

Literature, &c.

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LOOKING UP IN THE WORLD.

AN AMERICAN SKETCH.

By Maria J. B. Browne.

Cousin Sophronia was good enough to come early, and spend all the morning with Mrs Skates, congratulating her on having emerged from a living burial in the country, welcoming her to the unutterable delights of a city life, and giving her lessons in gentility, while Mr Skates went out to seek for some kind of 'genteel business.' Everywhere he inquired he was informed by the industrious and laborious business men, that 'they did not keep the article,' and he returned from his unsuccessful tour quite discouraged and disheartened. But he was soon called to forget his ill success in obtaining employment, by the necessity of preparation for dinner. Cousin Sophronia had apprised Mrs Skates that 'folks did not dress much for breakfast, but dinners at hotels and fashionable boardin' houses was a great affair, and conducted with a marvellous display of state and ceremony—that they must be dressed in their very best and gayest clothes, and be on the alert to see just how other folks did; or, coming from the country so fresh, they would be liable to some gross violations of dinner-table etiquette, and the folks would think so strange of it.'

Katy felt less apprehension for her own ability to manage than she did for her husband and children. That Mr Skates was awkward there was no disputing; and the children would be most likely to do as children always will—behave worst when they are upon their best behavior—cry when they are indispensable they should remain quiet—seize upon things they should let alone, and sometimes, by the simplest prattle, uncover family secrets it takes the practised ingenuity of parents to conceal—the plain-spoken little wretches!

Mr Skates was sent to the barber to get himself shaved after the most approved fashion, and then he was trimmed out in his new suit of blue broadcloth, with his fancy silk vest and his new blue and white plaid neckerchief, and his white pocket handkerchief shaken out of its neat folds, and stuffed with fashionable carelessness into his coat pocket by Sophronia's own competent hands. Indeed, he looked very much dressed up, and you would hardly have suspected his occupation but for the peculiar stoop in the shoulders craftsmen of his calling are apt to acquire, and for certain dark-colored and very incorrigible labor lines and calluses on his hands which resisted all the influence of soap and sand which could be brought to bear upon them. Honorable labor-lines and calluses they were, too; he was in no danger of losing the good opinion and respect of any whose respect and good opinion were worth preserving; he might be, for suffering himself to be persuaded to blush for them.

Katy Skates robed herself in her new changeable silk, flounced and ressetted in the skirt, and decorated about the low neck and short sleeves in the very latest style. Her hair shone and waved and curled deliciously, her eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed like roses; and if she had been going to figure at a magnificent entertainment on some great and special occasion, by invitation from an affluent host, she would have looked not only suitably but beautifully habited; for Mrs Skates was really handsome in person. Moreover to set off her charms still more effectually, Cousin Sophronia—obliging soul—had been so good as to lend her a very gay bracelet and brooch, with great glaring, hot-looking purple stones in them, and a chain from which dangled a gold pencil. And when these were all fixed on in their places, and Katy looked in the mirror to see herself, her vain little heart swelled with pride and satisfaction. Mr Skates admired her too, and could hardly forbear kissing her, as if he were a lover, or she a bride.

The horrible notes of the gong were at length heard grumbling along through the halls. This time the children only turned pale, and clung closer to their parents, with their eyes stretched open, staring wonderingly. Mr Skates carried the baby, and Mrs Skates led James and hung on her husband's arm, till, with a crowd that kept swelling all the way from No 150 down, they found themselves floating into the spacious dining hall of the hotel; and somehow—they hardly realised how—they were seated at the table. Everything was new and strange. Mr Skates innocently stared at the services and ceremonies he could not understand; and Mrs Skates increased and made manifest her confusion, by trying to appear at ease and accustomed to it all. The 'great towel' laid by his plate Mr Skates had no use for, with a good white handkerchief in his pocket, so he doubled it up and put it behind him, to keep it out of little James's hands.

That hopeful young scion opened the table scene by refusing to be seated on his father's knee, and clamouring bravely for his high chair. Mr Skates's arguments for some time were of no avail, but at length he succeeded in persuading his small but resolute antagonist, that 'they did not have high chairs here in the city,' and he must either be good or be sent to No. 150 to stay alone. James surrendered; but as soon as he was fairly seated in his place, and had looked a loo & in-

quisitive stare into the faces of the company on the opposite side of the table, he seized a silver fork that lay by his father's plate, and began raking it over his cheeks.

'What's this, pa? what's this thing?' he inquired, holding it still more fast, while his father attempted to take it out of his determined grasp.

