

THE FROTH OF NEW YORK SOCIETY.

BY JAMES L. FORD.

OUR SOCIAL CHRONICLERS HAVE TOLD US MUCH OF THE LOWER MILLION, MUCH OF BOHEMIA, AND MUCH TOO MUCH OF THE UPPER FOUR HUNDRED, BUT THERE IS ONE INTERESTING FIELD THAT THEY HAVE HITHERTO NEGLECTED.

THE broad fields of metropolitan life have been so sedulously cultivated of late years by our active and enterprising literary husbandmen that in many cases the soil has become exhausted and the toilers have found themselves forced to seek their harvest elsewhere. It is true that the city grows each year in population and in the variety of its life, but it does not begin to keep pace with the demands made upon it through the increase in the number of those writers who find in New York their favorite and most profitable field of fiction. The meadows which lay fallow until long after the Civil War are cultivated today by scores of eager and keen scented toilers, while the search for new territory has thrown open to the world innumerable phases of existence which a quarter of a century ago were practically unknown to the reading public.

It seems strange, in view of the fierce competition, that there should still remain within the limits of Greater New York any considerable extent of territory untouched by plow or harrow. Nevertheless, there are in the metropolis certain very distinct circles of society which are perhaps more in evidence than any other that the town can boast of, and which, so far as my knowledge goes, have never yet gained admittance to the pages of American literature.

The men and women who constitute the social strata to which I refer are continually before our eyes. They patrol Broadway every fine afternoon; they are constant in their attendance at the race track and theater, and they form the greater part of the summer population at Long Branch and Saratoga. Restaurants of the medium and higher grades would not survive if they were to lose their patronage, while those which do a late supper trade on Broadway are devoted to them almost exclusively.

Just now, owing perhaps to the flush times and the rapid growth and development of the town, this class is larger and more in evidence than it ever was before. In theaters and music halls its members surround us on all sides. During the entr'actes we can hear their amiable and intimate chatter about the players on the stage and the conspicuous persons in the audience. The first represen-

tation of a new piece, especially one in a lighter vein, brings them out in full force; and if we hearken to their gossip, we are likely to learn a great deal about the cost of the piece, the financial standing of the manager, the personal traits of some of the performers, and the real reason why Gussie Quicklime, who rehearsed the rôle of *Polly* for two weeks, was taken out of the cast at the last minute and her part given to "Baby" Vinton, who happened, by the merest chance in the world, to be "dead letter perfect" in the lines. Miss Quicklime's severe illness was recorded in the newspapers at the moment of her retirement from the company, and she is believed by the public to be in a critical state at this very moment; but the chatterers about us smile as they point to the box in which she sits, half hidden from public view and with a face of supernatural sourness and disgust.

There is something else that is likely to attract our attention if we choose to study these well groomed, cheerful looking men and women who seem to be always in whatever place of amusement we attend, and that is the fact that they form a most important element in the audience, not alone from their numerical strength, but because of the eager attention with which they follow the performance, and the quick appreciation of artistic merit which manifests itself when anything of unusual excellence occurs on the stage. As a class, they possess what is known as the "artistic temperament" in a very high degree, these men and women of the "Froth of Society," and they have emotions which are easily reached by the actor or singer who knows how to strike the right key. Some of us, in fact, can well afford to watch them closely on a first night, if only to learn what there is in the play to applaud and what deserves censure.

When I speak of the froth of society I do not refer to the vicious and hopelessly depraved element, but rather to those persons who are connected in one way or another with the lighter and more entertaining phases of metropolitan life. In many cases they make their living by it—and the number of those who gain their daily bread from the many sided business of providing the public

with entertainment is enormous—but more frequently they are drawn to the playhouse, the race track, and the feverish summer resort by mere force of attraction. What is merely an occasional evening's amusement to persons of conventional habits of life is to these men and women the most talked of, most thought of, and most important phase of existence. Where other people seek only peace and quiet, they look for constant change and novelty and excitement. Broadway is their world, and they are distinctly unhappy when they are away from it. They have a society of their own, which touches at certain points those social circles which have already found recognition at the hands of contemporary writers, but which is nevertheless distinct, and *sui generis*, and thoroughly characteristic of modern New York.

It is only within a very few years that this society has crystallized into actual visible form, but it exists today and it fares luxuriously, too, for its constituent parts love fine apparel and place a high value on what are commonly termed the "good things of life," although there are so many things that are infinitely better. It has, as I have already said, certain points of contact with conventional society; and by this I mean that there are a few men—less than a dozen all told—who really enjoy a high standing in both.

The other persons who are to be found in this metropolitan froth do not, so far as the outward observances of life are concerned, differ materially from those whose names are to be found in the fashionable chronicles of the day, and who affect Lenox and Newport rather than the Saratoga race track. They are perhaps more particular in regard to their clothes than their brothers and sisters of recognized fashion, and have a horror of any old fashioned or dowdy apparel that it would be difficult for certain highly bred women to understand. Indeed, if we have in New York any leaders in dress, they are to be found within these very circles.

