

The Golden Era
September 27, 1863

The Lick House Ball

EDS. ERA: I have received a letter from the land of eternal summer - Washoe, you understand - requesting a short synopsis of the San Francisco fashions for reference. There are ten note paper pages of it. I read it all. For two hours I worked along through it - spelling a word laboriously here and there - figuring out sentences by main strength - getting three or four of them corraled, all ragged and disjointed, and then skirmishing around after the connection - two hours of unflagging labor, determination and blasphemy, unrewarded by one solitary shadow of a suspicion of what the writer was trying to get through her head or what she could possibly be up to - until I bore down upon the three lines at the bottom of the last page, marked "P.S.," which contained the request about the fashions, and was the only paragraph in the document wherein the light of reason glimmered. All that went before it was driveling stupidity - all that the girl really wished to say was in the postscript. It was not strange that I experienced a warm fellow-feeling for the dog that drank sixty gallons of water to get at a spoonful of mush in the bottom of the tank.

The young lady signs herself "Ænone." I am not acquainted with her, but the respect, the deference which, as a white man and a Christian, I naturally feel for members of her sex, impels me to take no less pains in obliging her than were the circumstances different.

A fortunate occurrence has placed it in my power to furnish Ænone with the very latest fashions: I refer to the great ball given me at the Lick House last Thursday night by a portion of the guests of that hotel, on the occasion of my promising to "let up" on Messrs. Jerome Rice, John B. Winters, Brooks, Mason, Charley Creed, Capt. Pease, and the other "billiard sharps" of the establishment.

It was a graceful acknowledgment of my proficiency in the beautiful science of billiards, as well as of the liberality I have shown in paying for about every game I ever played in the house.

I expect I have been rather hard upon those gentlemen, but it was no fault of mine - they courted their own destruction. As one of them expressed it, they "could not resist the temptation to tackle me;" and if they baited their hooks for a sardine and caught a whale, who is to blame? Possibly it will be a comfort to Capt. Pease to know that I don't blame him, anyhow; that there is no animosity whatever, and that I feel the same filial affection, the same kindly regard, etc., etc., just as if nothing had happened.

Ænone, (or Unknown, if it is all the same to you), the ball was a grand success. The army was present and also the navy. The nobility were represented by his Grace the Duke of Benicia, the Countess of San Jose, Lord Bless you, Lord Geeminy, and many others whose titles and whose faces have passed from my memory. Owing to a press of imperial business, the Emperor Norton was unable to come.

The parlors were royally decorated, and the floors covered with a rich white carpet of mauve domestique, forty dollars a yard, imported from Massachusetts or the kingdom of New Jersey, I have forgotten which. The moment I entered I saw at a glance that this was the most extraordinary party ever given in San Francisco. I mentioned it to Benish, (the very friendly, not to say familiar, relations existing between myself and his Grace the Duke of Benicia, permit of my addressing him in this way without impropriety,) and he said he had never seen anything like it where he came from. He said there were more diamonds here than were displayed at the very creditable effort of the Messrs. Barron, recently. This remark revived in his breast a reminiscence of that ball. He observed that the evening before it came off, he visited all the jewelry shops in town for the purpose of leasing some diamonds for his wife, who had been invited; but others had gone before him and "cleaned out," (as the facetious nobleman expressed it,) every establishment. There was but one shop where a diamond remained on hand; and even there, the proprietor was obliged to tell him - though it cost him pain to do it - that he only had a quart left, and they had already been engaged by the Duchess of Goat Island, who was going to the ball and could not do without them.

The memory of the incident affected the noble Benish almost to tears, and we pursued the theme no further. After this, we relapsed into a desultory conversation in French, in which I rather had the best of him; he appeared to have an idea that he could cypher out what I was driving at, whereas I had never expected to understand him in the first place.

But you are suffering for the fashions, C enone. I have written such things before, but only by way of burlesquing the newspaper descriptions of balls and dresses launched at the public every now and then by individuals who do not seem to know that writing fashion articles, like wet nursing, can only be done properly by women. A rightly constituted man ought to be above filching from the prerogatives of the other sex. As I have said, the fashion synopses heretofore written by myself, have been uncouth burlesques - extravagant paraphrases of the eloquence of female costume, as incomprehensible and as conflicting as Billy Birch's testimony in the case of the atrocious assassination of Erickson's bull by "Jonesy," with his infamous "stuffed club." But this time, since a lady requests it, I will choke down my distaste for such feminine employment, and write a faithful description of the queenly dresses worn at the Lick House party by several ladies whose tempers I think I can depend on. Thus:

Mrs. F. F. L. wore a superb *toilette habillee* of Chambery gauze; over this a charming Figaro jacket, made of mohair, or horse-hair, or something of that kind; over this again, a Raphael blouse of *cheveux de la reine*, trimmed round the bottom with lozenges formed of insertions, and around the top with bronchial troches; nothing could be more graceful than the contrast between the lozenges and the troches; over the blouse she wore a *robe de chamber* of regal magnificence, made of *Faille* silk and ornamented with maccaroon (usually spelled "maccaroni,") buttons set in black guipre. On the roof of her bonnet was a menagerie of rare and beautiful bugs and reptiles, and under the eaves thereof a counterfeit of the "early bird" whose specialty it hath been to work destruction upon such things since time began. To say that Mrs. L. was never more elaborately dressed in her life, would be to express an opinion within the range of possibility, at least - to say that she did or could look otherwise than charming, would be a deliberate departure from the truth.

