

***GEORGE WILLIAM
CURTIS***



***PRUE
AND I***

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DINNER-TIME.

MY CHATEAUX.

SEA FROM SHORE

TITBOTTOM'S SPECTACLES.

A CRUISE IN THE FLYING DUTCHMAN.

FAMILY PORTRAITS.

OUR COUSIN THE CURATE.

DINNER-TIME.

Table of Contents

“Within this hour it will be dinner-time;
I’ll view the manners of the town,
Peruse the traders, gaze upon the buildings.”
Comedy of Errors.

In the warm afternoons of the early summer, it is my pleasure to stroll about Washington Square and along the Fifth Avenue, at the hour when the diners-out are hurrying to the tables of the wealthy and refined. I gaze with placid delight upon the cheerful expanse of white waistcoat that illumines those streets at that hour, and mark the variety of emotions that swell beneath all that purity. A man going out to dine has a singular cheerfulness of aspect. Except for his gloves, which fit so well, and which he has carefully buttoned, that he may not make an awkward pause in the hall of his friend’s house, I am sure he would search his pocket for a cent to give the wan beggar at the corner. It is impossible just now, my dear woman; but God bless you!

It is pleasant to consider that simple suit of black. If my man be young and only lately cognizant of the rigors of the social law, he is a little nervous at being seen in his dress suit—body coat and black trowsers—before sunset. For in the last days of May the light lingers long over the freshly leaved trees in the Square, and lies warm along the Avenue. All winter the sun has not been permitted to see dress-coats. They come out only with the stars, and fade with ghosts, before the dawn. Except, haply, they be brought homeward before breakfast in an early twilight of hackney-

coach. Now, in the budding and bursting summer, the sun takes his revenge, and looks aslant over the tree-tops and the chimneys upon the most unimpeachable garments. A cat may look upon a king.

I know my man at a distance. If I am chatting with the nursery maids around the fountain, I see him upon the broad walk of Washington Square, and detect him by the freshness of his movement his springy gait. Then the white waistcoat flashes in the sun.

“Go on, happy youth,” I exclaim aloud, to the great alarm of the nursery maids, who suppose me to be an innocent insane person suffered to go at large, unattended,—“go on, and be happy with fellow waistcoats over fragrant wines.”

It is hard to describe the pleasure in this amiable spectacle of a man going out to dine. I, who am a quiet family man, and take a quiet family cut at four o'clock; or, when I am detained down town by a false quantity in my figures, who run into Delmonico's and seek comfort in a cutlet, am rarely invited to dinner and have few white waistcoats. Indeed, my dear Prue tells me that I have but one in the world, and I often want to confront my eager young friends as they bound along, and ask abruptly, “What do you think of a man whom one white waistcoat suffices?”

By the time I have eaten my modest repast, it is the hour for the diners-out to appear. If the day is unusually soft and sunny, I hurry my simple meal a little, that I may not lose any of my favorite spectacle. Then I saunter out. If you met me you would see that I am also clad in black. But black is my natural color, so that it begets no false theories concerning my intentions. Nobody, meeting me in full black,

supposes that I am going to dine out. That sombre hue is professional with me. It belongs to book-keepers as to clergymen, physicians, and undertakers. We wear it because we follow solemn callings. Saving men's bodies and souls, or keeping the machinery of business well wound, are such sad professions that it is becoming to drape dolefully those who adopt them.

I wear a white cravat, too, but nobody supposes that it is in any danger of being stained by Lafitte. It is a limp cravat with a craven tie. It has none of the dazzling dash of the white that my young friends sport, or, I should say, sported; for the white cravat is now abandoned to the sombre professions of which I spoke. My young friends suspect that the flunkeys of the British nobleman wear such ties, and they have, therefore, discarded them. I am sorry to remark, also, an uneasiness, if not downright skepticism, about the white waistcoat. Will it extend to shirts, I ask myself with sorrow.

