

JANUARY.—THE FANCY BALL.



CHRISTMAS was over, the pantomimes on their last legs, and the new burlesque had reached its thirtieth night. I had assisted at so many dinners and dances, that turkeys and *tempêtes* had lost for me all their interest. My chimney-piece exhibited only a ghostlike series of invitations to bygone parties, and old editions of paid bills; and the future presented nothing more cheering to my speculations than those dreary two months which intervene—a sort of *saison de pénitence*—between the gas-light existence of Christmas and the sunshine of spring. At such a time, the following brief note, which reached me, Peregrine Singleton, one gloomy evening at the latter end of January, was not a little welcome, as, at all events, suggesting an idea, if not giving absolute promise, of a pleasure:—"Dear Mr. Singleton,—We are going to hold a "Court of Misrule" here to-morrow evening, and upon your presenting yourself, not later than eight o'clock—of course in Court dress—you will be admitted.

"Very truly yours,
"FANNY HARLAND."

A Fancy Ball, at twelve hours' notice—for such was evidently the intent of this quaint *annonce*—seemed, at the first blush of it, rather a hazardous speculation, but I had confidence in my friend; and, though Portia's Leaden Casket, which "rather threatened than did promise aught," was scarcely less eloquent, I determined upon the risk, and accepted the invitation.

The notice given afforded, as was probably intended, no time for devising anything very elaborate in the shape of the indispensable Court dress. All was evidently designed to be impromptu; and I could, therefore, only appeal to the lady portion of my home circle for such advice and assistance as their taste might suggest and the time admit of. Fortunately for us on such occasions, next to costuming themselves, there is nothing our lady friends enjoy more than presiding over the toilet of other people; and my appeal, therefore, was not made in vain. Shreds and patches of bygone silks and satins were routed out; and by eight o'clock the following evening, with the extraneous aid of sixpennyworth of *crêpe* hair and a dash of rouge, I found myself at my friend's house as good a Prince of Misrule as terry velvet, sarsnet ribbons, peacock's feathers, and borrowed jewellery could render me.

A low buzz from a circle of quaint, wholly unrecognisable characters assembled round the fire, as I made my appearance, a searching look of inquiry, and a burst of laughter when my identity was discovered, afforded an agreeable tribute to the success, so far, of my contribution to the general entertainment, and left me at liberty to pursue some investigations on my own account. A very short time sufficed to satisfy me that, for the success of the evening, there was nothing to fear. Portia's Leaden Casket had yielded a prize. The party, which I found had owed its origin to a box of costumes and old armour left in my friend's charge by an artist friend on a journey to Rome, consisted of some twenty persons, all sufficiently advanced in social wisdom to recognise the pleasure and profit of now and then playing the fool, and all sufficiently intimate not to mind doing so in one another's company. The Grays—four sons and three daughters—whose Charade Parties in Suffolk-terrace have obtained among their friends the enviable reputation—due, by the way, to few such entertainments—of amusing the audience as well as the actors; Percy Butler, known among his friends as O'Trigger Butler, by reason of his unrivalled performance of *Sir Lucius* in private theatricals; Frank Standish and his wife and sister, all musical, who, in addition to knowing how to play, possess the far rarer accomplishment of knowing when to play and when to leave off; with a house circle of six good and true souls, made up a party which dispelled all misgivings as to the result of the experiment. By the time we had finished tea, the ice of novelty had satisfactorily thawed, and the fun was fast approaching to boiling heat. The difficulties we had experienced in devising costumes on such short notice formed all in turn the subject of a laugh, or the material for a jest. The lion of England which surmounted the regal crown of the gorgeous *King Cole* Frank Standish had made of himself, had been borrowed, he was compelled to confess, from Johnny's Noah's Ark, to the great despair of its original owner; and the magnificent ruff—the admiration of all beholders—of his wife as *Queen Elizabeth*, had been robbed from a quire of her husband's brief paper. Laura Harland, who was of a somewhat mechanical genius, and an antiquarian tone of mind, had devised a head-dress from Strutt, which was a marvel to society how she ever got into it; and the unrivalled representative of *Sir Lucius*, with a handleless sauceman on his head, and a *gig-umbrella* over it, imparted a life-like resemblance to his rendering of *Nimrod* by a rich Cork brogue, which he insisted was the true ancient *Hermislan*, as the cuneiform inscriptions, when properly deciphered, would doubtless testify. How we laughed when Charles Harland's mustachios wouldn't keep on; and his brother's helmet (Tom Harland, as *Julius Caesar*), an ingenious contrivance of tinfoil, from a tea-chest, nearly stifled him, because it wouldn't come off. How we spoke impromptu addresses, and paid forfeits when we failed; danced Gavottes under the superintendence of Charles Gray (appropriately attired as *Steady* in the "Quaker"), who had acquired that accomplishment at a dancing academy in the days of his youth; and improvised Corantos, under the guidance of the archaeologically-minded Laura.

