THE PRINCESS AND HER POOR.*

It is a presence in white and mauve, with large and lustrous eyes which owe much of their expression of command to their perfect steadiness, and with features that defy the enemy in their firm and faultless lines: for the face seems to have perpetual youth among other attributes of the skies. There are more figures belonging to the same exalted region—a Jovian co-partner and head of the family, who beams genially upon the whole scene, but who, on this occasion, rather avoids notice; daughter princesses, erect, immobile, impassive, as though waiting their turn to smile according to the privilege of their degree; secondary satellites of ladies and gentlemen in attendance, who will take up the smile, in their turn, when it has passed all the steps of the throne. But for the moment our regards, our thoughts, are fixed on the one in whose name we have been bidden to the feast. It is the dinner of the Princess, and the Princess is here.

From my obscure position I see that 'Tilda is completely in the toils. She

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has been waving one of the infants as a flag; and the necessity of restoring him unbroken to his place has delayed her retreat, and brought her face to face with the Princess.

In an instant we have one of those crystallizations of incident that make what is called a situation. The whole room strains for sight and sound of what is going to happen. The children, and some of the old men and women, gather round, as the Aztecs might have gathered round Cortes when they felt that at last they had before them one of the promised children of the sun. Furtive hands, some of them skinny with the age that ought to know better, stretch forth to touch the hem of the white and mauve, as though even that must have some effluence of the supernatural. The coster-"gal" and the Princess stand motionless in the centre of the circle, the one so immeasurably high, the other so immeasurably humble, yet, in view of their mother nature, perhaps hardly a pin to choose between them in every essential attribute of womanhood.

The Princess speaks:

"What a very pretty table, and how nicely the flowers are arranged!"

'Tilda's agitation is painfully apparent to me. She is, as ever, straight as a dart; but there is a deep flush on her cheek, and her breathing is registered in the short, convulsive agitation of a little brooch of German silver which she wears on her breast.

But a gracious observation has been made, and the gracious observation demands a reply.

"Thank you, lidy. Thank you, milidy. Yes, your Majesty." Poor 'Tilda!

But really the best of us can hardly come to these things by the light of nature. 'Tilda will rally presently, I feel sure; but she is naturally a little unsteady in the first passes of this awful encounter.

The smiling end of the committee of reception, which is the one nearest to the point of courtly contact, has made many attempts to intervene. It now makes another, as though to save the Princess from 'Tilda by substituting its more polished self. To its surprise —a little, perhaps, to its chagrin,—the Princess avoids the threatened rescue by a dexterous half-turn toward the coster-girl, which is equivalent to a command. She is smiling, too; but her smile is that of the only unembarrassed person in the circle, and in this connection it has the unmistakable significance of "Please leave us alone."

"And are you the kind flower-girl that arranged it all?"

"Yes, mum." 'Tilda has got it at last. If she can only stick to it, now!

"Lady Ashbury tells me that you have paid for the flowers out of your own pocket. It is so good of you."

A silence, natural enough in the circumstances. One part of its import, I begin to fear, is that it measures the immeasurableness of the social void between them, the stellar remoteness of all possible points of contact.

"It must be delightful to live in the country with the beautiful flowers."

It is a shot which, in its aim, takes no account of the economic uses of Covent Garden market, or of the fact that 'Tilda has hardly ever in her life beheld a flower growing "wholesale."

"Oh, milidy ('Tilda, 'Tilda! make it one thing or the other), "I ain't got nothin' to do with makin' 'em grow. But 'ow should you know, milidy? 'Ow should you know?"

Perturbation of committee, which shows a disposition to push itself forward with a short account of the system of distribution in the flower trade.

"Milidy," however, is apparently a better judge of a good answer than the committee, and her fair countenance is still turned to the quarter from which the answer came. If the distance between the two women is still

one of stellar spaces, it has yet been lessened by stellar spaces by 'Tilda's considerate offer of an excuse.

The press looks disconcerted. What seemed only to be an exchange of passing remarks now threatens to lengthen into an interview, and the press is distinctly out of reach.

Milidy (with a glance from the plain ring of galvanized iron on 'Tilda's left hand to the infant she has just deposited in its place). And is this pretty child yours?

'Tilda (interpreting the glance). No, milidy; I ain't a married woman. But he did so cry to have a peep at yer; and p'r'aps he mayn't never see yer no more.

"Why so? I shall come often and see my poor—again and again."

"Oh, milidy, it 'u'd be like the Bible if you could come and walk down John street Saturday nights. Don't you believe 'em when they s'y the men won't mind nobody. They'd mind you. Oh, milidy, that's what I'd do if I looked as though I'd got wings under my bodice, and could talk French."

There is a headlong impetuosity in the girl's manner, as though she felt she had to speak a decisive word for others, and that now or never was her chance. It is clear that, in her poor, rude way, she is pleading for her fellows, and that the dominant idea in her mind is still the wonder of this morning's experience with the fine lady, carried to finer ends. For this time she has been made to feel that woman as a man-subduer is to conquer for something higher than mere personal domination, and to use angelic powers of compulsion that proud nations may be brought under the yoke of tenderness "to them as can't fight," and may consent to put forth all their strength to make the weak and lowly happier, and the world a sweeter scene. The sense of the unsuspected fighting power of beauty and of grace, that seemed to dawn upon her when I took her to see the pictures, has been deepened by the might of living forces on this astounding day—at first by her encounter with the fairest of the "common people of the skies," and now by its culmination in this tremendous event.

Chairman of the Committee (with a warning look at 'Tilda). Ahem!

Milidy (very gently). Well, who knows? Since you wish it so much, perhaps I shall come to John street some day.

'Tilda (on second thoughts). Oh, no, please, milidy, you mustn't never come there—leastways, Saturday nights. It 'u'd only make yer want to die. Perhaps if you was jest to s'y you wouldn't 'ave it,—without comin',—it might all stop. Send 'em a message, milidy, and pass a act o' Parliament. Don't give no more dinners to us grown-ups. We're done. But make a lor about the young 'uns. Them's your chance. Make a lor to give 'em two plates o' meat a week,—never mind the oringes, —and to keep their pore little feet out o' the wet. Make a lor so as they sha'n't 'it their little sisters—leastways, when they ain't two of a size, and the gal can't spar.

The girl's voice trembles in its last accents; and, faith, it is a moving scene.

The committee have now quite given it up, and to all appearance they are engaged in mental prayer. They make miraculous recovery, however, when their precious charge, smiling no longer, but with a sigh, and a slow, penetrating look straight into the eyes of 'Tilda, shakes hands with the coster-"gal," and resumes her tour of the hall.