

SOCIAL EVENTS IN A GIRL'S LIFE.

By LA PETITE.

PART II.

THE EASTER BANQUET AT THE MANSION HOUSE.

I THINK that next to my presentation I most enjoyed my first banquet at the Mansion House, for that, too, was unique in its way.

When the invitation arrived I felt much elated, for it was one of the few functions I really wanted to attend. It was, I knew, unlike any other dinner, and here again I turned to my mother for information, for my parents' annual departure to the Guildhall for the Lord Mayor's dinner, was another of my childish recollections.

A suitable dress having been decided on, and various shopping expeditions connected with the event having taken place, I had nothing to do but to wait for the evening itself, which I did, full of pleasurable anticipation.

It came at last—wet and dismal—though the month was April; but as I drove through the busy City streets, with a resplendent personage in full Court dress—sword and all—beside me, I felt that nothing could damp my happiness, except a lurking pity for every one who was not going with me.

I felt like a certain young English authoress who, when the Queen sent a state carriage for her, exclaimed—

"Oh, that I could stand in the street and see myself go by!"

Visions of Cinderella in her pumpkin coach also flitted through my brain, and, in fact, only vanished when the carriage drew up at the Mansion House itself. Yards of red-and-white-striped awning, unlimited crimson carpet, and rows of stalwart policemen met my delighted eyes when I sprang out with more haste than dignity, I fear, but I was recalled to the necessities of the situation by the apparition of the resplendent personage aforesaid, whose imposing costume reminded me that this was no ordinary occasion.

Side by side we mounted the front steps and entered the outer hall, and then I was shown a room on the right, where I laid aside my wraps before joining my companion in the pillared saloon glittering with mirrors and lights, adorned with tapestry and flowers, and filled with a gallant company of City and other magnates, whose magnificent uniforms, together with the superb jewels and dresses of their wives and daughters, made a bewilderingly dazzling picture.

The company formed a living avenue, with the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress standing in front of two red-and-white-and-gold arm-chairs at the end, supported by the City officials in quaint dress, with equally quaint titles, and I found I had to walk up between the guests and make my curtsy, with about two hundred and fifty people looking on and criticising me.

Talk about "running the gauntlet"!

However, I was not new to the sort of thing; a most excellent band was discoursing inspiring music, and so I plucked up courage and presently found myself shaking hands with my august host and hostess, and then forming one of the crowd, watching eagerly as celebrity after celebrity appeared, and the buzz of voices grew ever louder.

Every gentleman had a "plan of the tables" given him, so that he could see at a glance where his seat was; and the plan also formed a menu and a programme of music. Long before I was tired of gazing and listening, the toast-master led the way to the dinner, shouting—

"Room for the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor and the Lady Mayoress," and we all trooped after them into the Egyptian Hall.

This is a splendid apartment, which I had

often seen by day when it is not at its best, for the light coming entirely through stained glass it is always rather dark, but now, under the soft radiance of electric light, with buffets of gold plate and eight long tables decked with flowers, candelabra with red shades and more gold plate, it looked grand!

Even the white statues along the sides seemed warmed up into something like life, and the only pity was that the stained glass could not be lighted up from outside, so that we could enjoy its lovely colours.

The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, and most distinguished guests, sat at a long table running the length of the hall, and all the rest sat at other tables branching down from it.

By the help of our plan we soon found our seats, on each plate being placed a plain white card with the City arms in gold on the top and our names written legibly thereon.

The toast-master ensconced himself behind the Lord Mayor's chair, the band established itself in a tiny balcony overhead, a Latin grace was sung, and we settled down to the business of the evening.

I say "business" advisedly, for dish after dish made its appearance in apparently endless succession; every delicacy in season and out of season, each with its accompanying wine, sauce, or vegetable, till it seemed to me impossible that anything new could follow.

There was so much to look at, too, that it was waste of time to eat or drink.

It was such a blaze of light and colour, with the music clashing overhead, and the hum of talk and laughter filling the place and echoing up to the dim roof that I had to pinch myself now and then to make sure I was awake and not dreaming about this splendid pageant.