Mrs. Wm. M. S. wore a gorgeous dress of silk bias, trimmed with tufts of ponceau feathers in the *Frondeur* style; elbowed sleeves made of chicories; plaited Swiss habit - shirt, composed of Valenciennes, *a la vieille*, embellished with a delicate nansook insertion scalloped at the edge; Lonjumeau jacket of maize-colored *Geralda*, set off with *bagnettes*, bayonets,

clarinets, and one thing or other -beautiful. Rice-straw bonnet of Mechlin tulle, trimmed with devices cut out of sole-leather, representing aigrettes and arastras - or asters, whichever it is. Leather ornaments are becoming very fashionable in high society. I am told the Empress Eugenie dresses in buckskin now, altogether; so does Her Majesty the Queen of the Shoshones. It will be seen at a glance that Mrs. S.'s costume upon this occasion was peculiarly suited to the serene dignity of her bearing.

Mrs. A. W. B. was arrayed in a sorrel organdy, trimmed with fustians and figaros, and canzou fichus, so disposed as to give a splendid effect without disturbing the general harmony of the dress. The body of the robe was of zero velvet, goffered, with a square pelerine of solferino *poil de chevre* amidships. The fan used by Mrs. B. was of real palm-leaf and cost four thousand dollars - the handle alone cost six bits. Her head dress was composed of a graceful cataract of white Chantilly lace, surmounted by a few artificial worms, and butterflies and things, and a tasteful tarantula done in jet. It is impossible to conceive of anything more enchanting than this toilet - or the lady who wore it, either, for that matter.

Mrs. J. B. W. was dressed in a rich white satin, with a body composed of a gorgeously figured Mackinaw blanket, with five rows of ornamental brass buttons down the back. The dress was looped up at the side with several bows of No. 3 ribbon - yellow - displaying a skirt of cream-colored Valenciennes crocheted with pink cruel. The coiffure was simply a tall cone of brilliant field-flowers, upon the summit of which stood a glittering 'golden beetle' - or, as we call him at home, a "straddle-bug." All who saw the beautiful Mrs. W. upon this occasion will agree that there was nothing wanting about her dress to make it attract attention in any community.

Mrs. F. was attired in an elegant Irish foulard of figured aqua marine, or aqua fortis, or something of that kind with thirty-two perpendicular rows of tulle puffings formed of black zero velvets (Fahrenheit.) Over this she wore a rich balmoral skirt - Pekin stripe - looped up at the sides with clusters of field flowers, showing the handsome dress beneath. She also wore a white Figaro postillion pea-jacket, ornamented with a profusion of Gabriel bows of crimson silk. From her head depended tasteful garlands of fresh radishes. It being natural to look charming upon all occasions, she did so upon this, of course.

Miss B. wore an elegant goffered flounce, trimmed with a grenadine of *bouillonnee*, with a crinoline waistcoat to match; pardessus open behind, embroidered with paramattas of passementerie, and further ornamented at the shoulders with epaulettes of wheat-ears and string-beans; tulle hat, embellished with blue-bells, hare-bells, hash-bells, etc., with a frontispiece formed of a single magnificent cauliflower imbedded in mashed potatoes. Thus attired Miss B. looked good enough to eat. I admit that the expression is not very refined, but when a man is hungry the similes he uses are apt to be suggested by his stomach.

It is hardly worth while to describe the costumes of the gentlemen, since, with the exception of a handsome uniform here and there, (there were six naval Brigadier Generals present from the frigate Lancaster) they were all alike, and as usual, there was nothing worthy of particular notice in what they wore.

Enone, I could furnish you with an accurate description of the costume of every lady who attended that party if it were safe to do it, but it isn't, you know. Over in Washoe I generally say what I please about anybody and everybody, because my obliging fellow citizens have learned to put up with it; but here, common prudence teaches me to speak of those only who are slow to anger, when writing about ladies. I had rather lose my scalp, anyhow, than wound a lady's feelings.

But there is one thing you can rest assured of, Ænone: The pleasantest parties in the world are those given at the Lick House every now and then, and to which scarcely any save the guests of the establishment are invited; and the ladies are handsomer, and dress with more taste and greater magnificence - but there come the children again. When that last invoice of fifteen hundred infants around and get to romping about my door with the others, and hurraing for their several favorite candidates for Governor, (unaware that the election is over, poor little miscreants) I cannot write with such serene comfort as I do when they are asleep. Yet there is nothing I love so dearly as a clean, fat, healthy infant. I calculate to eat that whole tribe before I leave the Lick House.

Now, do you know, Ænone - however, I hear the stately tread of that inveterate chambermaid. She always finds this room in a state of chaos, and she always leaves it as trim as a parlor. But her instincts infallibly impel her to march in here just when I feel least like marching out. I do not know that I have ever begged permission to write "only a few moments longer" - never with my tongue, at any rate, although I may have looked it with my expressive glass eye. But she cares nothing for such spooney prayers. She is a soldier in the army of the household; she knows her duty, and she allows nothing to interfere with its rigid performance. She reminds me of U. S. Grant; she marches in her grand military way to the centre of the room, and comes to an "order arms" with her broom and her slop-bucket; then she bends on me a look of uncompromising determination, and I reluctantly haul down my flag. I abandon my position - I evacuate the premises - I retire in good order - I vamoose the ranch. Because that look of hers says in plain, crisp language, "I don't want you here. If you are not gone in two minutes, I propose to move upon your works!" But I bear the chambermaid no animosity.