Who is there can fix upon paper the hundred minute particles of enjoyment

which make the aggregate of a pleasant evening? The thing is not to be done. Snuffle it, then, to say that the Court of Misrule proved a decided success. The entire absence of all pretence—for which, indeed, there had been no time—afforded no room for mortification; and where there was no effort, there could, of course, be no failure. Every one contributed a quota to the general enjoyment, and drew out his or her share from the common stock in exchange for it. All were gratified, and all unanimous in agreeing that the Court of Misrule, if the last of the season, was not to be the last of its race.

A year passed away, and the Court of Misrule was well nigh forgotten, when I received one evening the following note:—"Mrs. CHARLES HARLAND at Home, Wednesday, 26th January, Half-past Nine. Uniforms and fancy dresses will be welcome."

A host of pleasant visions rose up before my eyes as I called to mind our former evening's entertainment, and hastened to despatch my acceptance of an invitation which promised, from old associations, so much similar enjoyment. Then came the important consideration of dress. With a three weeks' warning, any such impromptu arrangements as answered very well on the former occasion would be out of the question. Something new must be struck out—"Things unattempted yet." How many of Mr. Jeff's costume prints I turned over in the next fortnight without arriving at any satisfactory result, I am afraid to say. My private theatrical wardrobe was confined to a mask of eccentric conformation, a souvenir of the *Bal de l'Opéra*, at Paris; and a false beard and mustachios, a bequest from my friend Tom Woodcock on his quitting St. Thomas's for a quiet practice in Norfolk—good properties enough in their way, but obviously quite unequal to the occasion. My next-door neighbour in chambers would, I knew, be delighted to accommodate me with the uniform of the North Hants Yeomanry Company, in which he has for some years held a commission with honour to himself and advantage to his country; but then, apart from my being deficient in the black whiskers and martial deportment which enabled my friend to lend dignity to the trappings of that distinguished corps, he rode, I knew, twelve stone, and I and *Romeo's* apothecary were cast in twin moulds. My friend Tom Wye de Wake (of the Waste Paper Office), who was a very cyclopædia of information on topics of this nature, was profuse in his offers of service. He had a complete suit of everyday costume, white on one side, and black on the other, which he assured me had earned him immortal renown at Jullien's last *Bal Masqué*. He was likewise the happy possessor of a green velvet polonaise, with hessians to match, which, in the early days of the polka, had been rather a hit at the Polish Ball of 1847. Neither of these suggestions aided me much. I doubted my capacity to give satisfaction, as two gentlemen at once, and I entertained a decided objection to hessians. I had almost reached the depths of despair, when one night, a few days only before the all-important evening, a brilliant idea flashed upon my mind, at a whist party—I would go as the Knave of Clubs.