The people, too, were most interesting and amusing, not sitting as at an ordinary dinner—a lady and gentleman alternately—but just as they came, and all helping to form a most splendid spectacle.

At length we arrived at the ice-pudding, which marked the close of the banquet, and the men brought round a huge gold dish filled with rose-water, into which we each dipped a corner of our serviettes. These gorgeous dishes, of course, take the place of the usual finger-bowls.

Have any of you read Mark Twain's *Prince and the Pauper*?

If so, you may remember how this same "broad, shallow, golden dish with fragrant rose-water in it," proved a great stumbling-block to poor Tom who, after gazing at it a puzzled moment or two, raised it to his lips and gravely took a draught. Then he returned it to the waiting-lord, and said—

"Nay, it likes me not, my lord; it hath a pretty flavour, but it wanteth strength."

Poor little pauper! This was but one of many blunders by which he dismayed the "Grand Hereditaries" around him; but I thought of that special incident as the dish passed on.

Next came the "Loving Cup," which is a special feature of City banquets, and is a large, tall, two-handled gold goblet with a most elaborate cover, which I watched with interest making its way round to me.

At length it reached the gentleman on my right, who received it, standing, from the lady on his right, also standing, and then he turned round to me.

I had been thoroughly drilled in the matter so I knew what to do.

Rising, I removed the cover, which I held carefully in both hands, while he, grasping the two handles of the cup, bowed to me and took a sip, then he passed his serviette lightly over the rim, I put on the cover, took the cup in

both hands and turned to the gentleman on my left who rose and removed the cover while I bowed and sipped, wiped the edge, waited till he replaced the cover and gave up the goblet.

He repeated the pantomime with his other neighbour, and so on till every one in the hall had partaken.

I was struck by the weight of the cup, which was as much as I could comfortably hold, and indeed I was in mortal terror lest my wrists should give way and a catastrophe ensue.

It would have been a bad omen, to say the least of it, but I am glad to say the Mansion House was saved from such an exhibition of awkwardness.

I cannot say I was pleased with the mixture within, though this statement, I am aware, is not very far short of high treason, but it was not to my taste at all, being compounded of wine, highly spiced with pungent herbs of various sorts and other ingredients too numerous to mention.

I was disappointed, too, that the company did not approach this historical ceremony in a less frivolous spirit. I took it very seriously, but most of the others laughed over it, affected to shudder at the contents, and altogether treated it far too lightly, I thought.

You know it really dates from our most ancient times when treachery was abroad in the land and even lurked at the festive board.

After Edward the Martyr was stabbed by his step-mother Elfrida in 978, while drinking a cup of wine, it was arranged that companions at a feast should have both hands occupied when drinking, so that neither could stab the other while off guard; but, happily, now the graver reason no longer exists, and the quaint old ceremony only survives from pleasure, not necessity.

After the "loving cup" came toasts, and here the toast-master (who must have been having rather a dull time of it, poor man) came into play.

First he exclaimed—

"Pray silence for the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor!"

Then as each toast was given out he started up from behind the Lord Mayor's chair (where he had remained *perdu* all this time) and in stentorian tones exclaimed—

"Charge your glasses, gentlemen! The Queen!" and so on.

Then, of course, each toast was proposed and responded to in suitable speeches by appropriate persons, and in the intervals we had songs, a grand piano being wheeled into the Egyptian Hall for the purpose.

When at last the signal was given for rising, every one moved back into the pillared saloon (for the gentlemen did not remain behind the ladies as at other dinners), and here we found a buffet spread with tea, coffee, and yet more eatables!

The gentlemen smoked while the ladies strolled about, in and out of the drawing-rooms, which are as beautiful as can be imagined, and all chatted and enjoyed themselves.

I discovered a girl who had, like myself, never been to a Mansion House banquet before, so we were happily comparing notes, when I was summoned to take leave, and was dismayed to find how late it was.

It is not often in this world that one's anticipations are realised, but mine were on this occasion, and I think I cannot end this article better than by quoting what I wrote in my diary the morning after: "Altogether it was a brilliant success, and the proudest evening of my life!"