

IX

Of Charles Gardiner West, President-Elect of Blaines College, and his Ladies Fair: all in Mr. West's Lighter Manner.

THE closing German of the Thursday Cotillon, hard upon the threshold of a late Lent, was a dream of pure delight. Six of them in the heart of every season since 1871, these Germans have become famous wherever the light fantastic toe of aristocracy trips and eke is tripped. They are the badge of quality, and the test of it, the sure scaling-rod by which the frightened débutante may measure herself at last, to ask of her mirror that night, with who can say what tremors: "*Am I a success?*" Over these balls strangers go mad. They come from immense distances to attend them, sometimes with superciliousness; are instantly captivated; and returning to their homes, wherever they may be, sell out their businesses for a song and move on, to get elected if they can, which does not necessarily follow.

Carriages, in stately procession, disembarked their precious freight; the lift, laden with youth and beauty, shot up and down like a glorious Jack-in-the-Box; over the corridors poured a stream of beautiful maidens and handsome gentlemen, to separate for their several tiring-rooms, and soon to remeet in the palm-decked vestibule. Within the great room, couples were already dancing; Fetzy's Hungarians on a dais, concealed behind a wild thicket of growing things, were sighing out a wonderful waltz; rows of white-covered chairs stood expectantly on all four sides of the room; and the chaperones, august and handsome, stood in a stately line to receive and to welcome. And to them came in salutation Charles Gardiner West and, beside him, the lady whom he honored with his hand that evening, Miss Millicent Avery, late of Maunch Chunk, but now of Ours.

They made their devoirs to the dowagers; silently they chose their seats, which he bound together with a handkerchief in a true lovers' knot; and, Fetzy's continuing its heavenly work, he put his arm about her without speech, and they floated away upon the rhythmic tide.

At last her voice broke the golden silence: "I feel enormously happy to-night. I don't know why."

The observation might seem unnoteworthy to the casual, but it carried them all around the room again.

"Fortune is good to me," said he, as lightly as he could, "to let me be with you when you feel like that."

He had never seen her so handsome; the nearness of her beauty intoxicated him; her voice was indolent, provocative. She was superbly dressed in white, and on her rounded breast nodded his favor, a splendid corsage of orchid and lily-of-the-valley.

"Fortune?" she queried. "Don't you think that men bring these things to pass for themselves?"

They had made the circle on that, too, before West said: "I wonder if you begin to understand what a power you have of bringing happiness to me."

He looked, and indeed, for the transient moment, he felt, like a man who must have his answer, for better or worse, within the hour. She saw his look, and her eyes fell before it, not wholly because she knew how to do that to exactly the best advantage. Few persons would have mistaken Miss Avery for a wholly inexperienced and unsophisticated girl. But how was she to know that that same look had risen in the eyes of West, and that same note, obviously sincere, broken suddenly into his pleasant voice, for many, many of the fair?

The music died in a splendid crash, and they threaded their way to their seats, slowly and often stopped, across the crowded floor. Many eyes followed them as they walked. She was still "new" to us; she was beautiful; she was her own young lady, and something about her suggested that she would be slightly unsafe for boys, the headstrong,

and the foolish; rumor made her colossally wealthy. As for him, he was the glass of fashion and the mould of form, and much more than that besides. Of an old name but a scanty fortune, he had won his place by his individual merits; chiefly, perhaps, for so wags the world, by an exterior singularly prepossessing and a manner that was a possession above rubies. His were good looks of the best fashion of men's good looks; not a tall man, he yet gave the effect of tallness, so perfect was his carriage, so handsome his address. And he was as clever as charming; cultured as the world knows culture; literary as the term goes; nor was there any one who made a happier speech than he, whether in the forum or around the festal board. Detractors, of course, he had — as which of those who raise their heads above the dead level have not? — but they usually contented themselves with saying, as Buck Klinker had once said, that his manners were a little too good to be true. To most he seemed a fine type of the young American of the modern South; a brave gentleman; a true Democrat with all his honors; and, though he had not yet been tested in any position of responsibility, a rising man who held the future in his hand.

They took their seats, and at last he freed himself from the unsteady embarrassment which had shaken him at the first sight of her under the brilliant lights of the ball-room.

"Two things have happened to make this seventh of March a memorable day for me," said he. "Two great honors have come to me. They are both for your ear alone."

She flung upon him the masked battery of her eyes. They were extraordinary eyes, gray and emerald, not large, but singularly long. He looked fully into them, and she slowly smiled.

"The other honor," said Charles Gardiner West, "is of a commoner kind. They want to make me president of Blaines College."

"Oh — really!" said Miss Avery, and paused. "And shall you let them do it?"

He nodded, suddenly thoughtful and serious. "Long before snow flies, Semple & West will be Semple and Something else. They'll elect me in June. I need n't say that no one must know of this now — but you."

"Of course. It is a great honor," she said, with faint enthusiasm. "But why are you giving up your business? Does n't it interest you?"

He made a large gesture. "Oh, it interests me. . . . But what does it all come to, at the last? A man aspires to find some better use for his abilities than dollar-baiting, don't you think?"

