

THE TOSS OF A BALL.

CHAPTER I.

"Esther," began Mr. Sweetapple, and paused hesitatively.

"Yes, Silas?" responded his sister, pausing likewise, but interrogatively.

Silas Sweetapple was a small man; rotund, dapper, and habited in brown. His clothes were cut in bygone Quaker fashion; his surroundings betrayed the same bias of opinion. The handsomely-furnished room indicated wealth dominated in expenditure by severe taste. Every article therein was solid in quality, sombre of color; excepting one object, Miss Sweetapple.

She was a little woman, soft, round and cushiony; apparently lacking angularities of either form or character. Her short, plump figure was arrayed in garments of bluish grey; and the folds of a snowy neckerchief crossed upon her breast were caught together by a small but valuable brooch, the centre of which, composed of a curved lock of grey hair—her dead father's—fastened by a tiny diamond star, was bordered by pearls of no great size, but of flawless shape and color.

I said one object. I mistake, there were two others.

A china basket heaped with York and Lancaster, moss and cluster roses; and a knot of blue ribbon tossed carelessly upon the seating of a massive chair, wherewith it appeared as congruous as a tuft of thistledown upon a mastiff's coat.

Anything more anomalous to Quaker proclivities than that coquettish knot of blue ribbon 'twere hard to find. But it was redolent of its owner.

Indeed the three individuals composing the banker's household represented three distinct gradations of opinion: Miss Sweetapple clinging tenaciously to the customs and tenets of the community wherein she had been born and bred; her brother, while repudiating both, finding himself continually trammelled by early habit and association; and sweet, wilful Clemency, his only child, who unhesitatingly avowed her antipathy to everything appertaining to the sect, excepting her beloved Aunt Esther.

She was coming now down the garden through the sunshine in her high red-heeled shoes and quaint bunched dress of blue, patterned over with roses, and looped here and there by azure bows. Possibly it was the sight of her approaching figure that bridged the pause in her elders' conversation.

"There badst somewhat to communicate. Doth the matter concern the child?" Miss Sweetapple enquired, her eyes following the father's to where Clemency halted, slender as the flower, and as pure, beside a tall white lily, whose calice overflowed with golden light.

"Yes, verily doth it, and that nearly," replied her brother, relapsing, as was his wont when stirred, or earnest, into Quaker diction. "Esther, my daughter, is besought of me in marriage."

By whom? Frank Hollis?"

"Nay, that were stale news," laughed the other. "Is not that a standing dish presented regularly once a month, and as regularly refused?"

"Clemency might do worse," returned Miss Sweetapple decidedly. "Frank is a good lad, and his father is a man of substance."

"But Algernon Duckett is more than wealthy—he is rich."

"Algernon Duckett!"

Miss Sweetapple laid her knitting upon her knee, and surveyed her brother in surprise.

"Verily, Esther," he remarked testily, "thy discernment must be limited if thou dost not see whither this young man's attentions tended."

"Nay, I marvel not at Clemency's attracting any man," returned Miss Sweetapple, gently. "What creates my wonder is that thou should'st seriously consider an offer tendered from such a quarter."

"But wherefore? What knowest thou to this youth's discredit?" asked the disconcerted father.

"Naught tangible. His address is good—his speech pleasant," replied his sister musingly. "Still, thou knowest, Silas, woman's instinct oft probeth that whereunto man's heavier reason cannot pierce. Besides," Miss Sweetapple enquired, flinging the question with sudden directness, "what knowest thou of these Ducketts? Who are they? Whence their family, breeding, or position?"

"The possessors of Cotswold Revel should be somewhat, Esther!"

"Truly; yet poles oft sever 'should be' and 'are.' And maybe, Cotswold Revel, ruined and forsaken by its rightful owners, was more honorable in its desolation than under the domination of these mushroom tenants, who, the growth of a night, may also in a night, perchance, depart."

"Anyway they keep the place in beautiful order."

"Excepting the west wing. Wherefore," commented Miss Sweetapple with reflected emphasis, "should its doors be barred, its windows darkened, and access to the laurel garden walled across? Also, what mean these flying rumors of shadowy figures, corpse-candles, and strange, unearthly noises?"

"Yokels' gossip, and old wives' fables. Esther, art thou in thy dotage?"

"Not yet, Silas," replied his sister calmly. "That charge, meseemeth, applied best to thee. Greed of gold is the vice of age; and thou appearest inclined to sell even thy daughter to the highest bidder."

"Gold honestly acquired is a good thing—as none knoweth better than thyself," was the banker's heated retort.

"Verily. Yet it beholdeth a prudent man to test its source ere tampering with the stream," was Miss Sweetapple's dry response.

"Nevertheless, this suitor demands honorable consideration."

"Assuredly. Yet would brief courtesy suffice did his acceptance rest with me. Wilt thou acquaint Clemency with this matter?"

"I doubt my right of withholding it from her," said Mr. Sweetapple uncertainly. "Thou would'st not counsel any such proceeding, would'st thou, Esther?"

