



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

The Country Cousin.

CHAPTER I.

"Now, girls, stitch away; there's lots to do yet, and none too much time to do it in. Here's the trimming to put on my dress, and the lace on Fanny's skirt, besides that white wreath to alter. Oh dear, how I do wish I could afford a new one!" said Sophy Harrison, with an impatient jerk at the flimsy fabric on her lap.

"Could I do anything?" asked a plainly dressed, quiet-looking young girl, who had been for some time surveying the scene in silence.

"Of course you can," replied Sophy; "but it is a shame to set you on to work so soon. Besides, perhaps you have something to do for yourself."

"Oh, no, my dress is all ready. Shall I tack that lace on?" and without waiting for an answer Maggie Cameron was soon working away as busily as the rest.

"What are you going to wear, Maggie?" inquired Sophy, after a pause, during which needles and thread had been swiftly flying to and fro.

"I have but two evening dresses with me," replied Maggie; "a white muslin and a blue grenadine. I will wear whichever you like."

"Oh not blue, I beseech you," said Sophy; "it would quite spoil the effect of my peach blossom. White will suit you admirably, and a red rose will look delicious in your dark hair."

"Frank Wilford is to be at the party to-night," said Fanny. "You don't say so?" exclaimed Sophy, dropping her work with a sudden start; "I wish I had known that before, and I would have had a new wreath!"

"Ah, but Kitty Ansell is going, too," said Fanny. "So there's not much chance for you or anybody else."

"I don't know that," said Sophy. "At any rate it's no harm to try; and who knows what may happen. *Ni desperandum* is my motto. Are there any nice young men about your place, Maggie?"

"I don't know, indeed," said Maggie, laughing. "I go out so very little as home."

"Oh I forgot," said Sophy. "My aunt is very strict, isn't she, and makes a little nun of you? I should hate that. It is so charming to go to balls, and plays, and concerts; only one's obliged to cut and contrive one's dress so, and that's horrid."

"You should have white muslin," said Maggie, innocently; "that always washes and looks new again."

"Yes, but that's as old as the hills, child," replied Sophy. "Nobody wears anything but grenadine and tulle, unless, indeed, one could afford lace. Now, the dearest wish of my whole heart is to wear a black lace—real lace, mind you—over pink satin. Oh, wouldn't it be heavenly! Lotty Stephens has one over amber silk—such a beauty!—but then she's going to be married, and can have anything. Heigho! I wish I was."

"There, that's done!" exclaimed Fanny, jumping up and throwing down her thimble; "make haste, girls, it only wants ten minutes to five, and we must be ready soon after eight. How long do you take to dress, Maggie?"

"Oh, about half an hour, I dare say," was the reply; "but—"

"Half an hour!" screamed Sophy; "hear her! Why I am going up now, and I shan't be ready one bit before the time. I shall be an hour, at least, doing my hair. What a little rustic you are, Maggie!"

Maggie's color rose; but she only said, quietly, "Mamma does not like me to spend so much time over my dress, cousin; so I shall be ready to help you, if you like."

"That's a darling," said Sophy; "so you shall for I want to look killing to-night, I can tell you."

The Harrisons were a large family, three girls and as many boys; and Mrs. Harrison and her daughters being excessively fond of show and company, it was almost as much as they could do to make both ends meet at the year's end, particularly now when the girls were all "out," and doing their best to get off. Their cousin, Maggie Cameron, who had been brought up in a very different way, had come to spend the winter with her aunt and uncle in the large, bustling town of Winterbury, where there was always plenty of gaiety in some shape or other the year round. The eldest Miss Harrison, Sophy, was nearly three-and-twenty, and her settlement in life was becoming a matter of very serious consideration, for visiting and late hours are not favorable either to eyes or complexion, and a fair beauty soon fades.

