NATURAL SELECTION.

A ROMANCE OF CHELSEA VILLAGE AND EAST HAMPTON TOWN.

By H. C. Bunner

PART II.

RANDOLPH'S communication was not a surprise to his mother. In such matters the maternal instinct needs but a small clew for its wonderful intuitive processes. It is not often that a young man surprises his mother in this sort of avowal. There are such cases, but they are rare. I knew one dear old lady whose son took her aside one day. "I'm engaged," he said. "I know it, dear," the sweet old gentlewoman replied, "and I wish you would tell Sally Hastings that I shall love her as though she were my own daughter." "But it isn't Sally Hastings, mother," said the young man, who had never been a steadfast young man, "it's Miss McIlvaine, from Tonawanda."

Mrs. Wykoff had known for some months that her son was a constant visitor at the Leetes. She knew that there were two girls in the family, and that the younger was a pretty girl, and superior to the rest of the Leetes in taste and education. She knew, also, that however valuable Mr. Leete's aid and advice might be to her son, the young man's enthusiasm for his new work was not great enough to make him forget a social code acquired by inheritance, inculcated in early youth, and ratified by the authority of Harvard College. There was but one interpretation to be put upon his devotion to these new friends.

All this Mrs. Wykoff knew from the little her son had told her. It was little enough. Randolph was not secretive or deceitful, but he rarely talked personalities, and of his own doings he spoke no oftener than was necessary. He had a young man's sensitiveness to the criticism and comment that fall to the lot of the open-mouthed enthusiast. And then his position was not so clear to himself that he could make it clear to others. Do not blame him. If you were falling deeper and deeper into love, and knew that the object of your affections could not be acceptable to your kind parents, would you issue daily bulletins of the progress of your case, with conscientious diagnosis and prognosis? Was there ever a pair of lovers who did not yearn to keep their common joy eternally a selfish secret? Frown all you care to, stern censor—if all the lovers had their way, there would not be desert islands enough to go around.

Mrs. Wykoff knew something, and guessed a great deal, yet she could not act either on the certainty or the suspicion. She knew that she could not oppose Randolph. He had all his father's self-confidence and stubborn courage without—the widow sadly thought—without, as yet, John Wykoff's clear judgment, fine sense of right and wrong, and unselfish devotion to principle.

John Wykoff's wife knew well the Wykoff strain. She had married John Wykoff when his father, by ill-judged speculations, had ruined not himself only but all the Wykoff family, root and branch, and had made himself hated by the whole body of his kith and kin. She had been her husband's best friend and counsellor through all the years that it took to build up again the great shipping-house of Wykoff & Son, and during those years she had led a pinched, narrow, meagre life. Then, when the new fortune was made, and the honor and credit of the old firm reestablished, it was her tact that won them admission to the society from which Grandfather Wykoff's recklessness and their own poverty had exiled them. It was her task to renew old associa-

tions, to strengthen long-enfeebled ties, to close up breaches, and negotiate reconciliations. She had to bear snubs and slights; she had to win her right to respect and esteem in a long and hard fight; and all that she had to do and bear was done and borne, not for her own sake, but for the sake of her husband and her boy. For herself she had no need to take thought; she was a Broadwood, of Philadelphia, and her family thought that she lowered herself when she married the son of a bankrupt Wykoff.

The struggle had ended years ago, and now Mrs. Wykoff was a widow, still handsome, rich in money and in friends. The discipline of her life had not been lost on her. Her nature, that was always sweet, had grown strong in troublous times, and she was, at forty-five, a chastened woman of the world. I think the world makes as many saints as sinners.

She received her son's story with a calm acceptance of the situation that ought to have put him on his guard. To be sure, she cried a little, but only for a moment; and for the rest she was all loving interest and attention. It must be said for Randolph that, having come to confession, he made a good, honest, clean breast of it. He made no attempt to put an imaginative gilding on the Leetes. In speaking of the family he dwelt only on their unimpeachable probity and respectability. Of Celia he could truthfully say that her manners and her speech were correct. If he dwelt too much on her intelligence, on her cleverness, and on her understanding of and sympathy with his hopes and ambitions, it must be kept in mind that Celia was an uncommonly good listener.