'You musn't meddle with it; let it alone, James. It looks like a spoon!' replied Mr Skates, forcing it away from the little hand, and laying it back on the cloth. But James, with the child's universal license to misbehave on the most important occasions, instantly took it up again, and began ringing the elegant champagne glass which a servant that moment presented to a gentleman who sat next.

'We ha'n't got no 'poons like them to home, have we, pa?' interrogated the youngster.

'Ah, James,' interrupted Mrs Skates, who had had more than she could do thus far to keep her borrowed finery out of the hands and mouth of the astonished baby, 'Ah James, what did I tell you?'

'You said you would trounce me if I wasn't still,' confessed the child, rapping his head with a fork, and making it do the service of a comb in frizzling up his nicely smoothed hair. But the memory of the threat silenced him for a few minutes, while a fiery red blush of threefold mortification suffused the before-glowing cheeks of the exasperated mamma—mortification that her son had exposed his ignorance of the purposes for which silver forks are used—that he should disclose so publicly, and without remorse, the unfortunate and disgraceful fact that he was a stranger to such luxuries at home, and lastly, that he should be so explicit in his denunciation of her peculiar mode of family discipline.

But Mrs Skates's cheeks tinged still more and her forehead burned hotter, when she heard her unsophisticated spouse remark to a waiter, who handed him a well-filled plate.

'Thank'ee, thank'ee, sir, but you've loaded most too heavy of that; I can't eat all this and taste of all them other sorts, too. I see you've got lots back there yet.'

Mrs Skates sent her satin slipper hard down on Mr Skates's boot, telegraphing that he was guilty of something; he hardly knew what, but it made him silent, and left her to blush and flutter at the impertinent smile she saw running from lip to lip on the other side of the table—a cruel but very common way of exposing the real vulgarity and grossness of mind which would pass itself for high breeding, and a contempt for what, by a kind of false comparison, appears unrefined or uncultivated in the manners of others.

Little James by this time had recovered from the shock he had experienced from the recollection of what was in store for him, if he 'wasn't still,' and he found his curiosity was by no means satisfied concerning the new things that were about him. He proceeded with his investigation by seizing a bill of fare which his nearest neighbor had just laid down.

'What is this, pa?' he inquired, bringing the clean smooth paper into contact with his mouth. It was a fixed habit of Master James's to introduce everything to the acquaintance of his facial orifice, whether said orifice was in receiving order or not.

'I do' know, child; let it alone, and hand it right straight back to the gentleman—it's his'n,' replied Mr Skates, getting not a little impatient with his son's inquisitiveness.

'But what is it, pa?' persisted James, pouting and scowling at the dawning of his curiosity should be so cruelly repressed.

'I do' know, I tell you; it looks like a little newspaper about victuals. Now hold your tongue!' retorted Mr Skates, as he took the soiled paper out of James's hand, and administered a box on his ear sufficiently expressive to set him whimpering.

This scene of course added to the amusement of the gay young people across the table. They discoursed very audibly about 'Jonathans,' and 'bumpkins,' and 'country animals,' and one young woman, more vulgar souled and ill-bred than her companions, tho' her face was royally beautiful, and her voice as soft and sweet as the voice of a siren, and her diction, even in rude sarcasm, as polished and musical as that of an orator, called quite loud:

'Waiter, do give me that little newspaper about victuals.'

Her party joined in the joke with boisterous merriment, and poor Katy instead of feeling honest contempt, rejoiced that her child screamed just then, for even an uncomfortable and annoying circumstance relieved the bitter confusion of a consciousness that she and her well-meaning husband were the unfortunate objects of such unprincipled ridicule.

'That's what we call a bill of fare mum, not a newspaper,' replied the waiter obsequiously, placing the paper in her fair hand. He had a kind heart, and he saw the sneer she aimed at those manners were a thousand times better than her own, though they had not been trained like herself to all the usages of conventional etiquette; but they did the best they knew, the very best, and she thought to turn their very honesty and simplicity into ridicule.

'Oh, I understand, sir,' retorted the disconcerted beauty, a flush of indignation mounting to her very temples, that a servant should dare to presume her ignorant; 'your explanation was quite unnecessary,' but before she could repeat the rebuke, the offending waiter was out of hearing on the other side of the hall.

Mrs Skates now began to hope that her sufferings for this once were at an end; but scarcely was the baby quieted when James caught hold of the chain that depended from his mother's neck, and inquired with the most provoking innocence, 'Whose is this, ma? Cousin Phrony lent it to you, didn't she, ma?'