By eight o'clock on this particular evening Maggie was dressed, and down stairs long before the others, who, as is usual with young ladies on such occasions, were fully half an hour behind the time. At length, however, they all sailed in, dressed in the extreme of fashion, with their heads an elaborate mixture of frizzles, puffs and flowers, and their skirts so voluminous, that how they ever got into them must have been a riddle to the uninitiated.

Maggie's costume was a decided contrast, a plain white muslin, tastefully yet simply trimmed, and made, too, without that sacrifice of modesty in which young ladies delight at the present day, for it actually did cover the fair smooth shoulders, and really had sleeves, and not shoulder-straps. A single flower of deep velvety crimson nestled in the glossy brown hair, and a handsome pearl locket, suspended by a piece of black velvet round the throat, completed the simple costume.

Maggie had never looked so well. Her cousins surveyed her in silence, and only Sophia exclaimed, "My gracious, child, you've no bracelets, or bouquet, or fan, or anything! But it's too late now; make haste,—the carriage is waiting."

Maggie had never been at so large a party before; and the sudden plunge into so much brilliancy and fashion fairly dazzled her at first. But this feeling soon wore off, and the music was so exhilarating that she felt almost ready to dash off and join the dancers there and then.

"Does not your cousin dance?" inquired young Wilford, whom Sophy had successfully maneuvered to get for the first round dance.

"Oh yes, I suppose so,—I wonder mamma has not found her a partner," answered Sophy, not quite pleased at the inquiry.

"Perhaps you will introduce me," he continued, as the music ceased, and they found themselves nearly opposite Maggie, who was half hidden by Mrs. Harrison's satin skirts. Sophy complied, rather ungraciously, and then seated herself by her mamma, exclaimed that she was tired to death, and should like an ice of all things. Of course there was nothing to be done but to comply with her request, and offer his services to escort her to the refreshment-room, which afforded a delightful opportunity for a little flirtation. Before they returned, Maggie had another chance of dancing; and, after that, she found no lack of partners for the rest of the evening, which passed away much too quickly for the fresh young girl, whose early bloom had not been sullied by any of those scenes of childish dissipation known as "children's parties."

"And how did you like the ball, Maggie?" said Fanny, as she yawned over a new novel the following morning.

"Oh, so very much!" exclaimed Maggie, enthusiastically; "and the music was perfectly delicious; it almost makes me dance now to think of it."

"You queer child," said Sophy, who sat resting her feet upon the fender; "I did not think it nice a bit, and the music was simply horrid."

"Oh, but it was my first ball, you know, and it all seemed delightful to me," said Maggie. "I dare say you felt exactly the same at first."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Sophy; "it is so long since my first ball that I forget all about it. I've gone to balls regularly these ten years, and really one gets tired of everything in time."

"Ten years!" exclaimed Maggie, in astonishment; "why you must have been quite a child."

"Of course I was," replied Sophy; "twelve or thirteen, perhaps, not more. To be sure they were only children's parties, but we used to go on pretty much as we do now, flirting and all, in a small way."

"Oh, Sophy, how ridiculous!" exclaimed Maggie.

"Ridiculous!" said Sophy; "not at all. I'm sure I enjoyed myself then much more than I do now. It was so very delightful. But how do you like Frank Wilford, Maggie?"

"Oh pretty well," said Maggie, slowly, for she had not been very favorably impressed with the gentleman in question, who dropped his r's, parted his hair down the middle, and said, "no, thanks" all of which were capital sins and offences in Maggie's eyes.

"Only 'pretty well,'" repeated Sophy; "why, he's the richest fellow in the place, besides being the best dancer."

"Well you need think nothing about him, Sophy," said Fanny; "Kitty Ansell will take care of him, depend upon it."

"I don't believe a word of it," returned Sophy, pettishly; "but if he prefers her to me, why I hope he'll take her, that's all. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"Now that's a very vulgar saying," put in Harriet, who was the fine lady of the family; and you only use it when you're vexed."

"I vexed, indeed!" said Sophy; "I'm not vexed. But if it comes to that, I think Maggie has almost as good a chance as Kitty Ansell. I'm sure he admired her, and he asked for an introduction; which looks suspicious, to say the very least of it."