Miss Avery privately thought not, though she certainly did not like his choice of terms.

"If a man became the greatest stock-jobber in the world, who would remember him after he was gone? Miss Avery, I earnestly want to serve. My deepest ambition is to leave some mark for the better upon my environment, my city, and my State. I am baring my small dream for you to look at, you see. Now this little college . . ."

But a daring youth by the name of Beverley Byrd bore Miss Avery away for the figure which was just then forming, and the little college hung in the air for the nonce. Mr. West was so fortunate as to secure the hand of Miss Weyland for the figure, he having taken the precaution to ask that privilege when he greeted her some minutes since. Couple behind couple they formed, the length of the great room, and swung away on a brilliant march.

"It's going to be a delicious German — can't you tell by the *feel*?" began Sharlee, doing the march with a *deux-temps* step. "I'm so glad to see you, for it seems ages since we met, though, you know, it was only last week. Is not that a nice speech for greeting? Only I must tell you that I've said it to four other men already, and the evening is yet young."

"Is there nothing in all the world that you can say, quite new and special, for me?"

"Oh, yes! For one thing your partner to-night is altogether the loveliest thing I ever saw. And for another —"

"I am listening."

"For another, *her* partner to-night is quite the nicest man in all this big, big room."

"And how many men have you said that to to-night, here in the youth of the evening?"

But the figure had reached that point where the paths of partners must diverge for a space, and at this juncture Sharlee whirled away from him. Around and up the room swept the long file of low-cut gowns and pretty faces, and step for step across the floor moved a similar line of swallow-tail and masculinity. At the head of the room the two lines curved together again, round meeting round, and here, in good time, the lovely billow bore on Sharlee, who slipped her little left hand into West's expectant right with the sweetest air in the world.

"Nobody but you, Charles Gardiner West," said she.

The whistle blew; the music changed; and off they went upon the dreamy valse.

There are dancers in this world, and other dancers; but Sharlee was the sort that old ladies stop and watch. Of her infinite poetry of motion it is only necessary to say that she could make even "the Boston" look graceful; as witness her now. In that large room, detectives could have found men who thought Sharlee decidedly prettier than Miss Avery. Her look was not languorous; her voice was not provocative; her eyes were not narrow and tip-tilted; they did not look dangerous in the least, unless you so regard all extreme pleasure derived from looking at anything in the nature of eyes. Nor was there anything in the least businesslike, official, or stenographic about her manner. If her head bulged with facts about the treatment of the deficient classes, no hint of that appeared in her talk at parties. Few of the young men she danced with thought her clever, and this shows how clever she really was. For there are men in this world who will run ten city blocks in any weather to avoid talking to a woman who knows more than they do, and knows it, and shows that she knows that she knows it.

Charles Gardiner West looked down at Sharlee; and the music singing in his blood, and the measure that they trod together, was all a part of something splendid that belonged to them alone in the world. Another man at such a moment would have contented himself with a pretty speech, but West gave his sacred confidence. He told Sharlee about the presidency of Blaines College.

Sharlee did not have to ask what he would do with such an offer. She recognized at sight the opportunity for service he had long sought; and she so sincerely rejoiced and triumphed in it for him that his heart grew very tender toward her, and he told her all his plans; how he meant to make of Blaines College a great enlightened modern institution which should turn out a growing army of brave young men for the upbuilding of the city and the state.

"They elect me the first of June. Of course I am supposed to know nothing about it yet, and you must keep it as a great secret if you please. I give up my business in April. The next month goes to my plans, arranging and laying out a great advertising campaign for the September opening. Early in June I shall sail for Europe, nominally for a little rest, but really to study the school systems of the old world. The middle of August will find me at my new desk, oh, so full of enthusiasms and high hopes!"

"It's splendid. . . . Oh, how fine!" pæaned she.

Upon the damask wrapping of Sharlee's chair lay a great armful of red, red roses, the gift of prodigal young Beverley Byrd, and far too large to carry. She lifted them up; scented their fragrance; selected and broke a perfect flower from its long stem; and held it out with a look.

"The Assistant Secretary of the State Department of Charities presents her humble duty to President West."

"Ah! Then the president commands his minion to place it tenderly in his buttonhole."

"Look at the sea of faces . . . lorgnettes, too. The minion *dassen't*."

"Oh, that we two were Maying!"

"You misread our announcement," said Beverley Byrd, romping up. "No opening for young men here, Gardy! Butt out."

West left her, his well-shaped head in something of a whirl. In another minute he was off with Miss Avery upon a gallant two-step.

Fetzy's played on; the dancers floated or hopped according to their nature; and presently a waltz faded out and in a breath converted itself into the march for supper, the same air always for I don't know how many years.

Miss Avery rose slowly from her seat, a handsome siren shaped, drilled, fitted, polished from her birth for nothing else than the beguiling of lordly man. From the heart of her beautiful bouquet she plucked a spray of perfect lily-of-the-valley, and, eyes upon her own flowers, held it out to West.