But there is something pleasanter to contemplate during these quiet strolls of mine, than the men who are going to dine out, and that is, the women. They roll in carriages to the happy houses which they shall honor, and I strain my eyes in at the carriage window to see their cheerful faces as they pass. I have already dined; upon beef and cabbage, probably, if it is boiled day. I am not expected at the table to which Aurelia is hastening, yet no guest there shall enjoy more than I enjoy,—nor so much, if he considers the meats the best part of the dinner. The beauty of the beautiful Aurelia I see and worship as she drives by. The vision of many beautiful Aurelias driving to dinner, is the mirage of

that pleasant journey of mine along the avenue. I do not envy the Persian poets, on those afternoons, nor long to be an Arabian traveller. For I can walk that street, finer than any of which the Ispahan architects dreamed; and I can see sultanas as splendid as the enthusiastic and exaggerating Orientals describe.

But not only do I see and enjoy Aurelia's beauty I delight in her exquisite attire. In these warm days she does not wear so much as the lightest shawl. She is clad only in spring sunshine. It glitters in the soft darkness of her hair. It touches the diamonds, the opals, the pearls, that cling to her arms, and neck, and fingers. They flash back again, and the gorgeous silks glisten, and the light laces flutter, until the stately Aurelia seems to me, in tremulous radiance, swimming by.

I doubt whether you who are to have the inexpressible pleasure of dining with her, and even of sitting by her side, will enjoy more than I. For my pleasure is inexpressible, also. And it is in this greater than yours, that I see all the beautiful ones who are to dine at various tables, while you only see your own circle, although that, I will not deny, is the most desirable of all.

Beside, although my person is not present at your dinner, my fancy is. I see Aurelia's carriage stop, and behold white-gloved servants opening wide doors. There is a brief glimpse of magnificence for the dull eyes of the loiterers outside; then the door closes. But my fancy went in with Aurelia. With her, it looks at the vast mirror, and surveys her form at length in the Psyche-glass. It gives the final shake to the skirt, the last flirt to the embroidered handkerchief, carefully

held, and adjusts the bouquet, complete as a tropic nestling in orange leaves. It descends with her, and marks the faint blush upon her cheek at the thought of her exceeding beauty; the consciousness of the most beautiful woman, that the most beautiful woman is entering the room. There is the momentary hush, the subdued greeting, the quick glance of the Aurelias who have arrived earlier, and who perceive in a moment the hopeless perfection of that attire; the courtly gaze of gentlemen, who feel the serenity of that beauty. All this my fancy surveys; my fancy, Aurelia's invisible cavalier.

You approach with hat in hand and the thumb of your left hand in your waistcoat pocket. You are polished and cool, and have an irreproachable repose of manner. There are no improper wrinkles in your cravat; your shirt-bosom does not bulge; the trowsers are accurate about your admirable boot. But you look very stiff and brittle. You are a little bullied by your unexceptionable shirt-collar, which interdicts perfect freedom of movement in your head. You are elegant, undoubtedly, but it seems as if you might break and fall to pieces, like a porcelain vase, if you were roughly shaken.

Now, here, I have the advantage of you. My fancy quietly surveying the scene, is subject to none of these embarrassments. My fancy will not utter commonplaces. That will not say to the superb lady, who stands with her flowers, incarnate May, "What a beautiful day, Miss Aurelia." That will not feel constrained to say something, when it has nothing to say; nor will it be obliged to smother all the pleasant things that occur, because they would be too flattering to express. My fancy perpetually murmurs in

Aurelia's ear, "Those flowers would not be fair in your hand, if you yourself were not fairer. That diamond necklace would be gaudy, if your eyes were not brighter. That queenly movement would be awkward, if your soul were not queenlier."

You could not say such things to Aurelia, although, if you are worthy to dine at her side, they are the very things you are longing to say. What insufferable stuff you are talking about the weather, and the opera, and Alboni's delicious voice, and Newport, and Saratoga! They are all very pleasant subjects, but do you suppose Ixion talked Thessalian politics when he was admitted to dine with Juno?

I almost begin to pity you, and to believe that a scarcity of white waistcoats is true wisdom. For now dinner is announced, and you, O rare felicity, are to hand down Aurelia. But you run the risk of tumbling her expansive skirt, and you have to drop your hat upon a chance chair, and wonder, *en passant* who will wear it home, which is annoying. My fancy runs no such risk; is not at all solicitous about its hat, and glides by the side of Aurelia, stately as she. There! you stumble on the stair, and are vexed at your own awkwardness, and are sure you saw the ghost of a smile glimmer along that superb face at your side. My fancy doesn't tumble down stairs, and what kind of looks it sees upon Aurelia's face, are its own secret.

