



THE CHARADE.

THE philosophy which we are enabled to summon to our aid under the minor disappointments of every-day life, receives generally, it is to be feared, but very inadequate support from the insignificance of the circumstances of the evil, or our own inability to change them. Among the small grievances of life, there are few that test the patience more severely than a wet day in the country, when we have made up our minds and our plans for a fine one. Never was this truth more thoroughly recognised than among the inmates of Airedale, a pleasant country-house in one of the northern counties, as they assembled at an early breakfast on a real November morning, and contemplated the aspect of the world without. This proverbially gloomy month had, in truth, seldom sustained its reputation by a day more thoroughly

dispiriting. The drizzling rain clouded the windows of the cheery-looking breakfast-room, and the blaze of the fire almost obscured the faint glimmering of daylight which found its way in through the fog and mist. The wind wailed dismally among the trees, but seemed to have no energy for more earnest demonstrations. Nature looked depressed rather than angry, and therefore held forth less hope of a favourable reaction. It seemed difficult to believe that the sun had ever shone upon the world, and still more incredible that it should ever smile again through that dense unbroken mass of grey clouds. Whilst the party in question are discussing, with various degrees of dolour, their breakfast and their interrupted plans, we will take a glance at its more prominent members. The mistress of the house, Mrs. Ormerod was one of those

genial persons in whom Nature is wont, not too often, to associate that combination of virtues which, when united, constitute the pattern hostess. She welcomed her guests with a cordiality as genuine as though they were members of her own family, and allowed them to be happy in their own way. She was never known to break up a pleasant excursion by exacting a punctual return to dinner, or to discourage the irregularity of an impromptu party from any fears of indignant subordinates. She had been long a widow, and her time and thoughts were chiefly devoted to rendering life and home as pleasant as possible to the two sons who represented her surviving family. The guests, by whose instrumentality she was contributing to this desirable aim on the occasion of which we are speaking, included two pretty sisters, Blanche and Julia Wyndham, who were extremely ornamental, if not very useful; Kate Southern, a niece of Mrs. Ormerod, a lively and clever girl, who had been brought up in Paris; extremely popular, especially with the gentlemen, though regarded with some distrust by one or two country beaux, whom she had alarmed by an unlucky, and, as the other ladies agreed, a very flippant remark, that she "would undertake to turn any young man inside out in half an hour;" a bride and bridegroom, rather too much interested in each other to be very interesting to other people; a Mr. Singleton, who, having a fine tenor voice—to which, by the way, he was indebted for his invitation—sang and dressed after Mario; several agreeable girls, with no very marked characteristics; an odd mamma or two; and sundry bachelor intimates of Langford Ormerod, much addicted to field-sports and billiards.

The particular day on which the fates and the weather had thrown this circle upon its own resources for entertainment, was to have been more than usually eventful. The gentlemen had made up their minds for a capital day's hunting, and the ladies had promised to ride over with them to the "meet," prior to a visit which had been for some days in contemplation to the lions of a neighbouring cathedral town. It was agreed during breakfast, by a large majority, that to go out on such a day, when it was possible to stay at home,

