

CHAPTER IV.

LADY THEOBALD.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed nervously, "there is Lady Theobald."

Lady Theobald, having been making calls of state, was returning home rather later than usual, when, in driving up High Street, her eye fell upon Miss Bassett's garden. She put up her eyeglasses, and gazed through them severely; then she issued a mandate to her coachman.

"Dobson," she said, "drive more slowly."

She could not believe the evidence of her own eyeglasses. In Miss Bassett's garden she saw a tall girl, "dressed," as she put it, "like an actress," her delicate dress trailing upon the grass, a white lace scarf about her head and shoulders, roses in that scarf, roses at her waist.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed: "is Belinda Bassett giving a party, without so much as mentioning it to me?"

Then she issued another mandate.

"Dobson," she said, "drive faster, and drive me to Miss Bassett's."

Miss Belinda came out to the gate to meet her, quaking inwardly. Octavia simply turned slightly where she stood, and looked at her ladyship, without any pretence of concealing her curiosity.

Lady Theobald bent forward in her landau.

"Belinda," she said, "how do you do? I did not know you intended to introduce garden-parties into Slowbridge."

"Dear Lady Theobald"--began Miss Belinda.

"Who is that young person?" demanded her ladyship.

"She is poor dear Martin's daughter," answered Miss Belinda. "She arrived to-day--from Nevada, where--where it appears Martin has been very fortunate, and owns a great many silver-mines"--

"A 'great many' silver-mines!" cried Lady Theobald. "Are you mad, Belinda Bassett? I am ashamed of you. At your time of life too!"

Miss Belinda almost shed tears.

"She said 'some silver-mines,' I am sure," she faltered; "for I remember how astonished and bewildered I was. The fact is, that she is such a very singular girl, and has told me so many wonderful things, in the strangest, cool way, that I am quite uncertain of myself. Murderers, and

gold-diggers, and silver-mines, and camps full of men without women, making presents of gold girdles and dog-collars, and ear-rings that drag your ears down. It is enough to upset any one."

"I should think so," responded her ladyship. "Open the carriage-door, Belinda, and let me get out."

She felt that this matter must be inquired into at once, and not allowed to go too far. She had ruled Slowbridge too long to allow such innovations to remain uninvestigated. She would not be likely to be "upset," at least. She descended from her landau, with her most rigorous air. Her stout, rich black moire-antique gown rustled severely; the yellow ostrich feather in her bonnet waved majestically. (Being a brunette, and Lady Theobald, she wore yellow.) As she tramped up the gravel walk, she held up her dress with both hands, as an example to vulgar and reckless young people who wore trains and left them to take care of themselves. Octavia was arranging afresh the bunch of long-stemmed, swaying buds at her waist, and she was giving all her attention to her task when her visitor first addressed her.

"How do you do?" remarked her ladyship, in a fine, deep voice.

Miss Belinda followed her meekly.

"Octavia," she explained, "this is Lady Theobald, whom you will be very glad to know. She knew your father."

"Yes," returned my lady, "years ago. He has had time to improve since then. How do you do?"

Octavia's limpid eyes rested serenely upon her.

"How do you do?" she said, rather indifferently.

"You are from Nevada?" asked Lady Theobald.

"Yes."

"It is not long since you left there?"

Octavia smiled faintly.

"Do I look like that?" she inquired.

"Like what?" said my lady.

"As if I had not long lived in a civilized place. I dare say I do, because it is true that I haven't."

"You don't look like an English girl," remarked her ladyship.

Octavia smiled again. She looked at the yellow feather and stout moire

antique dress, but quite as if by accident, and without any mental deduction; then she glanced at the rosebuds in her hand.

"I suppose I ought to be sorry for that," she observed. "I dare say I shall be in time--when I have been longer away from Nevada."

"I must confess," admitted her ladyship, and evidently without the least regret or embarrassment, "I must confess that I don't know where Nevada is."

"It isn't in Europe," replied Octavia, with a soft, light laugh. "You know that, don't you?"

The words themselves sounded to Lady Theobald like the most outrageous impudence; but when she looked at the pretty, lovelock-shaded face, she was staggered the look it wore was such a very innocent and undisturbed one. At the moment, the only solution to be reached seemed to be that this was the style of young people in Nevada, and that it was ignorance and not insolence she had to do battle with--which, indeed, was partially true.