Is it any better, now you are seated at table? Your companion eats little because she wishes little. You eat little because you think it is elegant to do so. It is a shabby, second-hand elegance, like your brittle behavior. It is just as foolish for you to play with the meats, when you ought to

satisfy your healthy appetite generously, as it is for you, in the drawing-room, to affect that cool indifference when you have real and noble interests.

I grant you that fine manners, if you please, are a fine art. But is not monotony the destruction of art? Your manners, O happy Ixion, banqueting with Juno, are Egyptian. They have no perspective, no variety. They have no color, no shading. They are all on a dead level; they are flat. Now, for you are a man of sense, you are conscious that those wonderful eyes of Aurelia see straight through all this net-work of elegant manners in which you have entangled yourself, and that consciousness is uncomfortable to you. It is another trick in the game for me, because those eyes do not pry into my fancy. How can they, since Aurelia does not know of my existence?

Unless, indeed, she should remember the first time I saw her. It was only last year, in May. I had dined, somewhat hastily, in consideration of the fine day, and of my confidence that many would be wending dinnerwards that afternoon. I saw my Prue comfortably engaged in seating the trowsers of Adoniram, our eldest boy—an economical care to which my darling Prue is not unequal, even in these days and in this town—and then hurried toward the avenue. It is never much thronged at that hour. The moment is sacred to dinner. As I paused at the corner of Twelfth Street, by the church, you remember, I saw an apple-woman, from whose stores I determined to finish my dessert, which had been imperfect at home. But, mindful of meritorious and economical Prue, I was not the man to pay exorbitant prices for apples, and while still haggling with the wrinkled Eve

who had tempted me, I became suddenly aware of a carriage approaching, and, indeed, already close by. I raised my eyes, still munching an apple which I held in one hand, while the other grasped my walking-stick (true to my instincts of dinner guests, as young women to a passing wedding or old ones to a funeral), and beheld Aurelia!

Old in this kind of observation as I am, there was something so graciously alluring in the look that she cast upon me, as unconsciously, indeed, as she would have cast it upon the church, that, fumbling hastily for my spectacles to enjoy the boon more fully, I thoughtlessly advanced upon the apple-stand, and, in some indescribable manner, tripping, down we all fell into the street, old woman, apples, baskets, stand, and I, in promiscuous confusion. As I struggled there, somewhat bewildered, yet sufficiently self-possessed to look after the carriage, I beheld that beautiful woman looking at us through the back-window (you could not have done it; the integrity of your shirt-collar would have interfered,) and smiling pleasantly, so that her going around the corner was like a gentle sunset, so seemed she to disappear in her own smiling; or—if you choose, in view of the apple difficulties—like a rainbow after a storm.

If the beautiful Aurelia recalls that event, she may know of my existence; not otherwise. And even then she knows me only as a funny old gentleman, who, in his eagerness to look at her, tumbled over an apple-woman.

My fancy from that moment followed her. How grateful I was to the wrinkled Eve's extortion, and to the untoward tumble, since it procured me the sight of that smile. I took my sweet revenge from that. For I knew that the beautiful

Aurelia entered the house of her host with beaming eyes, and my fancy heard her sparkling story. You consider yourself happy because you are sitting by her and helping her to a lady-finger, or a macaroon, for which she smiles. But I was her theme for ten mortal minutes. She was my bard, my blithe historian. She was the Homer of my luckless Trojan fall. She set my mishap to music, in telling it. Think what it is to have inspired Urania; to have called a brighter beam into the eyes of Miranda, and do not think so much of passing Aurelia the mottoes, my dear young friend.

There was the advantage of not going to that dinner. Had I been invited, as you were, I should have pestered Prue about the buttons on my white waistcoat, instead of leaving her placidly piecing adolescent trowsers. She would have been flustered, fearful of being too late, of tumbling the garment, of soiling it, fearful of offending me in some way, (admirable woman!) I, in my natural impatience, might have let drop a thoughtless word, which would have been a pang in her heart and a tear in her eye, for weeks afterward.

