



### THE EVENING PARTY.

LAS for human happiness that human enjoyments must, sooner or later, come to an end. We cannot devote all the year to mince-pies and pantomimes; there is a Black Monday for us all; and the arrival of February warns us that this melancholy period is fast approaching. The holidays of the winter season are over; the refreshing family réunions of Christmas are long past; the surprises of the "tree" are by this time quite forgotten; New Year's Day and Twelfth Night have been enjoyed; and the children have returned to school. The only festival that remains to us is that of St. Valentine; the pleasures of which, be it said, with all respect, are of a limited and exclusive, rather than of a social character. Something must be done. We have become too habituated to holidays, to be able to give them up at once; so indemnify ourselves for the two dull

months which are before us, ere we can hope for spring thoughts or spring pleasures, by a short supplementary season of evening parties; which, retaining somewhat of the joyous character of Christmas time, are often among the most agreeable of the year. In the country, indeed, which promises more congenial enjoyments for the summer, this is the height of the orthodox season. February is there the month usually selected for the recurrence of those grand annual festive gatherings which are among not the least important features of rural life. Let us bid adieu for a night to London, Mr. Blagrove and Madame Jullien, and wend our way to some promising field for observation in the vicinity of a flourishing country town, possessing what is popularly called "a neighbourhood;" not so far from the great city as to be too unsophisticated, or so near to it as to have lost, in the manners and customs of the

metropolis, its own peculiar characteristics. General descriptions, it must be acknowledged, are often as unsatisfactory as general invitations; we will, therefore, Asmodeus-like, introduce ourselves quietly into some mansion in a locality which possesses all the requisite attributes, and in which various circumstances, unimportant in themselves, but eloquent to the initiated, combine to satisfy us that an evening party is at hand. I have in my mind's eye the very house. It is a substantial, thriving looking residence, not without a claim to antiquity; for, though surrounded by no park, and approached by no avenue, it can boast a lawn smooth as velvet, and a cedar worthy of overshadowing the oldest ruin in the land. It seems to form a link between the "cottage of gentility" and the lodge-bounded demesne of the county family; and its owners probably occupy a similar position in the grade of society. That they are not behind the impressing spirit of the age, we may infer from the additions, evidently recent, of a handsome portico and well-designed conservatory. Within this abode all has been bustle and commotion from an early hour in the morning, and each one of its denizens is earnestly occupied in the accomplishment of his or her allotted duties. The only exception to the rule, perhaps, is the worthy head of the family, who, having found himself in the way wherever he went, has wisely improvised an engagement to look at an eligible piece of land which will shortly be on sale on a neighbouring estate. As the groom, "for this occasion only" transformed into a Mercury, is absent on some mission, of vital importance, to the nearest town, his master uncomplainingly saddles his own horse and quietly departs, promising to return in time to get cool and collected before his share of the duties of the day are in demand. Mamma, who may have been a thrifty well-trained clergyman's daughter, knowing that where a perfect *ensemble* is desired, the minor details must not be deemed unworthy of attention, has adjourned to fashion with her own experienced hands the turretted lobster castle which is to form so distinguished an ornament to her supper-table; and to superintend this anxious process of turning out of the more elaborate designs in cream and

jelly. Everything except the ice is to be home-made, yet good and elegant; and in the hands of so experienced a manager it is more than probable that the absence of confectioners' shops in the neighbourhood may be rather an advantage than otherwise. We can only judge from external appearances; but when, all preliminaries being completed, the tables are at length covered and arranged, we must confess that the *coup d'œil* is decidedly satisfactory. The absence of barley-sugar temples tempting no one to desecrate them; of miniature banners displaying the word "contract" as distinctly as though it were emblazoned upon them, and of similar artificial decorations, is advantageously supplied by a profusion of beautiful flowers and hot-house ferns, the very sight of which would to a London eye be a luxury in itself. After many journeys of observation and reform to the various points of view, the critical eye of the lady is at length satisfied; she acknowledges to herself that all former efforts have been surpassed, and having received from the family assembled in conclave a vote of approval and admiration, dismisses from her mind all anxiety as to the result.