would be little short of insanity; but a small band of devoted sportsmen, with Langford Ormerod at their head, announced their intention of adhering, as far as they were concerned, to the original arrangement, and incurred thereby the sovereign displeasure of the ladies. It was not flattering at any time to be deserted for the society of fox-hunting squires; but that a helter-skelter gallop through rain and wind should be deemed preferable to a quiet day with themselves, was positively unendurable. They accordingly wished the delinquents much enjoyment in tones more or less severe: embittered the short interval before their departure by a double meed of kind words and sweet looks to their more dutiful cavaliers; and, finally, more rigorous still, vouchsafed not one glance from the windows at the irreproachable horsemanship and critical attire, which a delay of rather unnecessary length at the hall door afforded them ample opportunity of admiring. The trants at length rode away: and the desolate damsels, whose spirits rather flagged when their pride no longer sustained them, proceeded to dispose of themselves as they best could. Blanche Wyndham seated herself on a *cauaiseuse* with Edgar Ormerod, whose bent, we may mention, was decidedly literary. His proposal to read to her a few of his unpublished sonnets had been so gracefully received, as quite to decide in his mind a point on which he had long been doubtful, viz., whether blondes or brunettes have usually most soul. Julia Wyndham retired to her room, to devise new trimmings for a favourite dress; the bride had composed herself to the task of winding wools, in which she was dutifully aided by her lord and master; and Miss Southern, armed with a volume of Charles de Bernard, ensconced herself in an arm-chair, within view of their innocent flirtation—a young gentleman fresh from college, whom she had proposed to amuse herself by drawing out, having taken alarm at the preponderance of ladies, and retired to the more congenial seclusion of the stables; two or three matrons settled themselves in a corner for a quiet gossip; Mr. Singleton retired to the piano to practice; and the *Ami de Maison*, whom we have forgotten to introduce, a gentlemanly bachelor, who made indifferent puns, and had been younger, sensible of a general failure in his efforts to make himself agreeable, took refuge in political statistics and the *Quarterly*. So passed the morning wearily away until the “coming” of “the good time” of luncheon. It was an *infinite* relief to every one. The fair Blanche had begun to evince symptoms of weariness, and her Tasso to doubt whether, after all, her character did possess that appreciation of genius which her style of beauty had induced him to expect; nay, he had half resolved to transfer his allegiance to her sister. The talkers in the corner had begun to wax rather ill-natured, and the bride somewhat sleepy; Mr. Singleton had sung himself hoarse; and all were hungry, and glad of a change. Half an hour’s application to the creature comforts, however, exercised a very beneficial effect on the minds and countenances of the little society: they no longer held themselves aloof in detached groups, but formed a social circle round the fire to consult on the best means of ameliorating their condition. Many were the suggestions offered. The collegian thought that a game at billiards, between himself and some other gentleman of the party, would prove an interesting and exciting spectacle to the ladies; but he was summarily put down, and was heard no more. Mr. Singleton suggested that a few glees and catches would afford an agreeable occupation for the afternoon; but, as nobody appeared to know anything that any one else did, this proposal also fell to the ground.

The successful idea at length emanated from Kate Southern—why should they not get up a charade? The proposal was received with universal acclaim. Edgar Ormerod, in a fit of enthusiasm, volunteered to retire at once to his sanctum, and to deliver in some result, either good or bad, by dinner-time; for, with all the energy of amateurs, they resolved that the evening of the succeeding day should witness the realisation of their plans. His proposal was accepted, and the discussion of the details pleasantly occupied the rest of the afternoon.

Meantime, what of the sportsmen? As three or four animated beauties were descending to the drawing-room they encountered a somewhat rueful-looking cavalcade, consisting of the bespattered and weary Nimrods, who escaped at the earliest opportunity. A few hasty minutes were all that remained for their outward renovation; and when the gong summoned [the party to the dining-room, they presented themselves, looking red and sleepy—subjects rather for pity than punishment. Yet still the retribution for their offence pursued and clung to them: the conversation was on plans of which they knew nothing, and on subjects which, not having the key-note, they could not understand. They noticed the friendship which a community of interests had excited among the stayers at home; and after an unsuccessful attempt to excite curiosity by allusions to their own day’s adventures, they relapsed into indignant silence. The keen eyes of the ladies failed not to observe the discomfort of the Pariahs: their hearts were touched; the outcasts were restored to favour, and admitted to a participation in their plans and projects. On assembling in the drawing-room after dinner, Edgar Ormerod redeemed his promise by producing a voluminous MS., which he was called upon to read forthwith. The approval was unqualified until the distribution of the parts, when each person had some improvement to suggest in his own: one wanted a character with a Greek costume another a soliloquy which had been given to some one else; and, a third, a comic song. The unfortunate author, though somewhat embarrassed, succeeded at length in pacifying, if not satisfying, all; and they agreed that the result of their labours would be so successful as to merit a larger audience than the home circle could supply; so notes were written on the instant to all acquaintances residing within a moderate distance, to be sent express on the following morning.

It is strange what contrary effects may result from the same circumstances occurring at different times. The next day was, if possible, more gloomy

