tightly had been driven into each other's arms by stress of adverse circumstances, and could not all at once retreat from the friendship which had been re-established with so much apparent cordiality. But our experienced eyes could see that each lady had her high horse standing ominously near, and was prepared on the smallest provocation to mount that warlike steed; and we felt that, after all, the termination of such a hollow truce must soon be looked for.

Suddenly one day a rumour spread amongst us. It was Mrs. Highty who brought me the first news. Mrs. Tightly was sitting with me at the time, and I remember that my first feeling when my new visitor was shown in was dismay at the impossibility of providing her with a comfortable chair unless Mrs. Tightly vacated the one which, with some trouble, I had provided for her, for I was about to change my house, and my rooms were being dismantled of furniture. And as the Highty equipage drew up at my door, I had seen Mrs. Tightly settle herself still more stiffly and squarely in her armchair. What was I to do?

But before I had time to slammer out the apology I had been hastily divvying, Mrs. Highty sat down on a three-legged stool that somebody had brought from the kitchen. "Oh," she exclaimed, "what do you think! Poor dear little Bessie Smith has taken diphtheria. She's very ill, and her poor mother is helpless with terror. I've just been at Ivy Cottage and seen her. She's absolutely stupefied. She says the child never had a day's illness before. I've offered to get a nurse for her, for I believe Mrs. Smith is too bewildered to know what she's doing."

It was too true. Soon we heard that the child was sinking. There was no want of help, if human help could have saved her. The mother could only sit by her as if her mute agony of clinging love could baffle the fate that was to separate them. But doctor, nurse, and pitying friends were all at hand, and everything that could be done was done—in vain.

During these brief but most sorrowful three days, there was scarcely an hour of the day during which one or other of us was not at Ivy Cottage. It was absolutely necessary that some one should take charge, not only of the sick-room, but of the miserable, paralyzed mother. We relieved one another. Mrs. Highty and Mrs. Tightly took their turns of watching and attendance, and shared with one another the duty of providing the proper stimulants and nourishment which Mrs. Smith was unable to think of. And as they had been foremost in efforts to save her, they stood nearest one another when we followed little Bessie to her quiet grave.

Mrs. Smith rejoined her husband in India. There was rejoicing amongst us last year when we heard that another daughter had been sent to comfort them. Mrs. Highty and Mrs. Tightly are the two godmothers.

I do not say that between these ladies there never arises a shade of animosity which reminds one of the old vendetta. But they are good churchwomen, both; and as every Sunday they walk up the churchyard path and pass the little grave on which each so often places fresh memorial flowers, the sight of it must, I think, help them to begin another week at least in mutual charity and good-will.

Was it for this that the child came amongst us?

THE HIGHEST RANK.

If formerly it was enough to be in society, it is now not enough. To be in society means nothing if there be a highest rank in society. There is, then, after all, a cream of the cream, a finer bloom, a higher height. To be part of this can now alone satisfy. But how is the altitude to be gained?

"Ah! who can tell how hard it is to climb?"

The qualifications for the highest rank are, however, readily described. Intelligence, refinement, generous sympathy, intellectual freedom, urbanity, tact, and good nature are all of course indispensable. Affectation, vulgarity, ignorance, ostentation, selfishness, and boorishness are clearly incompatible with attainment of the highest rank of society people. Wit, cultivation, simplicity, and nobility of feeling—these supersede money as a qualification. Money, indeed, merely supplies the setting for the actual qualities. In the highest rank of society people of course you study at ease and in full play the qualities that have made the country, and furnish the bright promise of its future. Whoever was admitted to the charmed circle, which was described so glowingly, beheld, of course, the best of the chief city in the country.

It was always so. The sturdy virtues that asserted and maintained English liberty were found—were they not?—at the court of the Stuarts. The genius of social progress and of political reform in France dwelt—did it not?—in the palace of the royal Bourbons. Was it not at Versailles and Hampton Court that the highest rank of society people was found? Was it not, therefore, in the circle of the *Cell-de-Ban*, and in the pretty pastorals of the *Fait Trianon*, that the spirit of humanity and generous sympathy were enshrined? The highest rank of society people must be—must it not?—the class which is most truly mindful of the welfare of society, whose example is that of pure and honest living; moderate, gentle, wholesome.

For what kind of society must that be in which coroneted profligacy, or rich vulgarity, or courteous selfishness and sycophancy and moral cowardice figure as the highest rank? When this is the apex, what must the base and structure be? When a horse is conal, when a clown is king, what must the people be? Or was there some mistake at Hampton Court and Versailles? Was that refined and glittering crowd in velvet and silk and lace and flowing periwig not the highest rank of society people, after all, in any genuine sense, but only the richest and most conspicuous? Or, if the words must be accepted as strictly descriptive of the fact, if the hard-hearted, selfish, dissolute, corrupt throng at court, whether we like it or not, the highest rank of society people, was not that class the most contemptible in the kingdom?—*Editor's Easy Chair, in Harper's Magazine for April.*