An awning, a carpet from the road, and a crowd of eager lookers-on, confirm my impression as to the elaborate character of the whole affair. Various Italian Peasants, Débardeurs, Charles the Seconds, ladies of the last century, and gentlemen of no century all, fill the staircase as I enter—the whole reminding me of a picture I remember once seeing of the Elysian Fields, in which Edward the Black Prince, Benjamin Franklin, Homer, and George Fox, are engaged in familiar converse together. Our hostess, looking very queenly, and rather tired, as Marie Antoinette, is at the drawing-room door to receive us: and this labour, onerous enough under any circumstances, is in her case rendered painfully toilsome by the duty of addressing a compliment of as discriminating a character as may be to each of us as we make our appearance.

For the first hour or two all looked promising enough. There was no dancing, certainly; the room was much too full for any such enjoyment, and the whole place was hot to suffocation; but the novelty of the scene, the bright lights, varied dresses, and lively music, coupled with that determination for enjoyment to which one generally winds oneself up on such occasions, carried one on very well for a time, and gratified curiosity supplied not ineffectually the place of actual enjoyment. At length, somehow, a horrible suggestion—dismissed at once, yet returning—flashed across my mind that the affair was—will it be credited?—actually dull. This idea, scouted at first as an impossibility, forced itself gradually into attention, until it stood out an actual fact, impossible to ignore.

Even the choice spirits of the former evening—good and true souls, and equal, it might have been inferred, to any emergency—were no exception to the general dullness, and seemed each to labour under his or her peculiar grief. Fanny Harland, who looked a very charming Zuleika, had her *memento mori* in her own familiar friend, who had presented herself a very much handsomer edition, in amber satin, of the same character. Laura the Archaeological was in even greater despair, for Madame Crinoline, in the manufacture of the outer tunic of the dress of Philippa of Hainault, as described by Froissart, had put on an edging of mink instead of minever; thus destroying entirely, as she justly observed, the whole value of the costume. Frank Standish had devoted much anxious care to making up for Titian's Charles V.; or, as his wife, not learned in Robertson, persisted in calling him Charles XII., and nobody recognised him, and even "the friend of the family" (that ubiquitous personage known to all party-goers), who had aspired to make a hit as Uncle Tom, and had blacked his face conscientiously for the purpose, was so weighed down by the dullness around, as to recall less that popular character than the slave, whose duty it was to whisper of the fallibility of pleasure at the Fancy Balls of the ancients. As for myself truth compels me to confess that I was no more fortunate than my neighbours. I was the very superlative of stupidity—Boodledom embodied! The Knave of Clubs—such are all human expectations—was a dead failure; and that was the truth. No two people were agreed as to what it meant, and the only point upon which society seemed unanimous was, that it was frightful.

Here was a climax to a three weeks' preparation! here was a result to all my researches in *re vestiaris*! to all my anticipations of renown! When I entered the house that evening, a sensation which should strike my male acquaintances pale with envy, a corner table at supper with the belle of the room, and every dance with her afterwards, had been among the most certain of my expectations; a couple of hours afterwards a cool seat among the cacti, and a gossip with the least pretentious of my lady friends, would have amply met my requirements; and the time at length arrived when all my desires were bounded by the arm-chair I had so rashly quitted in my own snugery, "the unembarrassed brow," and a meerschaum of gebell. Luckily, these enjoyments were beyond the hand malign of fortune, and one o'clock saw me in comfortable possession of them. The festive attire gave place to the old shooting-coat; and the aspirations for social successes, in which I had so unwarily indulged three hours before, were profitably exchanged for a good-humoured speculation into the causes of their failure.

The result to which I arrived, and which is heartily at the service of those of my readers who have not made the discovery for themselves, was, that Horace Walpole, that wise social philosopher, never spoke more truly than when, in writing to his friend Mann to order for him a birthday suit in Paris, he apologetically added, "But, after all, it is an excessively foolish thing to dress oneself out in fine clothes in cold blood."