

CHAPTER III.

L'ARGENTVILLE.

Miss Belinda sat, looking at her niece, with a sense of being at once stunned and fascinated. To see a creature so young, so pretty, so luxuriously splendid, and at the same time so simply and completely at ease with herself and her surroundings, was a revelation quite beyond her comprehension. The best-bred and nicest girls Slowbridge could produce were apt to look a trifle conscious and timid when they found themselves attired in the white muslin and floral decorations; but this slender creature sat in her gorgeous attire, her train flowing over the modest carpet, her rings flashing, her ear-pendants twinkling, apparently entirely oblivious of, or indifferent to, the fact that all her belongings were sufficiently out of place to be startling beyond measure.

Her chief characteristic, however, seemed to be her excessive frankness. She did not hesitate at all to make the most remarkable statements concerning her own and her father's past career. She made them, too, as if there was nothing unusual about them. Twice, in her childhood, a luckless speculation had left her father penniless; and once he had taken her to a Californian gold-diggers' camp, where she had been the only female member of the somewhat reckless community.

"But they were pretty good-natured, and made a pet of me," she said;

"and we did not stay very long. Father had a stroke of luck, and we went away. I was sorry when we had to go, and so were the men. They made me a present of a set of jewelry made out of the gold they had got themselves. There is a breastpin like a breastplate, and a necklace like a dog-collar: the bracelets tire my arms, and the ear-rings pull my ears; but I wear them sometimes--gold girdle and all."

"Did I," inquired Miss Belinda timidly, "did I understand you to say, my dear, that your father's business was in some way connected with silver-mining?"

"It is silver-mining," was the response. "He owns some mines, you know"--

"Owns?" said Miss Belinda, much fluttered; "owns some silver-mines? He must be a very rich man,--a very rich man. I declare, it quite takes my breath away."

"Oh! he is rich," said Octavia; "awfully rich sometimes. And then again he isn't. Shares go up, you know; and then they go down, and you don't seem to have any thing. But father generally comes out right, because he is lucky, and knows how to manage."

"But--but how uncertain!" gasped Miss Belinda: "I should be perfectly miserable. Poor, dear Mar"--

"Oh, no, you wouldn't!" said Octavia: "you'd get used to it, and wouldn't mind much, particularly if you were lucky as father is. There is every thing in being lucky, and knowing how to manage. When we first went to Bloody Gulch"--

"My dear!" cried Miss Belinda, aghast. "I--I beg of you"--

Octavia stopped short: she gazed at Miss Belinda in bewilderment, as she had done several times before.

"Is any thing the matter?" she inquired placidly.

"My dear love," explained Miss Belinda innocently, determined at least to do her duty, "it is not customary in--in Slowbridge,--in fact, I think I may say in England,--to use such--such exceedingly--I don't want to wound your feelings, my dear,--but such exceedingly strong expressions! I refer, my dear, to the one which began with a B. It is really considered profane, as well as dreadful beyond measure."

"The one which began with a B," repeated Octavia, still staring at her.

"That is the name of a place; but I didn't name it, you know. It was called that, in the first place, because a party of men were surprised and murdered there, while they were asleep in their camp at night. It isn't a very nice name, of course, but I'm not responsible for it; and besides, now the place is growing, they are going to call it Athens or Magnolia Vale. They tried L'Argentville for a while; but people would

call it Lodginville, and nobody liked it."

"I trust you never lived there," said Miss Belinda. "I beg your pardon for being so horrified, but I really could not refrain from starting when you spoke; and I cannot help hoping you never lived there."

"I live there now, when I am at home," Octavia replied. "The mines are there; and father has built a house, and had the furniture brought on from New York."

Miss Belinda tried not to shudder, but almost failed.

"Won't you take another muffin, my love?" she said, with a sigh. "Do take another muffin."

"No, thank you," answered Octavia; and it must be confessed that she looked a little bored, as she leaned back in her chair, and glanced down at the train of her dress. It seemed to her that her simplest statement or remark created a sensation.

Having at last risen from the tea-table, she wandered to the window, and stood there, looking out at Miss Belinda's flower-garden. It was quite a pretty flower-garden, and a good-sized one considering the dimensions of the house. There were an oval grass-plot, divers gravel paths, heart and diamond shaped beds aglow with brilliant annuals, a great many rose-bushes, several laburnums and lilacs, and a trim hedge of holly

surrounding it.

"I think I should like to go out and walk around there," remarked Octavia, smothering a little yawn behind her hand. "Suppose we go--if you don't care."

"Certainly, my dear," assented Miss Belinda. "But perhaps," with a delicately dubious glance at her attire, "you would like to make some little alteration in your dress--to put something a little--dark over it."

Octavia glanced down also.

"Oh, no!" she replied: "it will do well enough. I will throw a scarf over my head, though; not because I need it," unblushingly, "but because I have a lace one that is very becoming."

She went up to her room for the article in question, and in three minutes was down again. When she first caught sight of her, Miss Belinda found herself obliged to clear her throat quite suddenly. What Slowbridge would think of seeing such a toilet in her front garden, upon an ordinary occasion, she could not imagine. The scarf truly was becoming. It was a long affair of rich white lace, and was thrown over the girl's head, wound around her throat, and the ends tossed over her shoulders, with the most picturesque air of carelessness in the world.

"You look quite like a bride, my dear Octavia," said Miss Belinda. "We are scarcely used to such things in Slowbridge."

But Octavia only laughed a little.

"I am going to get some pink roses, and fasten the ends with them, when we get into the garden," she said.

She stopped for this purpose at the first rose-bush they reached. She gathered half a dozen slender-stemmed, heavy-headed buds, and, having fastened the lace with some, was carelessly placing the rest at her waist, when Miss Belinda started violently.