"Do set your cap at him, Maggie," laughed Fanny; and cut out these other two girls. What fun it would be!"

Maggie looked from one to the other in silent astonishment, for she had never heard young ladies "chaff" before.

"Look at her, how grave she looks!" said Sophy. "Oh, Maggie, what a little rustic you are."

"Well, but seriously, Maggie, I should advise you to think about it. How nice to be the wife of Frank Wilford, Esq., of Temple Lawn, with carriages, and horses, and servants, and no end of money. Why, you would have a house in town, and an opera box, and go to no end of balls, and be presented at Court. Only think of it!"

"Besides making all these other girls, who have tried and could not get him, mad with rage and envy," chimed in Sophy. "Kitty Ansell would be ready to bite her fingers' ends off with jealousy. But dear me how late it is! Do come and dress, girls. I declare I had almost forgotten the chrysanthemum show, and some of them are sure to be there."

Maggie felt half inclined to refuse; but her uncle, who had taken quite a fancy to the quiet little country girl, would not hear of her staying at home; so she put on her "Sunday dress," a pretty gray merino, and went down stairs to wait for the others. As usual she was ready fully half an hour before her cousins, who came in radiant with the newest fashions.

"Why, Maggie," exclaimed Sophy, "you are surely not going in that plain French merino and felt hat? Why, you look like an Arcadian shepherdess."

Maggie colored slightly at this rude attack on her dress; but she only said, "Don't you think it will do, cousin? I have only got two light silks besides, and I thought those would be too dressy for morning."

"Too dressy, child! What nonsense!" exclaimed Sophy. "There's nothing too dressy in these days; but you don't understand such things. Never mind; nobody will notice you, I dare say."

But Sophy was mistaken; for somebody did notice her; and more than that, admired the fair, modest-looking flower; and all the more for the contrast she exhibited to the gorgeous blossoms beside her.

"Who is that young girl with the Harrisons?" asked young Hamilton, the most impassive and fastidious of all the Winterbury set.

"Haven't the faintest idea," answered his friend. "Wilford, do you know?"

Yes, she's a sort of cousin, or something," he replied. "I danced with her at the ball the other night. She's a nice little thing enough, and rather refreshing after the usual run of girls; a sort of daisy, you know, amongst a cluster of

exotics," and evidently thinking he had said something witty, Mr. Frank Wilford pulled up his shirt collar, and deliberately lounged away.

In a few minutes the Harrisons, whose acquaintance had previously been of the slightest, had the supreme delight of receiving a very cordial greeting from Mr. Claude Hamilton, who by a dexterous movement contrived to place himself next to Maggie, and gradually drew her into the conversation. She had too much good sense to be bashful, but spoke with a quiet modesty, which contrasted very favorably with the sparkling chatter of her fashionable cousins; so that when Mr. Hamilton lifted his hat, and said "good morning," it was with a determination to make a further acquaintance with the Harrison's country cousin.

"Mamma," said Sophy the next morning, "do let us give a party. We must have one before Maggie leaves; and we had much better have it early, so that she may come in for the return invitations."

"I don't think Maggie cares for parties," observed Mr. Harrison, looking kindly at her over his newspaper; "besides, it is full early yet for quadrille parties."

"Oh, but if we have it at once it will be done with," said Sophy; and as for Maggie's not caring for parties, you are quite mistaken, for she is as fond of dancing as any one of us."

"Yes, dancing, perhaps. Well, as you like," said Mr. Harrison. "But what does mamma say?"

"Oh, I've no objection in the world," replied Mrs. Harrison, who was as fond of gaiety as her daughters; "so get your desk, Sophy, and make out a list of names."

Sophy was soon hard at work, while Mr. Harrison, to escape the discussions as to who should and who should not be invited, took up his hat and walked off to his counting house.

"Mamma," said Sophy, as she reached the end of a tolerably long list, "let us invite young Hamilton; I thought he seemed particularly anxious to improve our acquaintance yesterday."