"I am thinking of your happiness, my dear," his mother said; "I trust I am not selfish. I could have wished, of course, that it had been someone who — someone whom I knew and loved, but——"

There lurked in this broken sentence an allusion that Randolph understood — an allusion to a cherished hope of his mother's. Perhaps he felt in some way guilty, for he made no direct reply, saying only:

"You will know Celia, mother, and you will love her. You cannot help it."

"I hope so," said the poor woman, with the best smile that she had for the occasion. "When shall I see her? Would

it not be well for me to call on her mother."

Randolph Wykoff went away from this interview with an easy mind and a heart filled with loving admiration of his mother. She was a wonderful woman, he thought, thus to combine feminine gentleness with masculine common-sense. How kindly and how wisely she had taken it! It did not come into his mind that in the course of that brief conversation he had been led to propose and to pledge himself to two things which he had never thought of before —first, that there should be no announcement of his engagement to Celia —no actual engagement, in fact—for a year to come; second, that the engagement should not be of less than a year's duration from the date of the announcement. These two ideas seemed to have been of his own conception. He knew, or he thought he knew, how much personal annoyance his marriage to Celia Leete would bring him. He had no desire to add to this annoyance, or to be guilty of a precipitancy which he himself could not excuse. His world would be ill-spoken enough; it was not for him to justify unkind criticism. It came to him as the most natural thing imaginable that Celia Leete ought to be introduced to some of his friends, at least, as Celia Leete, before they knew her as his betrothed. And he could hardly get his present business off his hands and feel free to devote himself to a wife short of a year or two of hard work.

Three days later Mrs. Wykoff was sitting in the darkened front parlor of the Leete house on the hair-cloth sofa under the chromo of the "Old Oaken Bucket." On the opposite wall hung the ambrotype of Mrs. Leete's mother, taken at the age of eighty-seven. Mrs. Leete's mother showed a mouth that seemed to be simply a straight line where the lips turned in. What little hair she had hung in a large flat festoon on either side of her head. A broad lace collar covered her shoulders. It was fastened under the chin by a brooch of vast size, which was, in fact, a box with a glass front, designed, apparently, to contain specimens of the hair of deceased members of the wearer's family, after the depressing fashion of the days of ambrotypes and inchoate civilization. On the face of Mrs. Leete's mother was an expression of stern resolve. She was sitting for her picture, and she was sitting hard.

Mrs. Wykoff was gazing hopelessly at this monument of respectability when

Mrs. Leete entered the room, red in the face from a hasty change of dress, and agitated by a nervousness the existence of which she would not have admitted to herself.

Why does your thoroughbred collie bark at the tramp or the peddler within your gates, and greet shabbiest gentlehood with a friendly wag of the tail? It is because there is a difference in human beings, just as there is in dogs, and the dogs know it. The human beings know it, too, although there are some who belie their knowledge—who, having learned that the rank is but the guinea's stamp and that the man's the gowd for a' that, go about trying to make themselves and others believe that there is no such thing as an alloy in the world, no counterfeit coin, no base metal.

Mrs. Leete was agitated even to her inmost spiritual recesses when she saw this handsome and well-dressed woman rise and come forward to meet her, with such an easy grace and dignity—with such a soft rustling of her black raiment. It was five minutes at least before the perfect tact that went with these outward and visible things had put the hostess at her ease.

After a little, Celia came shyly into the room, with cold hands and a pale face. Mrs. Wykoff's heart leaped in pleased surprise when she saw the girl of her son's choice. She kissed Celia almost with tenderness, and she felt a genuine thankfulness for the child's delicate beauty and her modest bearing. "I can understand it now," she thought, "and it is better than I had dared to hope."

But presently in came Mr. Leete, in his Sunday broadcloth, with a new collar making him very uncomfortable about the chin, and with him came Dorinda, red as to her bodice and black as to her skirts and wonderful as to the dressing of her hair, and all was not so well with Mrs. Wykoff.