'Sh-h-h, James,' fretted Mrs Skates. I think at that moment she could have trounced him right heartily. It was too vexatious that he should expose what she felt the keenest anxiety to conceal—the fact that she was really glittering in borrowed plumage.

'Shall you whip me, ma?' pursued the little wretch taking alarm from his mother's severe expression, and cowering down in the chair behind his father, where he had been standing; who uncomfortable and embarrassed, was industriously trying to clear his plate of its contents, the perspiration streaming in rivulets over his face. James managed to entertain himself in his new situation with his own perpetual clatter, and with scratching the chair with his fork till the meal was finished. O, how glad were Mr and Mrs Skates when that event happened! Poor Katy felt that her little No. 150 would be an asylum, indeed, she was so thoroughly disconcerted; and Mr Skates felt that he should never desire to dine again as long as he lived. Visions of his own quiet and social table, at the forsaken home, danced through his mind with a kind of tantalising mockery; and then, the precious absence of ceremony there. Sick indeed he was of so much ceremony that, 'he didn't know nothing what they meant by it!' He would have relished a thousand times better Katy's very poorest 'washing-day hash,' than those elaborately served viands and their multitude of French gastronomic accompaniments, and 'feel so all shook up in his mind,' as he declared he had done at this first city dinner.

Mrs Skates comforted herself and her husband with the hope that they should get used to it; they should observe how others did, and cousin Thompson would help them on in acquisition of city manners.

Mr and Mrs Skates remained at the hotel nearly a week, and every day they enjoyed less and less, though they tried to persuade themselves it was more and more. At that time cousin Sophronia advised them to make a fuss 'about their room;' it was so far off and so hot, and so small, and so inconvenient, every way, except for a single lodger to spend the night in—true, and if they could be afforded a handsome parlour, with bedroom adjoining, and the use of a servant to mind the children at dinner, and all for the same price, she counselled them to 'threaten the landlord roundly that they would leave, and trumpet the accommodations he gave to gentlemen-folks.'

Sophronia was an oracle. So Mr Skates complained and threatened accordingly, without at all alarming the imperturbable landlord, grumbled bitterly at the bill for board and extras he very coolly presented, and removed to a private house, 'genteel,' to be sure, but more economical, and with fewer boarders than thronged that splendid and renowned hotel. Moreover, Mrs Skates informed some of the ladies at the hotel, on whom she had intruded a speaking acquaintance at table, in the drawing room, and elsewhere, that a removal would better suit her husband's business, which she represented as requiring the strictest promptness and the closest attention. She wondered that none of the ladies were curious enough to inquire where or what was her husband's business. If they should ask her, Sophronia had instructed her to say 'he had an office in—what's the name of the street, now—really it had slipped her memory.' To be sure, he had an 'office!' He had, after much trouble and delay, succeeded in obtaining the 'office' of factotum in certain very popular Daguerrean rooms, with wages ruinously unequal to his expenses—such wages as would have seemed contemptible in his prosperous and palmy shoemaking days. Those days when he was a sane and reasonable man, and his wife a sane and reasonable woman. But he was beyond that now—yes, indeed! any distance beyond it! And Mrs Skates—why she was forgetting marvellously fast that she had ever been a mechanic's wife; and if she kept on improving under her new tutelage, as rapidly as she had this first week of city life, very soon would she forget she had ever been so unparadoxically vulgar as to live in the country and work.

At the new boarding-house, the ladies seemed very ladylike, and the gentlemen very gentlemanly, and entirely devoted to business. Mrs Skates was glad of that, for she would not have her husband appear busy and drudging early and late when all the rest of the family were taking their ease. It would be a shame to be industrious if others were idle, according to her false logic. Hers was a mind that could hardly have grasped Miss Bremer's beautiful sentiment, that 'prayer and labor ennoble the human mind.' But if the gentlemen were employed, the ladies were or seemed to be, very much at leisure; they walked out, and rode out, and went calling, promenading, shopping or sight-seeing, just as inclination, and that unsatisfied restlessness which certainly attaches itself to a drowsy idleness, dictated.

Now Mrs Skates with all her weakness, was a true mother—she loved her children dearly; and if the finger of sickness had but touched them, she would have been a very very pattern for anxiety and devotedness; and if she had been called to array them in the coffin, and bury them out of her sight, I think she would have been inconsolably bro-

ken-hearted with her deep and overwhelming sorrow. But situated as she was now, she did find them a most intolerable yoke upon the neck of her gay disposition.