There is a great deal more to be said regarding the froth of society in New York, but it is not my intention to say it here. My only purpose in speaking of it at all is to direct the attention of our writers of fiction to a field that is wide and full of interest as well, and that lies before our very eyes, untouched by the literary agriculturist.

Other adjacent fields have been diligently plowed and harrowed for many a long year, and none more diligently than that of fashionable life, which actually touches this one at more than one point. From the moment when the late Charles Astor Bristed brought forth "The Upper Ten Thousand," until the present age of Mrs. Burton Harrison and Julien Gordon, New York society has been made to do constant duty in the

pages of our national imaginative literature, while the Sunday newspapers have harped upon the foibles and fancies of the members of the Four Hundred, and the luxurious habits of the "millionaires of Gotham," "belles of Murray Hill," "prominent club men," and other spectacular figures in the social life of the town, to such a degree that we wonder there can be anything left to say about them.

Two other fields which have received due attention at the hands of our native writers are those of "low life" and "Bohemianism." The first includes what is known as the "congested districts"—a magnificent, vague phrase of the kind in which students of sociology and reporters alike find refuge. In this district are to be found "gangs" whose members say "Hully gee!" and "See?" and are capable of the most desperate deeds of villainy that a publisher can afford to countenance. Squalor and misery prevail here; toughness and repentance stalk arm in arm through the streets. The "slums" are all situated in this district, as are all the saloons, "dives," and "dens" that the city possesses. The population consists largely of fathers who beat their offspring, and pious boys who support their parents.

The field of Bohemianism is one that has known many sowers and reapers since the enormous "Trilby" crop was harvested by Mr. Du Maurier a few years ago. It contains many broad meadows, and its products are many and various. At present its limits are but vaguely defined, and it resembles one of the old fashioned cattle ranges which existed in the Southwest before syndicates bought up the land and fenced it in with barbed wire. In this field are many studios, each one tenanted by a "struggling" artist. In real life the artist is a sedentary character, but in this literary field he is always "struggling," after the fashion of a worm on a hook. In his struggles he receives the support and sympathy of his model, a young person of rare refinement and strict ideas of propriety.

He always has plenty of "grand ideals," which are inadequately described to us, and in entertaining his friends serves refreshments in what is termed a "motley array" of broken goblets, shaving mugs, and other comedy vessels. The cheese is cut with a palette knife, and the omelet cooked in the lid of a blacking box. It is true that a complete supply of domestic utensils can be purchased in any five cent store, but the recognized laws of "Bohemianism" forbid the use of any dish that is not either cracked, broken, or, best of all, intended originally for some other purpose.

Among the frequenters of the Bohemian studio are many of the familiar characters of

metropolitan life. There is, for example, the beautiful young actress who burns to portray noble rôles and at the same time retain whatever grip she may have on society; the millionaire who, coming as a chance guest, discovers that Bohemian society is infinitely better than anything that Newport or Tuxedo can offer, and is so impressed with the artist's talent that he straightway gives him an order for two pictures; and the young newspaper reporter, redolent of Park Row slang, and wise concerning the many phases of life with which his profession brings him in contact.

As a general thing, these characters are sanctified to the use of the refined reading public by some valuable and satisfying social connections. Of course the society in Bohemia is more brilliant and delightful than that of Murray Hill, while the unexceptionable morals of its inhabitants are a living reproof to those devotees of fashion whose hollow, arid lives are but a glittering mockery of true happiness. Nevertheless, the fact that the actress is "received by some of the very best people," and that the artist's aunt gives receptions and dinners which are reported in every greasy society column, lends a certain halo to these "merry studio gatherings" which the reading public is not slow to recognize.

It is at these points that the fields of Bohemianism and society come into contact, while that of low life is entirely cut off from both by a chasm which is temporarily bridged now and then for the benefit of "slumming parties," or writers in search of "local color"—another fine term.

I think my readers will agree with me in my estimate that fully nine tenths of the work of New York's literary husbandmen is confined to these three fields, while, so far as I know, not a shovelful of earth has as yet been turned up in those merry glades and along those breezy hillsides where the froth of society is to be found. Do the other meadows yield such abundant harvests, or is this one so lean and unimportant as to deserve such contemptuous neglect?

It is here that we find the women who set the fashions in dress, and the men and women who mold the popular taste in the matter of stage entertainment. In the work of regulating the morality and decency of the modern drama their influence is far greater than that of the philosophers, dramatic critics, and other thoughtful persons who have so much to say on the subject. Theatrical managers rejoice in their presence on the night of a first representation; and actors, knowing them to be sympathetic, exert themselves to the utmost to please them.

