

**A Fair Barbarian**

**By**

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A FAIR BARBARIAN.

CHAPTER I.

MISS OCTAVIA BASSETT.

Slowbridge had been shaken to its foundations.

It may as well be explained, however, at the outset, that it would not take much of a sensation to give Slowbridge a great shock. In the first place, Slowbridge was not used to sensations, and was used to going on the even and respectable tenor of its way, regarding the outside world with private distrust, if not with open disfavor. The new mills had been a trial to Slowbridge,--a sore trial. On being told of the owners' plan of building them, old Lady Theobald, who was the corner-stone of the social edifice of Slowbridge, was said, by a spectator, to have turned deathly pale with rage; and, on the first day of their being opened in working order, she had taken to her bed, and remained shut up in her darkened room for a week, refusing to see anybody, and even going so far as to send a scathing message to the curate of St. James, who called in fear and trembling, because he was afraid to stay away.

"With mills and mill-hands," her ladyship announced to Mr. Laurence, the mill-owner, when chance first threw them together, "with mills and

mill-hands come murder, massacre, and mob law." And she said it so loud, and with so stern an air of conviction, that the two Misses Briarton, who were of a timorous and fearful nature, dropped their buttered muffins (it was at one of the tea-parties which were Slowbridge's only dissipation), and shuddered hysterically, feeling that their fate was sealed, and that they might, any night, find three masculine mill-hands secreted under their beds, with bludgeons. But as no massacres took place, and the mill-hands were pretty regular in their habits, and even went so far as to send their children to Lady Theobald's free school, and accepted the tracts left weekly at their doors, whether they could read or not, Slowbridge gradually recovered from the shock of finding itself forced to exist in close proximity to mills, and was just settling itself to sleep--the sleep of the just--again, when, as I have said, it was shaken to its foundations.

It was Miss Belinda Bassett who received the first shock. Miss Belinda Bassett was a decorous little maiden lady, who lived in a decorous little house on High Street (which was considered a very genteel street in Slowbridge). She had lived in the same house all her life, her father had lived in it, and so also had her grandfather. She had gone out, to take tea, from its doors two or three times a week, ever since she had been twenty; and she had had her little tea-parties in its front parlor as often as any other genteel Slowbridge entertainer. She had risen at seven, breakfasted at eight, dined at two, taken tea at five, and gone to bed at ten, with such regularity for fifty years, that to rise at eight, breakfast at nine, dine at three, and take tea at six, and go to bed at

eleven, would, she was firmly convinced, be but "to fly in the face of Providence," as she put it, and sign her own death-warrant. Consequently, it is easy to imagine what a tremor and excitement seized her when, one afternoon, as she sat waiting for her tea, a coach from the Blue Lion dashed--or, at least, almost dashed--up to the front door, a young lady got out, and the next minute the handmaiden, Mary Anne, threw open the door of the parlor, announcing, without the least preface,--

"Your niece, mum, from 'Meriker."

Miss Belinda got up, feeling that her knees really trembled beneath her.

In Slowbridge, America was not approved of--in fact, was almost entirely ignored, as a country where, to quote Lady Theobald, "the laws were loose, and the prevailing sentiments revolutionary." It was not considered good taste to know Americans,--which was not unfortunate, as there were none to know; and Miss Belinda Bassett had always felt a delicacy in mentioning her only brother, who had emigrated to the United States in his youth, having first disgraced himself by the utterance of the blasphemous remark that "he wanted to get to a place where a fellow could stretch himself, and not be bullied by a lot of old tabbies." From the day of his departure, when he had left Miss Belinda bathed in tears of anguish, she had heard nothing of him; and here upon the threshold stood Mary Anne, with delighted eagerness in her countenance, repeating,--

"Your niece, mum, from 'Meriker!"

And, with the words, her niece entered.

Miss Belinda put her hand to her heart.

The young lady thus announced was the prettiest, and at the same time the most extraordinary-looking, young lady she had ever seen in her life.

Slowbridge contained nothing approaching this niece. Her dress was so very stylish that it was quite startling in its effect; her forehead was covered down to her large, pretty eyes themselves, with curls of yellow-brown hair; and her slender throat was swathed round and round with a grand scarf of black lace.

She made a step forward, and then stopped, looking at Miss Belinda. Her eyes suddenly, to Miss Belinda's amazement, filled with tears.

"Didn't you," she said,--"oh, dear! Didn't you get the letter?"

"The--the letter!" faltered Miss Belinda. "What letter, my--my dear?"

"Pa's," was the answer. "Oh! I see you didn't."

And she sank into the nearest chair, putting her hands up to her face, and beginning to cry outright.



"I--am Octavia B-bassett," she said. "We were coming to surp-prise you, and travel in Europe; but the mines went wrong, and p-pa was obliged to go back to Nevada."

"The mines?" gasped Miss Belinda.

"S-silver-mines," wept Octavia. "And we had scarcely landed when Piper cabled, and pa had to turn back. It was something about shares, and he may have lost his last dollar."

Miss Belinda sank into a chair herself.

"Mary Anne," she said faintly, "bring me a glass of water."

Her tone was such that Octavia removed her handkerchief from her eyes, and sat up to examine her.

"Are you frightened?" she asked, in some alarm.

Miss Belinda took a sip of the water brought by her handmaiden, replaced the glass upon the salver, and shook her head deprecatingly.

"Not exactly frightened, my dear," she said, "but so amazed that I find it difficult to--to collect myself."

Octavia put up her handkerchief again to wipe away a sudden new gush of

tears.

"If shares intended to go down," she said, "I don't see why they couldn't go down before we started, instead of waiting until we got over here, and then spoiling every thing."

"Providence, my dear"--began Miss Belinda.

But she was interrupted by the re-entrance of Mary Anne.

"The man from the Lion, mum, wants to know what's to be done with the trunks. There's six of 'em, an' they're all that 'eavy as he says he wouldn't lift one alone for ten shilling."

"Six!" exclaimed Miss Belinda. "Whose are they?"

"Mine," replied Octavia. "Wait a minute. I'll go out to him."

Miss Belinda was astounded afresh by the alacrity with which her niece seemed to forget her troubles, and rise to the occasion. The girl ran to the front door as if she was quite used to directing her own affairs, and began to issue her orders.

"You will have to get another man," she said. "You might have known that. Go and get one somewhere."

And when the man went off, grumbling a little, and evidently rather at a loss before such peremptory coolness, she turned to Miss Belinda.

"Where must he put them?" she asked.

It did not seem to have occurred to her once that her identity might be doubted, and some slight obstacles arise before her.

"I am afraid," faltered Miss Belinda, "that five of them will have to be put in the attic."

And in fifteen minutes five of them were put into the attic, and the sixth--the biggest of all--stood in the trim little spare chamber, and pretty Miss Octavia had sunk into a puffy little chintz-covered easy-chair, while her newly found relative stood before her, making the most laudable efforts to recover her equilibrium, and not to feel as if her head were spinning round and round.