

The Dinner Party

Stephen Pearl Andrews (1812-1886)

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The highest type of human society in the existing social order is found in the parlor. In the elegant and refined reunions of the aristocratic classes there is none of the impertinent interference of legislation. The Individuality of each is fully admitted. Intercourse, therefore, is perfectly free. Conversation is continuous, brilliant, and varied. Groups are formed according to attraction. They are continuously broken up, and re-formed through the operation of the same subtile and all-pervading influence. Mutual deference pervades all classes, and the most perfect harmony, ever yet attained, in complex human relations, prevails under precisely those circumstances which Legislators and Statesmen dread as the conditions of inevitable anarchy and confusion. If there are laws of etiquette at all, they are mere suggestions of principles admitted into and judged of for himself or herself, by each individual mind.

Is it conceivable that in all the future progress of humanity, with all the innumerable elements of development which the present age is unfolding, society generally, and in all its relations, will not attain as high a grade of perfection as certain portions of society, in certain special relations, have already attained?

Suppose the intercourse of the parlor to be regulated by specific legislation. Let the time which each gentleman shall be allowed to speak to each lady be fixed by law; the position in which they should sit or stand be precisely regulated; the subjects which they shall be allowed to speak of, and the tone of voice and accompanying gestures with which each may be treated, carefully defined, all under pretext of preventing disorder and encroachment upon each others privileges and rights, then can any thing be conceived better calculated or more certain to convert social intercourse into intolerable slavery and hopeless confusion?