

## APRIL.—THE FIRST DINNER PARTY.



On a certain evening in the month of April a young married couple were seated before their dining-room fire, discussing the propriety of a step, as yet unprecedented in their household career. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley had, as they remarked to each other, with many little felicitations, of no particular consequence to the reader, been married almost a year. They had some time since completed the round of complimentary entertainments, with which friends and acquaintances had heralded their promotion to the sphere of married life, and the time had now arrived, they agreed, when these hospitalities should be returned. A dinner party was due to society, and a dinner party they resolved to give, without any unnecessary delay. The idea had indeed found entrance into the minds of both, some little time before the fact was acknowledged by either; for each had some private motive for preserving silence on the subject. Charles Stanley was perfectly aware, from divers little misadventures connected with the domestic arrangements of the establishment, that his little wife, was, to say the least of it, not an experienced manager; and, although this circumstance had never seriously interfered with his own comfort, or excited much uneasiness in his mind, he had misgivings that it would be wise to avoid embarking her in the serious enterprise of a dinner party, until she could manage a refractory servant without sending for her aunt, or provide for a stray visitor without a hint from himself. It was not, however, any doubt of her own capacity for carrying through the undertaking, which had checked the idea in the mind of the bride. No one could for a moment have attributed to Mrs. Stanley conceit as a general characteristic; in respect to her capacity for housekeeping, however, the tone she took in conversation was positively arrogant. It was no mistrust of herself therefore, that deterred her from the proposal of a dinner party; it was solely the reflection that it would be so serious a departure from the principle of strict economy, which she had laid down for herself, and to which she had adhered as far as lay in her power, not unfrequently to her husband's vexation.

When, however, the word was by chance spoken, which revealed their congeniality of feeling as to the propriety of the step, regarded in a social aspect, all lets and hindrances vanished, as if by magic. Charles assured his wife, that on the strength of a new client, he could conscientiously give her *carte blanche* as to expense; and thus quieted her scruples; whilst his own delicate hint that (just to save herself trouble—for no other reason in the world), he thought she had better take counsel with his mother or her aunt, on the details of the affair, though not finding positive acceptance, called forth such confident promises of success, that, being of a trusting disposition, he felt quite at ease, and dismissed the subject from his mind. It was, however, not unfrequently recalled by the appearance at their family dinner of certain mysterious novelties, which he rather nervously suspected to be experiments having reference to the great day. Mrs. Stanley had from the first moment resolved that the glories of her dinner party should be the result of her own unaided genius; for she intended it to be a triumph in more ways than one. Its elegance should confirm Charles's faith in her for the rest of their lives; should reveal to her aunt a mine of domestic knowledge, concerning the existence of which she knew that relative to be very sceptical; and, finally, should be instrumental in compelling her mother-in-law, that prophetess of evil, before whom she would lay her accounts, to acknowledge herself equalled, if not surpassed in good management.

All these achievements seemed feasible enough in theory; but, as the three weeks' respite glided away, Mrs. Stanley found her cares and responsibilities pressing more heavily upon her; whilst, unfortunately, her confidence in her own ability to meet them decreased in a proportionate ratio. In a moment of deep depression, it did occur to her to have recourse to the confectioner, and to cast all her cares upon him; but that was a confession of weakness too humiliating to be seriously entertained; so she expended a guinea in the purchase of a most elaborate cookery-book, containing plates of wonderful repasts, with descriptive letter-press, and, after deep study, devised her three courses in a manner which she fondly hoped might eventuate satisfactorily.

The important day dawned at last; too soon for her wishes. Proceedings were opened at an early hour in the morning, by the appearance of the cook, who had scornfully rejected all offers of material assistance, but who now de-

clared, with a burst of tears and a look of injured innocence, that she never could get through what remained to be done before seven o'clock that evening, as her mistress must know perfectly well. The heart of the latter sank within her, as she listened to this awful announcement; but, instead of relieving her own feelings by giving notice to quit, the exigency of the case obliged her to administer a glass of wine and words of encouragement, by means of which diplomacy the business of the day was once more set in motion. No very great *contretemps* occurred during the morning, except that the pine-apple, which had been purchased a wonderful bargain, and selected from a lot of ten thousand, as per advertisement, proved, on its arrival, to have degenerated so marvelously, that Mrs. Stanley was compelled at the last moment to sally forth into the neighbourhood for the purpose of replacing it, and moreover to consider herself fortunate in securing a presentable one, even at a price which would counterbalance all her little economies for weeks to come. In consequence, too, of this unexpected errand, her toilette was so far delayed, that the first knock came before it was completed; and, although, by using a degree of expedition, not at all advantageous to her personal appearance, she was in readiness to receive the second detachment of guests, the ceremony was performed, she felt with precisely the same *distract*, anxious air which she had so often reproached in other hostesses, but which would henceforth excite in her the deepest sympathy. The profound calmness exhibited by her husband did not tend to re-assure her in the least, for she knew he was relying on those promises of success with which she had been so liberal three weeks before; but which, at that moment, she would have been sorry to confirm.