During this interval, an equally busy and far more noisy scene is enacting in the spacious drawingroom. Three blooming, though it must be confessed rather disordered Graces, daughters of the house, are here to be found with the dear friends who have been admitted to a special share in those pleasures of preparation which will so much enhance the enjoyment of the evening. Some are occupied in adorning with evergreens every nook and corner, convenient or inconvenient, for the purpose. The rest are eagerly carrying into execution a brilliant idea with which one of the party has suddenly been inspired. It is neither more nor less than the transformation into an elegant boudoir of an adjoining sanctum belonging to the eldest brother, who, after a good-natured protest, lounges idly by to witness the dislodgment of his lares and penates: fishing-rods and foils, mantons and merchaums, are ignominiously expelled to remote hiding-places: may they be forthcoming when they are wanted! The moreen curtains which have been considered "good enough for Charles," are being replaced by lace ones; an elegant couch and various odd-shaped, fashionable-looking ottomans, which have been necessarily expelled from the drawingroom, are in course of substitution for his horse-hair chairs and sofa; and a chess-table, print-stand, and other trifles having been introduced, the effect is pronounced perfect. It would really be difficult to believe that those walls could ever have witnessed the lighting of a cigar, or the *entrée* of canine favourites more destructive to order than a sister's pet Blenheim.

These pleasant labours are at length abridged by the hasty early dinner, a kind of in-door pic-nic, with its usual scarcity of plate and attendants, which is, nevertheless, most cheerfully endured. Then follows the arrangement of the liberal contributions of owners which pour in during the day from friends and neighbours, and by the time six bouquets are achieved—no light task of itself—and innumerable vases filled, the gloom of a February evening has insensibly closed around them. At this opportune moment, a loud ring at the door bell announces the arrival by the afternoon train of the second brother from London, where he is studying for the bar. He is accompanied by some half-dozen select friends, whose good looks, good manners, and good dancing, are to give especial *éclat* to the entertainment. The house party, unmindful of their *déshabille*, hasten to receive and welcome the new-comers, who are speedily regaled with a substantial tea in the nursery, which is found to be the only room available for the purpose. During the hour thus devoted to the revival of their exhausted energies, a rapid approach to acquaintanceship is made by those of the circle who now meet for the first time, whilst former friendships are vigorously reviving. In due time the party separate to commence the duties of the toilet, each resolving, no doubt, to appear to the best advantage, and not indisposed to outshine his or her neighbour, though, of course, quite in a friendly way.

By-and-by, a strong odour of coffee diffuses itself throughout the house, and a general illumination takes place. After a somewhat protracted period of silence, the dressing-room doors open one by one, and the whole party is again re-assembled around the drawingroom fire. Marvellous, indeed, is the improvement effected in their appearance by the occupations of the last two hours: each might have been touched, like Cinderella, with the wand of a fairy godmother. The Graces aforesaid, in their fresh white dresses, relieved by crimson camellias, would not have been easily recognised as the trio of the morning, and do not look a whit less mischievous for the simplicity of attire on which mamma always insists in their own home. The travellers not unwilling, probably, to dissociate from themselves any unsatisfactory impressions which might have been derived from the rough coats and shooting boots in which they had made their *entrée*, have achieved a toilet more than usually *soignée*, and feel with complacency that the honour of the metropolis will suffer no discredit in their persons. The little interval of leisure which precedes the arduous duties of reception is, we observe, variously employed. Some are gossiping about the expected guests, others already contracting and registering engagements. Here a couple are testing the floor in a *valse*, and there Charles is undergoing a lecture on the impropriety of devoting himself too exclusively to the beauties of the evening, to the prejudice of the claims of their elder sisters. The culprit only laughs, and will by no means promise amendment; but his mistress is consoled by the chivalry of the London phalanx, who entreat—sincerely, it is to be hoped—that they may be made useful in any way, even to the extent of dancing with married ladies, old maids, school girls, or dowdies in general.

The first grating of carriage-wheels is at length heard on the gravel, the whole party involuntarily draw themselves up, mentally and physically, for the reception of the new comers; who do not, however, make their appearance for some time. They are, no doubt, lingering over the glass till shame shall compel them to quit it, and taking coffee to the full extent of human ability, in the vain

