

CHAPTER IX.

WHITE MUSLIN.

As the good little spinster was arraying herself on this particular evening, having laid upon the bed the greater portion of her modest splendor, she went to her wardrobe, and took therefrom the scored bandbox containing her best cap. All the ladies of Slowbridge wore caps; and all being respectfully plagiarized from Lady Theobald, without any reference to age, size, complexion, or demeanor, the result was sometimes a little trying. Lady Theobald's head-dresses were of a severe and bristling order. The lace of which they were composed was induced by some ingenious device to form itself into aggressive quillings, the bows seemed lined with buckram, the strings neither floated nor fluttered.

"To a majestic person the style is very appropriate," Miss Belinda had said to Octavia that very day; "but to one who is not so, it is rather trying. Sometimes, indeed, I have almost wished that Miss Chickie would vary a little more in her designs."

Perhaps the sight of the various articles contained in two of the five trunks had inspired these doubts in the dear old lady's breast: it is certain, at least, that, as she took the best cap up, a faint sigh fluttered upon her lips.

"It is very large for a small person," she said. "And I am not at all sure that amber is becoming to me."

And just at that moment there came a tap at the door, which she knew was from Octavia.

She laid the cap back, in some confusion at being surprised in a moment of weakness.

"Come in, my love," she said.

Octavia pushed the door open, and came in. She had not dressed yet, and had on her wrapper and slippers, which were both of quilted gray silk, gayly embroidered with carnations. But Miss Belinda had seen both wrapper and slippers before, and had become used to their sumptuousness: what she

had not seen was the trifle the girl held in her hand. "See here," she said. "See what I have been making for you!"

She looked quite elated, and laughed triumphantly.

"I did not know I could do it until I tried," she said. "I had seen some in New York, and I had the lace by me. And I have enough left to make ruffles for your neck and wrists. It's Mechlin."

"My dear!" exclaimed Miss Belinda. "My dear!"

Octavia laughed again.

"Don't you know what it is?" she said. "It isn't like a Slowbridge cap; but it's a cap, nevertheless. They wear them like this in New York, and I think they are ever so much prettier."

It was true that it was not like a Slowbridge cap, and was also true that it was prettier. It was a delicate affair of softly quilled lace, adorned here and there with loops of pale satin ribbon.

"Let me try it on," said Octavia, advancing; and in a minute she had done so, and turned Miss Bassett about to face herself in the glass. "There!" she said. "Isn't that better than--well, than emulating Lady Theobald?"

It was so pretty and so becoming, and Miss Belinda was so touched by the girl's innocent enjoyment, that the tears came into her eyes.

"My--my love," she faltered, "it is so beautiful, and so expensive, that--though indeed I don't know how to thank you--I am afraid I should not dare to wear it."

"Oh!" answered Octavia, "that's nonsense, you know. I'm sure there's no reason why people shouldn't wear becoming things. Besides, I should be awfully disappointed. I didn't think I could make it, and I'm real proud

of it. You don't know how becoming it is!"

Miss Belinda looked at her reflection, and faltered. It was becoming.

"My love," she protested faintly, "real Mechlin! There is really no such lace in Slowbridge."

"All the better," said Octavia cheerfully. "I'm glad to hear that. It isn't one bit too nice for you."

To Miss Belinda's astonishment, she drew a step nearer to her, and gave one of the satin loops a queer, caressing little touch, which actually seemed to mean something. And then suddenly the girl stooped, with a little laugh, and gave her aunt a light kiss on her cheek.

"There!" she said. "You must take it from me for a present. I'll go and make the ruffles this minute; and you must wear those too, and let people see how stylish you can be."

And, without giving Miss Bassett time to speak, she ran out of the room, and left the dear old lady warmed to the heart, tearful, delighted, frightened.

A coach from the Blue Lion had been ordered to present itself at a quarter past five, promptly; and at the time specified it rattled up to the door with much spirit,--with so much spirit, indeed, that Miss

Belinda was a little alarmed.

"Dear, dear!" she said. "I hope the driver will be able to control the horse, and will not allow him to go too fast. One hears of such terrible accidents."

Then Mary Anne was sent to announce the arrival of the equipage to Miss Octavia, and, having performed the errand, came back beaming with smiles.

"Oh, mum," she exclaimed, "you never see nothin' like her! Her gownd is 'evingly. An' lor'! how you do look yourself, to be sure!"

Indeed, the lace ruffles on her "best" black silk, and the little cap on her smooth hair, had done a great deal for Miss Bassett; and she had only just been reproaching herself for her vanity in recognizing this fact.

But Mary Anne's words awakened a new train of thought.

"Is--is Miss Octavia's dress a showy one, Mary Anne?" she inquired. "Dear me, I do hope it is not a showy dress!"

"I never see nothin' no eleganter, mum," said Mary Anne: "she wants nothin' but a veil to make a bride out of her--an' a becominer thing she never has wore."

They heard the soft sweep of skirts at that moment, and Octavia came in.

"There!" she said, stopping when she had reached the middle of the room. "Is that simple enough?" Miss Belinda could only look at her helplessly. The "white muslin" was composed almost entirely of Valenciennes lace; the blue ribbons were embroidered with field-daisies; the air of delicate elaborateness about the whole was something which her innocent mind could not have believed possible in orthodox white and blue.

"I don't think I should call it exactly simple," she said. "My love, what a quantity of lace!"

Octavia glanced down at her jabots and frills complacently.

"There is a good deal of it," she remarked; "but then, it is nice, and one can stand a good deal of nice Valenciennes on white. They said Worth made the dress. I hope he did. It cost enough. The ribbon was embroidered by hand, I suppose. And there is plenty of it cut up into these bows."

There was no more to be said. Miss Belinda led the way to the coach, which they entered under the admiring or critical eyes of several most respectable families, who had been lying in wait behind their window-curtains since they had been summoned there by the sound of the wheels.

As the vehicle rattled past the boarding-school, all the young ladies in the first class rushed to the window. They were rewarded for their zeal

by a glimpse of a cloud of muslin and lace, a charmingly dressed yellow-brown head, and a pretty face, whose eyes favored them with a frank stare of interest.

"She had diamonds in her ears!" cried Miss Phipps, wildly excited. "I saw them flash. Ah, how I should like to see her without her wraps! I have no doubt she is a perfect blaze!"