Meantime, the due number of portly married couples, and other guests, had made their appearance. They were chiefly strangers to each other, and having for the most part donned with their velvet dresses and white cravats an icy dignity of demeanour which was as yet untawed, the period before the announcement of dinner promised to be more than usually dismal. Minute after minute glided away, and in an interval of unbroken silence the clock chimed the half hour with unpleasant distinctness. Mrs. Stanley's uneasiness became almost unbearable, for she fancied that her mother-in-law looked triumphant, and was certain that her husband stirred the fire with a frequency and impetuosity not at all characteristic of his usually placid demeanour. She had watched the door so long in vain, that it seemed an unexpected piece of good fortune to every one, when it really did open to the welcome announcement of dinner. But at this juncture a new difficulty presented itself for the hostess. Having rather a taste for lions, she had invited, on her own responsibility, a very young poet whom she had recently encountered in society. This youth considered himself by virtue of his "*Poetic Weeds*," the most distinguished individual in the assembly, and gave public evidence of his opinion, by offering his arm to the lady of the house, who, perplexed by many anxieties, had not presence of mind to decline it, though she pertained to a certain rich middle-aged gentleman, from whom Charles had expectations. This injured man was too much aghast at this infringement of his rights to think of repairing his loss, and was therefore left to follow the procession in solitary state, and to occupy the odd seat at the corner of the table.

The first course might have been considered successful, for, although competent authorities afterwards pronounced that the white soup was a little too thick, the brown a little too thin, and that the fish might have been fresher, all looked fair externally, and at any rate every one was occupied. But, with the *entrées* came mortification for the hostess. They consisted of pet compositions of the cook, for which the attendants were unable to find a name, or of imperfect realizations of the creations of M. Soyer; but in both cases the result was the same; people inquired into these mysteries only with their eyes. The *pièces de résistance* were therefore in request; but those who got a supply of viands, in vain waited for vegetables; and there seemed every probability that one modest damsel would be obliged to satisfy herself with the temperate refreshment of her roll; for the waiters were tyros in their art—economical experiments which, like the pine-apple, turned out badly. Mrs. Stanley was keenly sensitive to the fact that her guests concluded the second division of their gastronomical operations with great celebrity; but so it was, and the table was cleared for the sweets, during an awful pause. Every one appeared to be searching for an idea; but the combined intellects of twenty people could only originate two invitations to take wine, which, of course, led to no conversational consequences. At this inauspicious juncture, an attendant approached the unhappy hostess with an air of confidential misery; her two supporters ostentatiously turned away their heads, and she received the overwhelming intelligence that the pudding—the confectioner's juggling—on which she relied for consolation, had met with an accident on its journey up stairs, and was but a heap of ruins. She had just strength to desire that the table might be covered in some way, and then swallowed the remnant of her champagne to nerve her for what was to come. With the usual want of tact, which distinguishes servants in general, and hired waiters in particular, the first object which relieved the monotonous expanse of white table-cloth, was the *débris* of the pudding—an unwholy, incomprehensible mass, at which every one had ample opportunity of gazing and wondering, before the entrance of some more recognisable condiments, enabled them to resume their repast. The gentlemen fell back upon the game, though it had been out of season for a month, and the ladies were faithful to the jelly; for the melancholy top dish was, by common consent, ignored. It might have been observed, that when the cheese and croutons were offered, a serious onslaught was made upon them; while of the ornamented sponge-cake, generally held sacred at dessert, not a morsel escaped. The reader may draw his own conclusions from these facts. It only remains to add that the ice was perfect, but came to an end before it reached the middle-aged gentleman at the corner, whose wrath at this succession of injuries was not appeased for many a long day.

It may perhaps be supposed that Mrs. Stanley's trials were over when she quitted the dining-room, but such was by no means the case. The ladies looked gloomy and would not amalgamate. One had caught cold from a draught; another had a spot on her brocade dress; and for both misfortunes the hostess was evidently considered responsible. Then came some visitors who had been asked for the evening, but who, not being perfectly informed of the nature of the entertainment, made their appearance in full ball costume. It is much to be feared that the two dreary quadrilles which were instituted in their honour by the kind assistance of some accommodating parents of families, scarcely rewarded them for the brilliancy of their preparations and the trouble of coming.

No coachmen were made impatient, or their steeds' health endangered, on this particular evening, by unnecessary delays. The more courteously of the guests, on taking leave, muttered something about a delightful evening; but those very persons were afterwards the most vociferous in pronouncing the affair a failure. And a failure it was, as Mrs. Stanley frankly acknowledged to her husband. He behaved nobly on the occasion, and even invited some special bachelor friends to dinner the following week, to prove his confidence in her. On this occasion the young bride did not disdain counsel and assistance, and the result was a success so complete as to obliterate from every mind but her own all recollection of the mischances connected with her First Dinner Party.