"Nay, I counsel naught," replied Miss Sweetapple, folding her knitting together, and rising from her seat. "I have uttered my testimony, and now thee will act according to thy lights. The child is thine own. Her disposal is thy charge. I can but pray that Divine wisdom may guide thee both."

As the door closed upon his sister Mr. Sweetapple turned, leant his elbow upon the high mantlesheff, and reviewed the circumstances which had culminated in this climax.

To say that his heart was set upon this proffered alliance for his daughter were an exaggeration. That he fervently wished he might honestly desire it was a truth. The combined charms of personal beauty, and future wealth to be inherited in double portion from father and aunt, naturally attracted unnumbered suitors to pretty, wilful Clemency, the banker's only child. Amongst these three stood prominent: Frank Hollis, with whom she had played, laughed and coquetted from babyhood, and who precipitated himself and his possessions—mostly prospective—before her with whimsical persistency upon every possible opportunity; Ralf Alden, a lawyer of repute—like herself a recusant from Quaker tenets—grave, scholarly, self-possessed, whose wooing was as staid as Frank's was impulsive, and whose love was infinitely deeper; and Algernon Duckett.

St. Mildred's was an ancient cathedral city girded by the Stour, a clear, if somewhat narrow, river running a long and placid course before widening into the estuary that joined it to the sea. The community of St. Mildred's was dignified, prosperous and conservative. Around and within it dwelt families of pedigree, culture and position, yet none bore a name more honored, a lineage less stained, than that of Silas Sweetapple. Men trusted him. Into his hands, as into those of his ancestors for several generations, flowed the wealth of the district. But never had client opened an account with so large a deposit as had Algernon Duckett.

A distant contemplation of Clemency had primarily attracted this suitor's regard. Speedily compassing an introduction to her father, he so ingratiated himself, personally and financially, that Mr. Sweetapple endorsed his frankly outspoken request by promising that Miss Sweetapple and Clemency should take an early opportunity of paying their respects to his mother and his one young sister.

From one of the long white roads reaching outward from St. Mildred's branched, some five miles beyond the city, a devious, tangled country lane. To the right of this, going northward, stood a large, ivy-coated mansion, low set in a wood-embowered hollow. It had belonged to a family even older than its antiquated foundations, and who clung to its mouldering walls long after empty coffers precluded their repair. At last it was wrested from their grip, and they went forth never to return. People who had known and loved the old house in its picturesque decay mourned its impending demolition by iconoclastic progress; but at the eleventh hour an enterprising tenant offered himself and saved it for a season.

Who he was, or whence he came, nobody knew. The change transpired so suddenly that almost simultaneously with the letting of the deserted mansion vans of furniture and other properties arrived, and the new tenants established themselves in that portion of the building needing least repair.

Gratitude and curiosity impelled a shoal of callers almost before the new-comers could be supposed fairly settled—advances received with a cool indifference that, by preciding intimacy, gradually reduced all social intercourse to periodical interchanges of formal entertainment.

Mr. Duckett, senior, was not often visible at home, and seldom went abroad. He was a tall, muscular man, with heavy features, and a keen, wandering gaze, suppositiously addicted to abstruse scholastic research. Whence this belief originated was uncertain. Probably its primary basis was a peculiar awe respect wherewith his wife, a timid, reserved little woman, with shrinking manners, and a careworn, even scared expression of countenance, alluded to her husband's "study," a gloomy, thickly-pannelled room in the rear of the mansion, the one window of which looked on to a weedy court, from which access was obtained to the disused west wing upon whose reputation Miss Sweetapple had cast such strong opprobrium.

From this chamber visitors were rigorously excluded; albeit, some adventurous spirits had attempted invasion of its privacy. The most persistent merely gained a glimpse of book-lined walls and a strip of grey sky above a half-darkened window—material from which fact or fancy could evolve little. Here, however, Mr. Duckett was generally immured, invariably returning thither, even from formal gatherings, as soon as dinner was ended, and remaining there often far on into the night.

But the son went everywhere—was welcomed everywhere. Recently, too, a daughter, having finished a continental education, had returned home, and fostered with zest those social amenities wherewith her parents shrank.

She brought a whiff of fresh vigor into the mouldering old house; an inconvenient impetus, judging by the repression wherewith it was opposed, even Algernon vetoing invitations to school-friends, as his father did lengthened visits from anyone.

But Hilda Duckett could be as persistent as her elders, with, moreover, a vehement impetuosity carrying everything before it like a March wind. She rebelled at the restricted, cooped up life designed for her, and resolved upon emancipating herself and electrifying the neighborhood by giving a ball upon her approaching birthday. She swept away objections, laughed down protestations, and surmounted difficulties with a daring courage worthy of a better cause, until her bright effrontery actually enlisted an admiring coadjutor in her brother. Then Hilda's soul rejoiced, for she knew herself triumphant.

"I am a fool and you a greater for thus persuading me to give way to