As I walked nervously up the avenue (for I am unaccustomed to prandial recreations), I should not have had that solacing image of quiet Prue, and the trowsers, as the back-ground in the pictures of the gay figures I passed, making each, by contrast, fairer. I should have been wondering what to say and do at the dinner. I should surely have been very warm, and yet not have enjoyed the rich, waning sunlight. Need I tell you that I should not have stopped for apples, but instead of economically tumbling into the street with apples and apple-women, whereby I merely rent my trowsers across the knee, in a manner that

Prue can readily, and at little cost, repair. I should, beyond peradventure, have split a new dollar-pair of gloves in the effort of straining my large hands into them, which would, also, have caused me additional redness in the face, and renewed fluttering.

Above all, I should not have seen Aurelia passing in her carriage, nor would she have smiled at me, nor charmed my memory with her radiance, nor the circle at dinner with the sparkling Iliad of my woes. Then at the table, I should not have sat by her. You would have had that pleasure; I should have led out the maiden aunt from the country, and have talked poultry, when I talked at all. Aurelia would not have remarked me. Afterward, in describing the dinner to her virtuous parents, she would have concluded, “and one old gentleman, whom I didn’t know.”

No, my polished friend, whose elegant repose of manner I yet greatly commend, I am content, if you are. How much better it was that I was not invited to that dinner, but was permitted, by a kind fate, to furnish a subject for Aurelia’s wit.

There is one other advantage in sending your fancy to dinner, instead of going yourself. It is, that then the occasion remains wholly fair in your memory. You, who devote yourself to dining out, and who are to be daily seen affably sitting down to such feasts, as I know mainly by hearsay—by the report of waiters, guests, and others who were present—you cannot escape the little things that spoil the picture, and which the fancy does not see.

For instance, in handing you the *potage à la Bisque*, at the very commencement of this dinner to-day, John, the

waiter, who never did such a thing before, did this time suffer the plate to tip, so that a little of that rare soup dripped into your lap—just enough to spoil those trowsers, which is nothing to you, because you can buy a great many more trowsers, but which little event is inharmonious with the fine porcelain dinner service, with the fragrant wines, the glittering glass, the beautiful guests, and the mood of mind suggested by all of these. There is, in fact, if you will pardon a free use of the vernacular, there is a grease-spot upon your remembrance of this dinner.

Or, in the same way, and with the same kind of mental result, you can easily imagine the meats a little tough; a suspicion of smoke somewhere in the sauces; too much pepper, perhaps, or too little salt; or there might be the graver dissonance of claret not properly attempered, or a choice Rhenish below the average mark, or the spilling of some of that Arethusa Madeira, marvellous for its innumerable circumnavigations of the globe, and for being as dry as the conversation of the host. These things are not up to the high level of the dinner; for wherever Aurelia dines, all accessories should be as perfect in their kind as she, the principal, is in hers.

That reminds me of a possible dissonance worse than all. Suppose that soup had trickled down the unimaginable *berthe* of Aurelia's dress (since it might have done so), instead of wasting itself upon your trowsers! Could even the irreproachable elegance of your manners have contemplated, unmoved, a grease-spot upon your remembrance of the peerless Aurelia?

You smile, of course, and remind me that that lady's manners are so perfect that, if she drank poison, she would wipe her mouth after it as gracefully as ever. How much more then, you say, in the case of such a slight *contretemps* as spotting her dress, would she appear totally unmoved.

So she would, undoubtedly. She would be, and look, as pure as ever; but, my young friend, her dress would not. Once, I dropped a pickled oyster in the lap of my Prue, who wore, on the occasion, her sea-green silk gown. I did not love my Prue the less; but there certainly was a very unhandsome spot upon her dress. And although I know my Prue to be spotless, yet, whenever I recall that day, I see her in a spotted gown, and I would prefer never to have been obliged to think of her in such a garment.

Can you not make the application to the case, very likely to happen, of some disfigurement of that exquisite toilette of Aurelia's? In going down stairs, for instance, why should not heavy old Mr Carbuncle, who is coming close behind with Mrs. Peony, both very eager for dinner, tread upon the hem of that garment which my lips would grow pale to kiss? The august Aurelia, yielding to natural laws, would be drawn suddenly backward—a very undignified movement—and the dress would be dilapidated. There would be apologies, and smiles, and forgiveness, and pinning up the pieces, nor would there be the faintest feeling of awkwardness or vexation in Aurelia's mind. But to you, looking on, and, beneath all that pure show of waistcoat, cursing old Carbuncle's carelessness, this tearing of dresses and repair of the toilette is by no means a poetic and cheerful