"I have not had any occasion to inquire where it is situated, so far," she responded firmly. "It is not so necessary for English people to know America as it is for Americans to know England."

"Isn't it?" said Octavia, without any great show of interest. "Why not?"

"For--for a great many reasons it would be fatiguing to explain," she answered courageously. "How is your father?"

"He is very sea-sick now," was the smiling answer,--"deadly sea-sick. He has been out just twenty-four hours."

"Out? What does that mean?"

"Out on the Atlantic. He was called back suddenly, and obliged to leave me. That is why I came here alone."

"Pray do come into the parlor, and sit down, dear Lady Theobald," ventured Miss Belinda. "Octavia"--

"Don't you think it is nicer out here?" said Octavia.

"My dear," answered Miss Belinda. "Lady Theobald"--She was really quite shocked.

"Ah!" interposed Octavia. "I only thought it was cooler."

She preceded them, without seeming to be at all conscious that she was taking the lead.

"You had better pick up your dress, Miss Octavia," said Lady Theobald

rather acidly.

The girl glanced over her shoulder at the length of train sweeping the path, but she made no movement toward picking it up.

"It is too much trouble, and one has to duck down so," she said. "It is bad enough to have to keep doing it when one is on the street. Besides, they would never wear out if one took too much care of them."

When they went into the parlor, and sat down, Lady Theobald made excellent use of her time, and managed to hear again all that had tried and bewildered Miss Belinda. She had no hesitation in asking questions boldly; she considered it her privilege to do so: she had catechised Slowbridge for forty years, and meant to maintain her rights until Time played her the knave's trick of disabling her.

In half an hour she had heard about the silver-mines, the gold-diggers, and L'Argentville; she knew that Martin Bassett was a millionaire, if the news he had heard had not left him penniless; that he would return to England, and visit Slowbridge, as soon as his affairs were settled. The precarious condition of his finances did not seem to cause Octavia much concern. She had asked no questions when he went away, and seemed quite at ease regarding the future.

"People will always lend him money, and then he is lucky with it," she said.

She bore the catechising very well. Her replies were frequently rather trying to her interlocutor, but she never seemed troubled, or ashamed of any thing she had to say; and she wore, from first to last, that inscrutably innocent and indifferent little air.

She did not even show confusion when Lady Theobald, on going away, made her farewell comment:--

"You are a very fortunate girl to own such jewels," she said, glancing critically at the diamonds in her ears; "but if you take my advice, my dear, you will put them away, and save them until you are a married woman. It is not customary, on this side of the water, for young girls to wear such things--particularly on ordinary occasions. People will think you are odd."

"It is not exactly customary in America," replied Octavia, with her undisturbed smile. "There are not many girls who have such things. Perhaps they would wear them if they had them. I don't care a very great deal about them, but I mean to wear them."

Lady Theobald went away in a dudgeon.

"You will have to exercise your authority, Belinda, and make her put them away," she said to Miss Bassett. "It is absurd--besides being atrocious."

"Make her!" faltered Miss Bassett.

"Yes, 'make her'--though I see you will have your hands full. I never heard such romancing stories in my life. It is just what one might expect from your brother Martin."

When Miss Bassett returned, Octavia was standing before the window, watching the carriage drive away, and playing absently with one of her ear-rings as she did so.

"What an old fright she is!" was her first guileless remark.

Miss Belinda quite bridled.

"My dear," she said, with dignity, "no one in Slowbridge would think of applying such a phrase to Lady Theobald."

Octavia turned around, and looked at her.

"But don't you think she is one?" she exclaimed. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have said it; but you know we haven't any thing as bad as that, even out in Nevada--really!"

"My dear," said Miss Belinda, "different countries contain different people; and in Slowbridge we have our standards,"--her best cap

trembling a little with her repressed excitement.

But Octavia did not appear overwhelmed by the existence of the standards in question. She turned to the window again.

"Well, anyway," she said, "I think it was pretty cool in her to order me to take off my diamonds, and save them until I was married. How does she know whether I mean to be married, or not? I don't know that I care about it."