Mrs. Wykoff's visit lasted scarcely an hour, yet, when she had gone, every member of the family except Celia felt that affairs wore a new and less pleasing aspect. There was no longer a delightful certainty about the prospective alliance of the Leetes to one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the country. Three days before, Randolph Wykoff had asked Mr. Leete for his daughter's hand, and the offer had been accepted with no longer hesitation than was absolutely demanded by the self-respect of the head of the house. Since then, all the family had lived in a rose-tinted dream. Now, Mrs. Wykoff's friendly, informal chat had somehow served to marshal before their eyes an array of hard, cold, unwelcome facts. How had it been done? They did not know. They could not blame Mrs. Wykoff; she had been amiability itself. Yet there were the facts, patent to all of them. Why, it was Mr. Leete himself who had advanced the idea that for two young people to talk of marriage after three months of acquaintance was simply absurd. It was he who had said that people—he did not perhaps know what people, but, in fact, *people*—would comment with justifiable severity upon such heedless haste. Certainly the suggestion that at least a year must elapse before the announcement of the engagement had come from him; and none of the house of Leete was sufficiently versed in the subtleties of polite diplomacy to inquire how the notion came *to* Mr. Leete.

It was at Popper Leete, in very truth, that Mrs. Wykoff had directed her masked batteries, and with more effect than she suspected. She had touched lightly on Randolph's youth, his inexperience, his impulsive nature, and she had called attention to the undeniable truth that young men do not always know their own minds. Mr. Leete had taken the hint, and to his mind it had an exaggerated significance.

"I d'no but what she's right," he said to his wife; "mebbe we've been too easy about sayin' 'yes.' She's a business-woman, and she's got a good, sound head. Folks useter say that John Wykoff and wife was as good a business-firm as there was in town. Now, she knows this young feller, an' what do we know about him? Nothin', when you come right down *to* it. We don't know what his ideas are, or what sort of a man he is, anyway. We don't know how he spends his evenin's, or what he does with himself when we don't see him. Now, s'pose he was on'y foolin' with Celia, and was to get tired of her

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an' skip out to Europe, some day eruther? We can't tell. S'pose he was to marry her and then turn out bad? Look at the way them Newport folks are all the time gittin' divorced an' bein' shown up in the noozpapers. How do we know but what he's bean a-makin' up to a dozen girls over there in Europe. Now, reelly, we don't know much more about that young man than if he was a Eu*r*opean himself."

"Oh, Popper Leete," remonstrated his wife, "'tain't so bad as *that!*"

"Well," Mr. Leete insisted, shaking his head in stubborn doubt, "'tain't much better, when you come right down *to* it."

. . . . . .

There are plenty of married couples in the world who can lay their hands on their twain hearts and unanimously declare that the time of their betrothal was the happiest times of their lives. There are other people, however, who can as honestly say that they were never more uncomfortable and generally miserable than they were in the No Man's Land through which civilized matrimony must be approached.

Perhaps the months or years of engagement may be enjoyable to those who enter upon their contract in a business-like and practical spirit, or to those easy-going mortals who take their love on trial, much as they might take a type-writer or a patent lamp. But to two young people dreadfully in love and dreadfully in earnest, this stretch of time is like the trying pause when the soldier on the battle-field waits for the order to advance.

The woman's position is certainly doubtful and disagreeable. She belongs neither to her parents nor to her betrothed—not even to herself. Hers is the proud prerogative of deciding between blue and pink for the dining-room paper, between script and old English for the engraving on the spoons—while, perhaps, her former owners and her future owner are settling on a religion for her and for her children *in posse*.

We do not all of us have to suffer the possible rigors of this state of interregnum. The kindly refinements of modern life make the situation as agreeable as may be. Yet among the gentlest and most delicate of people, it is often a situation at best but barely tolerable. What must it be among people who are not given to yielding to others, and who are given to speaking their minds—those hastily made-up minds which for the most part were best left unspoken?