"They are beautiful," she said in her languorous voice. "I had n't thanked you for them, had I? Wear this for me, will you not?" She looked up and her long eyes fell — we need not assume for the first time — upon the flower in his lapel. "I beg your pardon," she said, with the slightest change of expression and voice. "I see that you are already provided. Shall we not go up?"

Laughing, he plucked a red, red rose from his button-hole and jammed it carelessly in his pocket.

"Give it to me."

"Why, it's of no consequence. Flowers quickly fade."

"Won't you understand? . . . you maddening lady. I've known all these girls since they were born. When they offer me flowers, shall I hurt their feelings and refuse? Give it to me."

She shook her head slowly.

"Don't you know that I'll prize it — and why?" said he in a low voice. "Give it to me."

Their eyes met; hers fluttered down; but she raised them suddenly and put the flower in his buttonhole, her face so close that he felt her breath on his cheek.

Beside him at supper, she took up the thread of their earlier talk.

"If you must give up your business, why should n't it be for something bigger than the college — public life for instance?"

"I may say," West answered her, "that as yet there has not been that sturdy demand from the public, that uproarious insistence from the honest voter . . ."

"At dinner the other evening I met one of your fine old patriarchs, Colonel Cowles. He told us that the new Mayor of this city, if he was at all the right sort, would go from the City Hall to the Governorship. And do you know who represents his idea of the right sort of Mayor?"

West, picking at a bit of duck, said that he had n't the least idea.

"So modest — so modest! He said that the city needed a young progressive man of the better class and the highest character, and that man was — you. No other, by your leave! The Mayoralty, the Governorship, the Senate waiting behind that, perhaps — who knows? Is it wise to bottle one's self up in the blind alley of the college?"

Thus Delilah: to which Samson replied that a modern college is by no means a blind alley; that from the presidential retreat he would keep a close eye upon the march of affairs, doubtless doing his share toward moulding public opinion through contributions to the *Post* and the reviews — that, in fact, public life had long had an appeal for him, and that if at any time a cry arose in the land for him to come forward . . .

"For a public career," said Delilah, with a sigh, "I should think you had far rather be editor of the *Post*, for example, than head of this college."

Samson made an engaging reply that had to do with Colonel Cowles. The talk ran off into other channels, but somehow Delilah's remark stuck in the young man's head.

Soul is not all that flows at the Thursday German, and it has frequently been noticed that the dance becomes

gayest after supper. But it becomes, too, sadly brief, and *Home Sweet Home* falls all too soon upon the enthralled ear. Now began the movement toward that place, be it never so humble, like which there is none; and amid the throng gathered in the vestibule before the cloak-rooms, West again found himself face to face with Miss Weyland with whom he had stepped many a measure that evening.

"I've been thinking about it lots, President West," said she; "it grows better all the time. Won't you please teach all your boys to be very good, and to work hard, and never to grow up to make trouble for the State Department of Charities."

She had on a carriage-robe of light blue, collared and edged with white fur, and her arms were as full of red roses as arms could be.

"But if I do that too well," said he, "what would become of you? Blaines College shall never blot out the Department of Charities. I nearly forgot a bit of news. Gloomy news. The *Post* is going to fire your little Doctor."

"Ah — no!"

"It looks that way. The directors will take it up definitely in April. Colonel Cowles is going to recommend it. He says the Doc has more learning than society requires."

"But don't you think his articles give a — a tone to the paper — and —?"

"I do; a sombre, awful, majestic tone, if you like, but still one that ought to be worth something."

Sharlee looked sad, and it was one of her best looks.

"Ah, me! I don't know what will become of him if he is turned adrift. Could you, *could* you do anything?"

"I can, and will," said he agreeably. "I think the man's valuable, and you may count on it that I shall use my influence to have him kept."

So the Star and the Planet again fought in their courses for Mr. Queed. West, gazing down at her, overcoat on arm, looked like a Planet who usually had his way. The Star, too, had strong inclinations in the same direction. For example,

she had noted at supper the lily-of-the-valley in the Planet's buttonhole, and she had not been able to see any good reason for that.

Her eyes became dreamy. "How shall I say thank you? . . . I know. I must give you one of my pretty flowers for your buttonhole." She began pulling out one of the glorious roses, but suddenly checked herself and gazed off pensively into space, a finger at her lip. "Ah! I thought this gesture seemed strangely familiar, and now I remember. I gave him a flower once before, and ah, look! . . . the president of the college has tossed it away."

West glanced hastily down at his buttonhole. The lily-of-the-valley was gone; he had no idea where he had lost it, nor could he now stay to inquire. The rose he took with tender carefulness from the upper pocket of his waistcoat.

"What did Mademoiselle expect?" said he, with a courtly bow. "The president wears it over his heart."

Sharlee's smile was a coronation for a man.

"That one was for the president. This new one," said she, plucking it out, "is for the director and — the man."

This new one, after all, she put into his buttonhole with her own hands, while he held her great bunch of them. As she turned away from the dainty ceremony, her color faintly heightened, Sharlee looked straight into the narrow eyes of Miss Avery, who, talking with a little knot of men some distance away, had been watching her closely. The two girls smiled and bowed to each other with extraordinary sweetness.