

CHAPTER VIII.

SHARES LOOKING UP.

There were others who echoed her ladyship's words afterward, though they echoed them privately, and with more caution than my lady felt necessary. It is certain that Miss Octavia Bassett did not improve as time progressed, and she had enlarged opportunities for studying the noble example set before her by Slowbridge.

On his arrival in New York, Martin Bassett telegraphed to his daughter and sister, per Atlantic cable, informing them that he might be detained a couple of months, and bidding them to be of good cheer. The arrival of the message in its official envelope so alarmed Miss Belinda, that she was supported by Mary Anne while it was read to her by Octavia, who received it without any surprise whatever. For some time after its completion, Slowbridge had privately disbelieved in the Atlantic cable, and, until this occasion, had certainly disbelieved in the existence of people who received messages through it. In fact, on first finding that she was the recipient of such a message, Miss Belinda had made immediate preparations for fainting quietly away, being fully convinced that a shipwreck had occurred, which had resulted in her brother's death, and that his executors had chosen this delicate method of breaking the news.

"A message by Atlantic cable?" she had gasped. "Don't--don't read it, my

love. L-let some one else do that. Poor--poor child! Trust in Providence, my love, and--and bear up. Ah, how I wish I had a stronger mind, and could be of more service to you!"

"It's a message from father," said Octavia. "Nothing is the matter. He's all right. He got in on Saturday."

"Ah!" panted Miss Belinda. "Are you quite sure, my dear--are you quite sure?"

"That's what he says. Listen."

"Got in Saturday. Piper met me. Shares looking up. May be kept here two months. Will write. Keep up your spirits. MARTIN BASSETT."

"Thank Heaven!" sighed Miss Belinda. "Thank Heaven!"

"Why?" said Octavia.

"Why?" echoed Miss Belinda. "Ah, my dear, if you knew how terrified I was! I felt sure that something had happened. A cable message, my dear! I never received a telegram in my life before, and to receive a cable message was really a shock."

"Well, I don't see why," said Octavia. "It seems to me it is pretty much like any other message."

Miss Belinda regarded her timidly.

"Does your papa often send them?" she inquired. "Surely it must be expensive."

"I don't suppose it's cheap," Octavia replied, "but it saves time and worry. I should have had to wait twelve days for a letter."

"Very true," said Miss Belinda, "but"--

She broke off with rather a distressed shake of the head. Her simple ideas of economy and quiet living were frequently upset in these times. She had begun to regard her niece with a slight feeling of awe; and yet Octavia had not been doing any thing at all remarkable in her own eyes, and considered her life pretty dull.

If the elder Miss Bassett, her parents and grandparents, had not been so thoroughly well known, and so universally respected; if their social position had not been so firmly established, and their quiet lives not quite so highly respectable,--there is an awful possibility that Slowbridge might even have gone so far as not to ask Octavia out to tea at all. But even Lady Theobald felt that it would not do to slight Belinda Bassett's niece and guest. To omit the customary state teas would have been to crush innocent Miss Belinda at a blow, and place her--through the medium of this young lady, who alone deserved

condemnation--beyond the pale of all social law.

"It is only to be regretted," said her ladyship, "that Belinda Bassett has not arranged things better. Relatives of such an order are certainly to be deplored."

In secret Lucia felt much soft-hearted sympathy for both Miss Bassett and her guest. She could not help wondering how Miss Belinda became responsible for the calamity which had fallen upon her. It really did not seem probable that she had been previously consulted as to the kind of niece she desired, or that she had, in a distinct manner, evinced a preference for a niece of this description.

"Perhaps, dear grandmamma," the girl ventured, "it is because Miss Octavia Bassett is so young that"--

"May I ask," inquired Lady Theobald, in fell tones, "how old you are?"

"I was nineteen in--in December."

"Miss Octavia Bassett," said her ladyship, "was nineteen last October, and it is now June. I have not yet found it necessary to apologize for you on the score of youth."

But it was her ladyship who took the initiative, and set an evening for entertaining Miss Belinda and her niece, in company with several other

ladies, with the best bohea, thin bread and butter, plum-cake, and various other delicacies.

"What do they do at such places?" asked Octavia. "Half-past five is pretty early."

"We spend some time at the tea-table, my dear," explained Miss Belinda. "And afterward we--we converse. A few of us play whist. I do not. I feel as if I were not clever enough, and I get flurried too easily by--by differences of opinion."

"I should think it wasn't very exciting," said Octavia. "I don't fancy I ever went to an entertainment where they did nothing but drink tea, and talk."

"It is not our intention or desire to be exciting, my dear," Miss Belinda replied with mild dignity. "And an improving conversation is frequently most beneficial to the parties engaged in it."

"I'm afraid," Octavia observed, "that I never heard much improving conversation."

She was really no fonder of masculine society than the generality of girls; but she could not help wondering if there would be any young men present, and if, indeed, there were any young men in Slowbridge who might possibly be produced upon festive occasions, even though ordinarily kept

in the background. She had not heard Miss Belinda mention any masculine name so far, but that of the curate of St. James's; and, when she had seen him pass the house, she had not found his slim, black figure, and faint, ecclesiastic whiskers, especially interesting.