It was a cocksure and outspoken family into which Randolph Wykoff had tumbled; and one that had well-defined opinions on all matters of personal conduct, and wanted no new lights from any source. And as Randolph himself could be cocksure on occasion, and as he certainly had not come down to Chelsea Village to seek illumination on any dark points of social doctrine, a clash was inevitable, and the clash came promptly.

It came when the chilling truth was first clearly recognized by the Leetes that young Mr. Wykoff was engaged to Celia exclusively, and did not hold himself bound to the rest of the family by any ties so tender. To be sure, Wykoff was the soul of kindly courtesy in his relations with them all, and yet, like the old farmer in *Punch*, sipping airy champagne in place of his accustomed old ale, they "didn't seem to get no forr'ader." When Randolph broke one of Mrs. Leete's teacups, he made the accident an excuse for sending her a full tea-set, so delicate of mould that Mrs. Leete never dared to use it. He gave Father Leete a meerschaum that he had brought from Europe. He adorned Alonzo's scarf with a scarabæus of rare beauty. (Alonzo held the gift but lightly until it occurred to him to have its money-value appraised at a Broadway jeweller's.) He loaded Celia with gifts, and he did not forget to select for her sister, every now and then, a trinket of a fashion more noticeable than he would have held fitting for his betrothed. And as for flowers—he made the dingy house brilliant with the artificial refinements of the hothouse. But beyond courteous speech and an open hand, they soon found that nothing was to be expected of the newcomer in the family circle.

Alonzo had to accept the obvious fact that he would never be put up at Mr. Randolph Wykoff's club, even if he sought such an honor—which he told his own conscience he did not. Dorinda

saw bright visions fade before her eyes when she learned that Mr. Wykoff, whether he were in mourning or out of mourning, was not in the habit of taking his "lady friends" to the public balls, and that he did not so much as know the "Triton" from the "Männerchor." And Mrs. Leete, while she understood that John Wykoff's widow must live for many months, at least, in strict retirement from the world, yet felt that it had in some subtile way been made clear to her own perception that the hand of society would never be stretched out to the Leetes at the particular request of the Wykoffs.

There was no question about it, Mr. Wykoff had no proper sense of his position as a prospective son- and brother-in-law; and hint and suggestion fell upon his calm unconsciousness of his delinquency as little sparks upon the breast of an ice-bound lake. They did their best to bring him to a knowledge of what they called among themselves "the proper thing;" but neither precept nor example availed aught against his vast, innocent ignorance.

In this he was quite honest, although the Leete family could hardly believe it. It did occur to him, at one time, that he had been made to hear a great deal about a certain Mr. Cargill, soon to be wedded to one of Dorinda's bosom friends. This gentleman had acquired what seemed to Randolph a strange habit of taking his bride-to-be and all her family, including a maiden aunt, to the theatre some four or five times a week. For this ceremony, or operation, Mr. Cargill was wont to array himself, according to Dorinda's account, in a swallow-tail coat, a lavender satin tie, and an embroidered shirt. But beyond a vague wonder if perchance Cargill completed this costume with shepherd's plaid trousers and Roman sandals, Mr. Wykoff saw no hidden significance in the parable.

Thus it came to pass that Randolph, for his contumacious and persistent abiding in darkness, was put under a ban by all save one member of the family. Father and Mother Leete, it is true, visited their displeasure upon him only passively, and far, far more in sorrow than in anger. But Alonzo and Dorinda declared him anathema, and would have none of him. I need hardly say that their parents knew nothing of this unwise severity.

There was a time when Wykoff was welcomed at the portal by Celia's brother or her sister, as it might happen. (It was a convention in the family—one of the "whats" which are "what"—that Celia might not with propriety open the front door to her beloved.) He was allowed to meet her in the hall-way, and they went into the parlor to chat out their private chat. Then they joined the family circle in the dining-room, where the evening lamp shone cheerily on the red cloth that turned the dining-table into a centre-table, and Randolph answered questions about his mother's health, or talked of building-matters with Mr. Leete, or made engaging conversation on topics judiciously selected from the news of the day.