"So I thought, Sophy," answered Mrs. Harrison, sagely nodding her head; "if we can only manage it; but your papa has such odd notions. However, we must see what can be done." But there was no need for Mrs. Harrison's diplomacy, as Mr. Hamilton found an excuse for calling the next day, and made himself so agreeable to the master of the house that he readily acquiesced in the proposed invitation.

CHAPTER II.

During the time that intervened before the ball little else was talked about, and Maggie grew thoroughly tired of the subject; but she had yet to learn how much there is of practical discomfort in a large party at the house of pretentious people. The preceding day was a scene of the wildest confusion. Beds were taken down and carpets taken up, that supper might be laid in one room, and quadrille dances in another. The study was turned into a coffee-room, and the dining-room into a card-room; so that poor Harrison fairly took flight, and was seen no more till evening, while the boys revelled in the commotion, and took their meals when and how they could, securing divers forbidden dainties in the scuffle. Maggie sought refuge in her own chamber, but she soon found that that was required for a cloak-room; so she put on her hat, and went for a long country walk, in which she contrived to lose herself, and only reached home in time for a cold, comfortless late dinner.

In the morning matters grew worse, and the racket only subsided as the hour approached for the arrival of the visitors. By nine o'clock the rooms were full—that is, about fifty people were crammed into a space scarcely large enough for half that number, so that flirting was carried on upon the stairs, and love-speeches whispered on the landing. However, the evening passed off well, and was what Harriet called, "a decided success." But the aspect of the house the next morning was utterly forlorn and desolate, such a chaos of rout seats and drooping garlands, such a litter of torn fluey and champagne corks, such a medley of chicken bones and dirty platters, that Mr. Harrison, who was a sworn friend to order and regularity, might well be heard to exclaim that he was glad it was over.

"And you really like all this gaily and dissipation, Miss Cameron?" said Claude Hamilton one evening.

"I liked it very much indeed at first," replied Maggie; "but I am beginning to get rather tired of it now, I must confess, and we live so very quietly at home."

"And pray how do you employ your time at home, Miss Cameron, if I may be allowed to ask the question?"

"Oh, I am never at a loss," she replied. "Mamma likes me to keep up my accomplishments; so I practice every day and draw a good deal; then we have always plenty of books, and generally we play at chess in the winter evenings; so that, with plain sewing and fancy work, the days often pass too quickly."

"In my day," said Mr. Harrison, "girls learnt housekeeping; and I have heard my mother say that she could make a pudding and knit a stocking before she was sixteen."

"And I can make a pudding too, uncle," laughed Maggie, "and do, often, when Martha is busy."

"What's that about puddings?" asked Sophy, sailing into the room in full evening costume. "Oh, Mr. Hamilton, I did not know you were here. Are you going to the Stephens' to-night?"

"No, I really could not manage it," he replied. "Three invitations for one evening fairly scared me, so I declined them all, and just called in here on my way home. It was astonishing how often Mr. Hamilton had lately called on his way home."

"Oh, how very shabby of you!" exclaimed Sophy, with her sweetest smile. "I shall tell Mrs. Stephens how very badly you behave." But the young lady's gallantry only elicited an exaggerated expression of despair at his inability to join her party, and an offer to escort her to the cab, in which the others were already seated.

"Mamma," exclaimed Sophy, eagerly, as the cab drove off, "did you know Mr. Hamilton was in the drawing-room?"

"I did," said Fanny; "but as I knew he did not come to see me, I forgot all about it."

"It was very provoking. I must say, and you might have told me, Fanny," said Sophy, very much put out.

"I did not know he was there," said Mrs. Hamilton; "but, after all, it does not matter. Maggie is only a child, and you need not fear, Sophy, dear." But Sophy was not so easily consoled, and a cloud obscured her fair brow, which was only removed by two waltzes and a gallopade, aided by the fervent devotion of a gallant captain of Dragons.

(To be continued.)