They have a society of their own, and no one who has ever attended any of their eve-

ning parties will dispute me when I say that the entertainment provided by the guests in the shape of singing, playing, or recitation is far better than anything that can be enjoyed in more conventional and dignified circles, while the keen enjoyment with which these people will listen to an interpretation of Wagner or Chopin is in marked contrast to the affable politeness with which these composers are treated at the ordinary drawingroom musicale. The society which is composed of these people has far more stability, and is infinitely more luxurious, than is generally supposed. More than one house could be named in which none but those who constitute the froth of society are ever entertained, unless it be perhaps some man who has strayed in from the adjacent field in which the *beau monde* disports itself. These houses are, in many instances, filled with costly and tasteful furniture, pictures, and bronzes, and kept up in fine style with men servants, horses and carriages, and the very best of food and drink.

The women of this world are, as a rule, more gorgeously dressed than their sisters of a higher social grade, and except for the fact that they smoke more cigarettes and call a larger proportion of the men of their acquaintance by their first names, or the diminutives thereof, it would be easy to mistake them for members of what is called the "fast set" of New York society, for whom, by the way, they frequently set the pace in dress and manners.

It is generally believed that their standard is lower than that which prevails in conventional society, but of that I am not sure. I should prefer to describe it as materially different from the other. Their method of judgment is in many respects totally unlike that to which the majority of my readers are probably accustomed, and I can best illustrate my meaning by supposing the case of a woman who, after having led a notorious life, has reformed and devoted her time to good works. Good society being composed, to a large extent, of good women, would never for an instant lose sight of what that woman had been in the past; the mention of her name would be sure to evoke that pious rolling of the eye and that sad and significant shake of the head that mean so much more than mere words. But let that same woman's name come up for discussion in the froth of society, and mark the difference. She will be spoken of as the woman who paid this or that unfortunate's rent, or sat by this hospital sick bed, or contributed to the support of this poor creature's orphan child. Any remark of the "if I were to tell what I know about her" variety would be frowned down. I am bound to say that I think that in the exercise of the virtue which is commended

to us as the "greatest of all these" the froth of society is not inferior to the upper crust.

The opening of a new playhouse in New York, not long ago, called forth a representation of this peculiar element that exceeded anything of the sort that the city has ever known. On this occasion the seats brought enormously high prices, many of them selling at the auction for five or six times their nominal value, while the boxes were taken at a proportionately high figure. I do not think that there were in the boxes or the lower part of the house a score of persons who were not identified, in one way or another, with this froth of New York society. The toilettes of the women were costly and tasteful to a degree, and the recognition of the good and bad points in the performance was instantaneous and hearty.

There was one player on the stage that night who owes her success in this country very largely to the fact that she made her first appearance here before that very audience. She was only slightly known, even by name, when she first stepped out on the stage, and she seemed then a homely, undersized little squab, a pathetic figure, having for her background the most exquisite combination of form, color, grace, and melody that New York had ever seen. It seemed almost hopeless to expect an audience to turn aside from the superb rhythmic ballet and center its attention upon this little woman; and yet in two minutes she had conquered them completely, and the froth of

society was ready to spread the news abroad that a new genius had come to town. If she had appeared before an ordinary, cold blooded New York house she might have been waiting yet for the recognition that she won that night in two short minutes.

There is more than one reason why the froth of society is denied a place in contemporaneous fiction. To begin with, it is the sort of thing that the average editor or publisher "views with alarm" as a subject so likely to curdle into impropriety under an unskilled hand that it is best to leave it alone altogether. And yet, when we consider the exalted moral tone that pervades the Bohemia which our story tellers have created for us, it is strange that such apprehensions should be felt. There is a better reason than this, however, and it may be found in the fact that there is probably not a single writer of fiction in the country who really knows anything about the class that I have described or has ever seen the inside of one of the drawingrooms that they frequent.

One of these days some enterprising literary husbandman will scale the fence that divides the as yet unbroken meadows of this domain from the overtilled fields of Bohemianism or high life, and proceed on a tour of investigation. And, if I may be permitted to paraphrase an old saying about the kingdom of Heaven, there are two surprises in store for this daring discoverer, namely, the things and people that he will find there, and the people and things that he won't.

THE ROMANY GIRL.

Brown as the nut brown dress she wears,
Aye! O Romany, Romany!
What though the leering townsman stares,
Little she heeds and less she cares,
Keen is the dagger a gipsy bears,
Aye! O Romany.

Brown was her hair as a colt's rough mane,
Aye! O Romany, Romany!
Combed and smoothed by the wind and rain,
And a bare brown hand with its berry stain,
Fie on the woman who is not vain,
Aye! O Romany.

Her eyes were brown as an autumn pool,
Aye! O Romany, Romany!
With a sunset flame in their depths so cool
That only a bold man's will could rule,
As a master might with a maid at school,
Aye! O Romany.

Her hand was brown as a leaf long dead,
Aye! O Romany, Romany!
And these were the parting words she said
(Brown was her cheek with a splash of red):
"Silver is dross where love hath fled,"
Aye! O Romany.

Ernest McGaffey.