But that time was long past ere the winter had travelled over the brow of Christmas Hill. Now it was always Dorinda who opened the door to him. He did not know it, but Dorinda, on the nights when he might be looked for, took her seat by the dining-room door, on the most uncomfortable chair in the room, and awaited his coming in a gloomy spirit of duty. She always opened the door with the chain up, and peered through the crack as though she were expecting a stranger of murderous intentions. Then she said, with the corners of her mouth drawn down in a painful smile: "Oh, I *beg* your pardon, Mr. Wykoff; I didn't know it was you, to-night." The door was closed, the chain let down, the door swung open slowly, and Randolph was admitted, to face a greeting that rarely varied much in form:

"I don't *s'pose* you want to see the *fam'ly*, Mr. Wykoff; if you'll be so *kind* as to step into the *parlor*, I'll tell my *sister* you're here."

Dorinda had reduced the difficult arts of irony and sarcasm to a few simple formulas of vigorous emphasis, applied to the direct deliverances of ordinary conversation. Yet, had it not been for a certain ring of triumphant satisfaction in her tone, and a sparkle of proud achievement in her eye, Wykoff would perhaps have failed to suspect her intent.

In the front parlor, dimly lit and chilly—Alonzo was in charge of the furnace—Randolph awaited his betrothed. After what was held a proper and dignified space of time, she was permitted to join him. She came in, often, with a flush high on her cheeks and with a fluttering breath, and hid her head on his shoulder, where he let it lie. He was not an observant young man; he was not a demonstrative wooer, but he felt that his little girl was suffering persecution, and he pitied her.

He had more than Dorinda's depressing salutation to open his eyes. As he sat in the shadowy parlor, waiting for Celia, he heard Dorinda return to the dining-room to announce his coming. Her entrance was followed by a silence. Then came a loud grunt, from far down in Mr. Leete's deep lungs, as if he said, "Oh, is *that* all?" Sometimes a profound sigh was audible through the closed folding-doors, and he could guess that there was a weight on Mother Leete's mind. And regularly, every night that he sat there, he heard Alonzo arise, march through the hall, put on his coat and hat, and go out into the night. And, in doing this simple thing, Alonzo contrived, in every step along the hall, to put a staccato accentuation into the setting down of his heel which could not fail to carry its meaning to the lost soul in the front parlor. It was the righteous man stalking out of the neighborhood of the accursed thing.

But of Celia's sufferings at her relatives' hands, Randolph had an exaggerated conception. Alonzo and Dorinda annoyed her in their different ways, but she was quite able to take care of herself in every sort of family spat. She was gentle of spirit, gentle in her tastes; but she had learned to spar in many wordy contests, and she was now no longer dependent upon the love or the approval of either Alonzo or her sister. Indeed, all minor matters, all the little things of the house which had been important to her a few months before meant nothing to her now. She was leading a life of which her brother, her sister, her father, her mother, knew nothing; she was walking in paths where their petty jealousies, spites, disappointments, and misunderstandings could not follow her.

There is, however, no telling where combatants like Alonzo and Dorinda will stop when they once start on a line of aggressive conduct. It is not enough for them to see that their weapons strike home; to see the punctures, to know, whatever momentary exaltation of soul may stay the physical pain of the victim, that, sooner or later, the wounds must begin to bleed, and the tender flesh to burn with fever. Theirs is a grosser warfare. They must see the suffering, they must hear the cries; they must realize that they have inflicted material damage before they can feel that they have done what they set out to do. Especially must their vengeance be complete when it constitutes what they consider merited punishment—and to judge and to punish is the especial mission of these right-thinking and right-doing people, who, being ever in the right, have but small pity for those erring mortals who have not their light.