This confinement with her little ones was Mrs Skates's greatest grief; everything else went on swimmingly and quite to her mind. The only alternative was to fancy herself well acquainted with the ladies of the family in a little while, that she could venture to ask the loan of a servant or nurse, to watch her children by Miss Thompson's suggestion.—She scarcely knew whether the compliance was stately or ill-natured, and cousin Sophronia said it was no matter so long as she secured the accommodation. As the weeks passed on, and the attractions became more and more inviting without, Mrs Skates and her children became so great an annoyance, that two or three families took board elsewhere, particularly on that account, greatly to Mrs Skates inconvenience; for their servants had been such a relief to her, when she could succeed in begging their services.

This circumstance was a serious drawback upon Mrs Skates shopping and promenading propensities; for there was but one family left who had children, and there were so many of these—only five, to one poor, jaded little Irish nurse, and general family factotum—that Mrs Skates at first felt some natural compunction about imposing two more fractious, testy, turbulent boys upon her. And for some days she managed to resist all cousin Sophronia's solicitations to go here and there, to see this, that, and the other, to attend this or that drygoods auction, or jeweller's sale, where 'they had broke, and things were going as cheap as dirt, and cheaper—and as they were so cheap she must go and buy whether she needed them or not—she would some time, if not then, and there never would be such a chance again.' This kind of sophistry had persuaded Mrs Skates, till her husband's purse had begun to grow mighty thin, compared with its plump and generous condition, when he was an honest, industrious shoemaker, making five dollars a day 'in good clean cash.' His wages now did not meet what his wife found she must spend for dresses and shawls and jewels, since she had become a fashionable lady. Her wardrobe and her milliner's and mantuamaker's bills made up a round sum for her husband to pay, which made him very uneasy and unhappy, though he said nothing to Katy about, she seemed to be enjoying it so finely. How could she, when he was drudging at a menial business, and growing pale every day.

And thus three months elapsed, and the time approached for the presentation of the quarter's bills. The weather began to grow cool, and the autumn colors to be put on; and of course Mrs Skates and the children must put on autumn colors too. Here were new expenses to be met; and then the evening amusements began to thicken; Mrs Skates was infatuated to go, and she must go in full dress, too, as other folks did. And one evening she began to talk to Mr Skates quite seriously about the necessity of a servant to take care of the children; she was obliged to be gone so much and receive so much company; and she reproached Mr Skates that he never went with her anywhere, as other husbands did, to which he replied for the first time, that 'he really couldn't afford it.'

'Can't afford it! well, that sounds well for a man making money like you are, Mr Skates. Come, you shall go with cousin Soph and me to the op'ry. She told me there is to be something splendid to-night from the Broombachs and Charlottes, I believe she called 'em. It won't do for us to miss hearing such splendid singing, really Mr Skates.'

Now Mr Skates had no artistic genius whatever in the matter of a judgment of the musical performances of Blumenbach and the Signora Carlotti—he would have been much better entertained with a grinding organ, or the negro songs of the Ethiopian Serenaders.

Mr Skates replied to his wife's invitation very decidedly indeed, and in a tone not a little surly, that 'he couldn't go, and wouldn't if he could; and as to a nuss, she might nuss her own children, for he wouldn't got one, nor no such thing; so she needn't say any more about it.'

With this piece of unprecedented ill-nature for him, Mr Skates arose and left his astonished wife, slamming the door behind him. She hardly knew what to make of it, but she was resolved to go. Just at this crisis cousin Sophronia appeared, to help her out of any dilemma she might chance to be in.

'What ails Skates?' ejaculated Miss Thompson; 'I met him in the hall just now, and he looked flushed and angry.'

'Nothing, only I laughed because he said he couldn't go to the op'ry,' replied Katy looking a good deal disconcerted and troubled. 'And I don't see as I can go, Sophronia—what can I do with the children?'

'Oh, hang the children,' elegantly responded Miss Thompson. 'If Skates won't go, make him take care of them, or ask Mrs Boyd for her girl.'

'I have asked her so much,' hesitated Katy, 'and she grows so cross about it that I don't like to.'

'Never mind that if you can get the girl,' returned Miss Thompson. 'Run and ask her now, and I'll see to them while you are gone.'

Mrs Skates very reluctantly started on her unpleasant mission, and met Mrs Boyd in the hall. Mrs Boyd imagined her errand, and looked threateningly, but Mrs Skates was so intent on the opera that she resolved to persevere.