hope of sharing with other visitors their undesired pre-eminence in the virtue of punctuality. But all is in vain, the servant is waiting to announce them, and they have no alternative but to enter upon the scene, which they do with a frank, cordial air, intended to imply that they have come early to enjoy as much as possible of their friends' society, and not by any means because the carriage has to return for the convenience of a second detachment of the family. A conversation arises on the state of the roads, the maturity of the moon—no unimportant element in our country entertainments—and a recent party in the neighbourhood, until fresh arrivals occur to create a diversion. Group after group enters the room, some boldly, some deprecatingly; but each bearing, to the eye of a casual observer, a general likeness to the other. Occasionally, however, our attention is arrested by one which is not without some decided characteristics of its town. Here, for instance, we observe a proud father and mother with the young daughter, who has evidently been permitted to anticipate her legitimate *début* on this occasion, and looks not quite at ease in her new dress. There, is a couple whom the slight nervousness of the gentleman taken in connexion with the white *noiré* of the lady, proclaim to be bride and bridegroom, and by virtue of their newly-acquired dignity, the hero and heroine of the night. The lady will be duly escorted in all honour to the Dowagers' *daïs*, whence, I suspect, she will take the earliest opportunity of effecting her escape. Here, again, is a young clergyman of High Church views, who has come on account of "his sister;" he looks rather guilty, but his scruples will probably not interfere with his ultimate enjoyment of the evening's pleasure. At length the arrival of the family of the county member, with such guests as may be enjoying their hospitality, proclaims that the business of the evening must commence in earnest. The only obstacle is unfortunately rather an important one, the non-arrival of the musicians, concerning whom distressing surmises occupy the mind of the hostess. Have they proved faithless, and broken their long-standing engagement with herself in favour of opposition festivities somewhere else; or have they been waylaid or upset in their transit from the distant town? Either suggestion seems equally alarming; for notwithstanding our friend's well-known benevolence, it is to be feared that her anxious thoughts are now directed to them in their abstract capacities of harp and cornet, rather than as mere human beings. Every one is on the *qui vive*, and something must be done; so the second daughter, who has a musical reputation to sustain, plays a lively polka with great energy and effect. The ice is broken. The countenances of all, save those who have no partners, light up perceptibly, and matters generally begin to brighten. During the progress of the dance, the delinquent harmonists present themselves, and take advantage of the confusion to glide quietly into their accustomed corner; the mind of the hostess is relieved and "all goes merry as a marriage bell." The ladies seem resolved to honour the occasion with their best smiles as well as dresses, the gentlemen, upon the whole with their most attentive manners and active exertions. Some few, it is true, are at first a little bashful, and content themselves with standing in the hall and casting envious glances through the open door at the progress made by their more adventurous brethren, but fortunately the friends from London are a host in themselves, and are prepared to do duty for the defaulters, were they twice as numerous.

The impromptu boudoir is most successful, and many a young couple bless it, tempting seclusion. They stroll in perhaps, after a dance, for rest, and a little quiet, sensible conversation over the print stand; and in due time yield their place to others, for the sense too often becomes sentiment, and when that happens, the attractions of the boudoir yield to those of the conservatory. Many a little episode—now touching, now amusing—will those orange trees and Chinese lanterns witness in the course of this eventful evening: but we must be as discreet as they are. Meanwhile, dance has succeeded dance, and the hours have sped so rapidly that the young people (we will not answer for the *chaperons*) are quite astonished when the arrival of twelve o'clock is announced by a movement of the seniors to the supper table. The first proceedings of the matrons of the conclave, who are probably meditating similar hospitalities, is to look round in quest of ideas and novelties, and this duty performed they betake themselves to practical experiments on the good cheer before them. After a reasonable time, the hostess gives a signal for departure, being not unmindful of the necessities of her younger friends, who, headed by one or two furnished and adventurous couples, crowd in with great despatch. By a little management, seats are found for all, and the gentlemen attend to the wants of their fair partners with not the less alacrity that they are able at the same time to minister to their own. At length, the secession of some of the more inveterate dancers produces a general return to the drawingroom with greatly-improved capacity for enjoyment. About two o'clock, the member's party take a gracious leave, and their example is followed by the more aristocratic portion of the guests. One could almost fancy that on their departure the hilarity increases, rather than otherwise; certain it is, that for some time the spirit of the evening does not flag in the least. At length, however, farewells become more frequent, and unwilling daughters are ruthlessly carried off, to the despair of prospective partners. The moment arrives when the last lady is handed to her carriage—a seat on the box being secured for the latest of those stray young men who come no one knows how, and always trust to circumstances and charity for their conveyance home—and the hall door closes for the night. A few moments are devoted to mutual congratulations on the unparalleled success of the evening, and after a series of leave-takings, rather impressive, by the way, on the part of the London friends, the ladies retire to sleep or talk, and the gentlemen return to the supper-table to finish the lobster-castle and a fresh bottle of champagne, which papa has liberally ordered as a finale. In half an hour silence reigns throughout the house.