It must be confessed that Miss Belinda suffered many pangs of anxiety in looking forward to her young kinswoman's first appearance in society. A tea at Lady Theobald's house constituted formal presentation to the Slowbridge world. Each young lady within the pale of genteel society, having arrived at years of discretion, on returning home from boarding-school, was invited to tea at Oldclough Hall. During an entire evening she was the subject of watchful criticism. Her deportment was remarked, her accomplishments displayed, she performed her last new "pieces" upon the piano, she was drawn into conversation by her hostess; and upon the timid modesty of her replies, and the reverence of her listening attitudes, depended her future social status. So it was very natural indeed that Miss Belinda should be anxious.

"I would wear something rather quiet and--and simple, my dear Octavia," she said. "A white muslin perhaps, with blue ribbons."

"Would you?" answered Octavia. Then, after appearing to reflect upon the matter a few seconds, "I've got one that would do, if it's warm enough to wear it. I bought it in New York, but it came from Paris. I've never worn it yet."

"It would be nicer than any thing else, my love," said Miss Belinda, delighted to find her difficulty so easily disposed of. "Nothing is so charming in the dress of a young girl as pure simplicity. Our Slowbridge young ladies rarely wear any thing but white for evening. Miss Chickie assured me, a few weeks ago, that she had made fifteen white-muslin dresses, all after one simple design of her own."

"I shouldn't think that was particularly nice, myself," remarked Octavia impartially. "I should be glad one of the fifteen didn't belong to me. I should feel as if people might say, when I came into a room, 'Good gracious, there's another!'"

"The first was made for Miss Lucia Gaston, who is Lady Theobald's niece," replied Miss Belinda mildly. "And there are few young ladies in Slowbridge who would not emulate her example."

"Oh!" said Octavia, "I dare say she is very nice, and all that; but I don't believe I should care to copy her dresses. I think I should draw the line there."

But she said it without any ill-nature; and, sensitive as Miss Belinda was upon the subject of her cherished ideals, she could not take offence.

When the eventful evening arrived, there was excitement in more than one establishment upon High Street and the streets in its vicinity. The stories of the diamonds, the gold-diggers, and the silver-mines, had been

added to, and embellished, in the most ornate and startling manner. It was well known that only Lady Theobald's fine appreciation of Miss Belinda Bassett's feelings had induced her to extend her hospitalities to that lady's niece.

"I would prefer, my dear," said more than one discreet matron to her daughter, as they attired themselves,--"I would much prefer that you would remain near me during the earlier part of the evening, before we know how this young lady may turn out. Let your manner toward her be kind, but not familiar. It is well to be upon the safe side."

What precise line of conduct it was generally anticipated that this gold-digging and silver-mining young person would adopt, it would be difficult to say: it is sufficient that the general sentiments regarding her were of a distrustful, if not timorous, nature.

To Miss Bassett, who felt all this in the very air she breathed, the girl's innocence of the condition of affairs was even a little touching. With all her splendor, she was not at all hard to please, and had quite awakened to an interest in the impending social event. She seemed in good spirits, and talked more than was her custom, giving Miss Belinda graphic descriptions of various festal gatherings she had attended in New York, when she seemed to have been very gay indeed, and to have worn very beautiful dresses, and also to have had rather more than her share of partners. The phrases she used, and the dances she described, were all strange to Miss Belinda, and tended to reducing her to a bewildered

condition, in which she felt much timid amazement at the intrepidity of the New-York young ladies, and no slight suspicion of the "German"--as a theatrical kind of dance, involving extraordinary figures, and an extraordinary amount of attention from partners of the stronger sex.

It must be admitted, however, that by this time, notwithstanding the various shocks she had received, Miss Belinda had begun to discover in her young guest divers good qualities which appealed to her affectionate and susceptible old heart. In the first place, the girl had no small affectations: indeed, if she had been less unaffected she might have been less subject to severe comment. She was good-natured, and generous to extravagance. Her manner toward Mary Anne never ceased to arouse Miss Belinda to interest. There was not any condescension whatever in it, and yet it could not be called a vulgarly familiar manner: it was rather an astonishingly simple manner, somehow suggestive of a subtle recognition of Mary Anne's youth, and ill-luck in not having before her more lively prospects. She gave Mary Anne presents in the shape of articles of clothing at which Slowbridge would have exclaimed in horror if the recipient had dared to wear them; but, when Miss Belinda expressed her regret at these indiscretions, Octavia was quite willing to rectify her mistakes.

"Ah, well!" she said, "I can give her some money, and she can buy some things for herself." Which she proceeded to do; and when, under her mistress's direction, Mary Anne purchased a stout brown merino, she took quite an interest in her struggles at making it.

"I wouldn't make it so short in the waist and so full in the skirt, if I were you," she said. "There's no reason why it shouldn't fit, you know," thereby winning the house-maiden's undying adoration, and adding much to the shapeliness of the garment.

"I am sure she has a good heart," Miss Belinda said to herself, as the days went by. "She is like Martin in that. I dare say she finds me very ignorant and silly. I often see in her face that she is unable to understand my feeling about things; but she never seems to laugh at me, nor think of me unkindly. And she is very, very pretty, though perhaps I ought not to think of that at all."