and dispiriting than its predecessor, and yet no one complained. The amateurs, on the contrary, rather congratulated themselves that they should be interrupted by no morning visitors, and that their hostess’s impromptu invitations would be too welcome, in the dull state of neighbouring affairs, to afford a probability of any refusals. One or two of the sportsmen, certainly, doubted whether any man in his senses would have his horses out on such a day; but the acceptances which rapidly succeeded each other, proved that the wishes of the ladies had, in most instances, overruled not only the objections of masters, but even of coachmen. It is scarcely necessary to follow the party through the multifarious occupations of the morning, which seemed to them little more than a third the length of mornings in general. Lunch and dinner-time presented themselves in due course; evening drew on; the visitors arrived; and, greetings and coffee fairly over, the time for the commencement of the entertainment arrived also. The younger part of the home circle quietly disappeared from the room, but we must confess that for a considerable time no result followed; poor Mrs. Ormerod was rendered desperate by the impossibility of amusing twenty expectant people, and sent appealing messages to beg they would commence immediately. At an appointed signal Julia Wyndham placed herself at the piano, and executed a rather fierce arrangement of “*L’ombrosa notte vien*,” as a kind of preparation for what was to follow; and at length the folding-doors, which had so eagerly guarded the sacred precincts, were thrown open. As our limits will not admit of the introduction of even portions of that striking dialogue in which Edgar Ormerod revealed his ideas, we must content ourselves with a brief sketch of this plot, the originality of which will be at once apparent to every one. The first scene, then, represented night in the stronghold of a robber chief. This desperate character—entrusted to Langford Ormerod, rather on account of his possessing the largest whiskers of the party, than by virtue of any histrionic genius he had ever been known to display—was attired, in default of armour, in what was supposed to be the evening dress of the period; and was discovered, on the opening of the doors, engaged in bringing to reason a disconsolate and indignant “*damozel*,” named Bertha, otherwise Kate Southern, whom it appeared he had abstracted, with matrimonial intentions, from her father’s castle, under cover of night. He pointed out the arrangements he had made for her happiness, in the shape of a casket of jewels, and the sympathising attendant, who, in the person of Blanche Wyndham, waits to do her behests. Failing in his attempts by ordinary means to quiet the grief of his captive, and with some vague impression, probably, of the efficacy of music “to soothe the savage breast,” he summoned to his aid the minstrel attached to his establishment: Mr. Singleton, in Mrs. Ormerod’s puce velvet cloak, with roses on his shoes, accordingly entered, and sang partly to the lady, partly to the audience, his last new song. The strain selected, “*Beviam che tutto spiri l’ebbrezza*,” not having the soothing effect intended, the Knight proceeded to storm, and the lady judiciously put an end to the interview by fainting away, which she did with due regard to her drapery. In scene the second, the doors re-opened to a dungeon in the same castle, with a conspicuous straw bed in the corner, where the fair Bertha, in graceful despair, again excited the commiseration of the audience. In a short autobiographical soliloquy, she explained her resolution to die rather than wed her hated captor, or indeed any one but a certain noble esquire of her father’s household, named Osmond, who had been her companion from childhood. At this moment a figure in a monk’s dress silently entered, and revealed himself, to the equal astonishment of the lady and audience, as the aforesaid Osmond, who had gained admission in the disguise of a wandering friar. Although so recent an acquaintance, it appeared that the tyrant had given Osmond his whole confidence, and, more imprudent still, the key of Bertha’s dungeon, with directions to prepare her for the altar, at which he himself was to officiate in an hour’s time. The lover, however, only prepared for flight, by throwing over her dress his own monkish robe, the hood of which was to conceal her features in any dangerous emergency. After some little time devoted to love-making, which we could not but think rather unwise in their precarious circumstances, they made their exit; and the result proved that they escaped whilst the deluded Knight and his retainers were carousing. Before the opening of the last scene a long interval ensued, which was, however, fully explained by the extensive nature of the preparations. A Royal court was represented, as well as the limited conveniences would allow; the bride and bridegroom—for who could have the heart to separate them?—were crowned, robed, and throned as King and Queen, and presented a very magnificent appearance, having monopolised rather an unfair share of the public decorations; around them were artistically grouped all the members of the *corps dramatique*, arrayed in as much splendour as could be achieved upon their leavings. In a few moments Osmond presented himself, looking extremely happy, bringing with him the robber Knight in chains, looking extremely vindictive; having, with a band of devoted followers, stormed his castle and made him prisoner. The Monarch, who was evidently acquainted with the whole circumstances of the case, having sternly reproved the culprit for his villany, dismissed him to condign punishment. He then conferred the honour of knighthood upon Osmond as a reward for his prowess; and the father of Bertha, in private life the friend of the family, completed the general satisfaction by bestowing his daughter upon her preserver. Every one then walked about for some little time to exhibit their finery, and the termination of the Charade was announced. Immense applause succeeded; the word, which was *KNIGHTHOOD*, was easily divined, and the performers on their return to their ordinary sphere of action, were almost overpowered with compliments and thanks. Those individuals who considered their *moyenage* costumes becoming, did not take the trouble of changing them; so kings, queens, forlorn maidens, and robber knights mingled with nineteenth-century ladies and gentlemen in the polkas and waltzes which concluded this most successful evening.