So it was not long before Dorinda laid down the foil of polite irony, and took to broadsword-practice. She had been content with the pleasure to be derived from outspoken conjectures as to her sister's probable behavior after she should have joined her "swell friends"—whether or no she would recognize her kinsfolk when she met them on the street—or look at anyone who lived in a frame house—or use baking-powder in her kitchen. But now she relieved her mind with open and vituperative onslaughts upon Randolph Wykoff, his mother, and all that they stood for and represented in the social scheme. She gave up going to the door to let Randolph in, and that duty was delegated to Alonzo, who performed it in absolute silence, with a discourteous hostility in his bearing that, had he not been Celia Leete's brother, would have got him a sound thrashing at the hands of a young gentleman who had been held, in his time, one of the prettiest middle-weight boxers that had ever sparred at Harvard College.

It was a most unpleasant state of things for the engaged pair, and they talked it over at every meeting. Wykoff was for going to Mr. Leete and demanding an abatement of the nuisance; but Celia, who underestimated the strength

of her position, told him that parental interference would only embitter her persecutors, and make her lot the harder; and her lover unwillingly held his peace. It was Dorinda who brought matters to a climax.

Mrs. Wykoff had been ill. Her lungs were not over-strong, and she had been taken with something that looked like pneumonia. Randolph stopped at the Leetes, late one January afternoon, to tell Celia of his mother's progress toward recovery. He was admitted by the servant—a rare event; for attendance upon the front door was not among that handmaid's many duties. She let him into the parlor, and there he found Dorinda, volubly entertaining a young man and a young woman whom he at once guessed to be the much-vaunted Cargill and his bride-elect. Cargill was a tall young man with a large black mustache. His clothing had that effect of shiny and unwrinkled newness which is rarely to be observed save on the wire frames in the tailors' windows. Huge diamonds sparkled on his fingers, in his necktie, and even in a shamelessly exposed collar-stud. Mrs. Cargill, that was to be, was clad in a blue velvet dress that just held its own for brilliancy against Dorinda's red bodice of state.

The Cargill and the Cargill-expectant glanced at the Wykoff as he entered and sat down in the farthest corner of the room; Dorinda did not even turn her head, but pitched the conversation in a higher key, so that he might lose no word of it.

"Was you at the Sweatman's sociable?" she inquired.

"Nope," said Mr. Cargill, sucking the big silver head of his cane.

"I heard it was real el'gant," Miss Leete ran on; "I couldn't go—ma 'n' me had to go to a meetin' of the church fair c'mittee. I s'pose you know I'm goin' to have the Rebekah booth at the fair. Hope you're comin' to patronize me. I'll sell you some lem'nade—'f you ever drink lem'nade, Mr. Cargill."

The simper with which this speech was ended was a beautiful tribute to Cargill in his quality of man of the world.

"Ain't sellin' beer this trip?" was Mr. Cargill's jocular inquiry. "Then I guess I'll take lem'nade. Sell a stick with it?"

"Oh, do hush," said the bride-elect, dabbing at him with her muff, and pre-

tending to be scandalized at his wickedness. "*I* think lem'nade's reel nice, don't you, D'rinda? I'm comin' to get some, 'n' I'm goin' to make *him* pay for it, too."

Two treble laughs and a bass laugh did honor to this witticism, and, when the spasm of merriment was over, Dorinda began again.

"D'you see Mr. Cree at the Sweatman's? *I* think he's one 'f the nicest gentlemen I ever *saw*."

Celia was out; it was a quarter of an hour before she came in, and through that quarter of an hour Randolph Wykoff sat in his corner of the parlor and heard the chronicle of a society that in one way might well be called, as it would have called itself, "el'gant."

This was bad enough, but there was worse yet. The visitors took their leave at last, and Dorinda followed them into the hall-way. She closed the door behind her, but one door was a poor obstruction to Dorinda's voice, and Wykoff heard what probably it was intended that he should hear:

"*Him?* Oh, that's Mr. Wykoff—Celia's friend, you know—he ain't any 'f *mine*. I'd have introduced you, on'y I don't hardly know him well enough. We ain't fine enough for him, 'n' I thought maybe our friends wasn't. Guess you ain't lost much, though."

When Celia came in, Randolph told her, as gently as possible, but definitely and definitively, that thereafter he would come to the house only when her sister was not at home, and he kept his word.

Yet they had to see each other, and so they fell into a bad way of meeting in the streets. Celia contrived to let her lover know that on such a day a shopping tour would bring her through such and such a street at this or that hour; and at the time and place appointed, Randolph would meet her to walk home with her. This unwise arrangement brought itself to a timely end, happily for both of them. Celia's sources of supply were among the marts of fashion that line West Fourteenth Street and the region round about. Thence she could find no route homeward on which a young man like Randolph Wykoff could have the ghost of an excuse for loitering. He therefore suggested to her to make her purchases at the larger shops on Broadway, so that he might join her in the quiet side-streets to the east of the great thoroughfare. Those streets between Union and Madison Squares are, for the most part, given over to boarding-houses and lodging-houses of dull respectability, and although they are not much traversed,

if she cared to read one or two books that he had found serviceable in his own studies.

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One little incident that took place just before Mrs. Wykoff went to Florida made a deep impression upon Mr. Leete, and set him to thinking uneasily of the future. His wife drew his attention to the fact that Mrs. Wykoff having passed through a serious illness, a call of congratulation, from the head of the house of Leete, would be an appropriate and delicate attention to the convalescent. Perhaps, the good wife suggested, the Leete family had been remiss in such matters of courtesy. Mrs. Wykoff's visit was still unreturned, and, as Mrs. Leete

truly said, it was only because Popper Leete had kept saying that he would go with her some day, and had never yet found the day to suit him. *Now*, they didn't both of them want to go streakin' down there together, when Mrs. Wykoff was sick, or sort of sick; and she herself couldn't go, with the church fair to look after; but Popper Leete could go just as well as not, and it would look as if they meant to do the right thing; and if he'd go now, he'd never have to go again, and he might just as well go, and have *done* with it.

Mr. Leete went. Dressed in his Sunday broadcloth, he presented himself at the door of the Wykoffs' great house on Second Avenue, and gave the liveried menial his one card, neatly written in Dorinda's elaborate "Anserian System" handwriting.

Mrs. Wykoff was lying on the lounge in her sunny sitting-room, which looked out on a little snow-covered corner of the garden, where a half-clad Venus snatched at her scanty raiment, and looked as though she would like to be able to shudder, and shake the snow off her bare shoulders.

Mr. Leete had a pleasant call. He soon found himself talking readily with the gentle, gracious lady on the lounge, and he was so much at his ease that he was even able to cast furtive glances at the room and its furniture—rich, yet simple and old enough in fashion to come within the scope of his knowledge. He was so much at ease, indeed, that when Mrs. Wykoff's tea was brought in, he accepted her offer of a cup, and, becoming

interested in the conversation, dropped the cup on the floor and broke it into many fragments.

He was deeply distressed. It took all Mrs. Wykoff's tact and discretion to make him feel that she saw no uncommon awkwardness in his mishap.

"They are absurd things, those little egg-shell cups," she said, "they are forever breaking. Randolph brought me that set only three months ago, and I think that he and I between us have contrived to break half a dozen cups since then. Don't give it another thought, please."

Mr. Leete did give it another thought, however. He gave it thought enough to privily examine the mark on the bottom of the broken cup. It bore a French name, strange to him; but he succeeded in getting some sort of mental picture of the combined characters. In his own phrase, he sized it up roughly. When, a quarter of an hour later, he found himself in the street, with no clear idea of the means by which his visit had been brought to a painless close and an easy exit, he was already nursing the germ of a great idea.

Why should not a Leete, as well as a Wykoff, replace a broken set of china-ware? Mrs. Wykoff had said that six cups were already gone—Mr. Leete's cup made the seventh. Here was a chance to perform an act of substantial courtesy, and with credit to the family. "I guess I'll do a little suthin' in the crockery line myself," thought Mr. Leete.

He remembered that Randolph's gift of china had come from a well-known shop on Broadway, and thither he went at once. A polite little salesman met him near the door of the long ware-room, and inquired his pleasure. Mr. Leete was conscious of feeling large, ponderous, and solid amid all the fragility. Faïence and Limoges were in front of him, Sèvres and Belleek to right and left, and his eyes rested on nothing simpler or more modest than that sturdy Meissen ware which is still honored under the name of Dresden.

"I want some tea-things," began Mr. Leete, "of the kind you call—" the French word failed him, but his eye lit on the thing itself, a set of the identical pattern, different only in color, lying in state among the satin folds of a huge leather case.

"There—them!" he said; "that's what I'm lookin' for, only I want it in blue."

"We haven't a blue set, sir," said the clerk; "we had one, but we sold it a few months ago."

"D'ye know who you sold it to?" queried Mr. Leete, hiding his detective intent under a mask of simplicity. "Maybe the party would be willin' to sell."

The clerk smiled superciliously.

"I hardly think so," he said; "our trade is pretty much with private customers."

"I'd like to have you make sure," persisted Mr. Leete; "I want blue, an' I'm willin' to pay for it."

The salesman trotted to the back of the shop, and spoke to a clerk at a desk. The clerk fluttered the leaves of a great book, and the salesman trotted back, with a superior smile on his lips.

"I don't think you'll be very successful, sir," he said; "that other set was bought by Mr. Wykoff, son of old John Wykoff, who died last year. You may have heard of him. They're one of the oldest families in the city, and one of the richest. I don't believe they'd be willing to dispose of anything they bought."

"I've heard of 'em," said Mr. Leete, smiling in his turn. He wanted to see that salesman's face when he told him to box up the pink set and send it to Mrs. John Wykoff, Second Avenue. After all, the pink would do as well as the blue.

"What's the price of this set here?" he asked, touching one of the egg-shell cups with a careful finger.

"Four hundred and twenty dollars," said the salesman.

"Eh?" said Mr. Leete.

"Very cheap at that, sir—marked down from four hundred and seventy-five. All hand-painted by one of the first artists in France. Only these two sets ever imported—quite unique."

"Hum!" snorted Mr. Leete, "too bad you ain't got the blue. Good-day."

Out in the street he made a rapid calculation.

"Four hundred 'n' twenty—cup 'n' saucer's one piece, I s'pose; one ain't good for much 'thout t'other—twelve—teapot, jug, an' sugar's fifteen—wa'n't no slop-bowl—fifteen into four hundred 'n' twenty—twenty-eight dollars. Moses Taylor!"

This is the New Yorker's special oath of astonishment; though why that eminent and sober-minded merchant has received such strange canonization in the calendar of mild profanity no one may know. When he was at home he told his wife all about it, and shook his head dubiously as he drew some uncomfortable conclusions.

"I don't see," he said, "that we've got any occasion to travel with folks that c'n smash twenty-eight dollars wuth 'f crockery an' not so much as know it. That ain't any sort of housekeeping for Celia. She ain't been brought up in that way, an' I don't want her to get sech ideas. Twenty-eight dollars! Why, Ma Leete, I'd ruther have her eat off stone china all the days 'f her life—an' so would you."

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And yet Mr. Leete was as much pleased as was his wife when, in July, a letter came from Mrs. Wykoff, at East Hampton, inviting Celia to spend a few weeks at the Wykoff homestead.

"You will have a dull time," she wrote, "for I am still something of an invalid, and, of course, we see no one; but my nieces—I call them so—are spending the summer with me, and they and Randolph will do what they can to make it pleasant for you. Write me that you will come, and Parker, my faithful factotum, will call for you and make you comfortable on your journey."

Even Alonzo felt some tender stirrings toward mercy in the depths of his stern soul; and Dorinda gave it as her opinion that Celia could adequately display her self-respect and sense of independence by delaying her answer for the space of twenty-four hours.

As it took poor Celia that time to prepare a missive sufficiently lofty in tone to pass the family conclave, Dorinda had her own way, and, being placated, entered with an interest only too active and energetic into the preparation of her sister's paraphernalia.