

CHAPTER X.

ANNOUNCING MR. BAROLD.

Lady Theobald's invited guests sat in the faded blue drawing-room, waiting. Everybody had been unusually prompt, perhaps because everybody wished to be on the ground in time to see Miss Octavia Bassett make her entrance.

"I should think it would be rather a trial, even to such a girl as she is said to be," remarked one matron.

"It is but natural that she should feel that Lady Theobald will regard her rather critically, and that she should know that American manners will hardly be the thing for a genteel and conservative English country town."

"We saw her a few days ago," said Lucia, who chanced to hear this speech, "and she is very pretty. I think I never saw any one so very pretty before."

"But in quite a theatrical way, I think, my dear," the matron replied, in a tone of gentle correction.

"I have seen so very few theatrical people," Lucia answered sweetly,

"that I scarcely know what the theatrical way is, dear Mrs. Burnham. Her dress was very beautiful, and not like what we wear in Slowbridge; but she seemed to me to be very bright and pretty, in a way quite new to me, and so just a little odd."

"I have heard that her dress is most extravagant and wasteful," put in Miss Pilcher, whose educational position entitled her to the condescending respect of her patronesses. "She has lace on her morning gowns, which"--

"Miss Bassett and Miss Octavia Bassett," announced Dobson, throwing open the door.

Lady Theobald rose from her seat. A slight rustle made itself heard through the company, as the ladies all turned toward the entrance; and, after they had so turned, there were evidences of a positive thrill. Before the eyes of all, Belinda Bassett advanced with rich ruffles of Mechlin at her neck and wrists, with a delicate and distinctly novel cap upon her head, her niece following her with an unabashed face, twenty pounds' worth of lace on her dress, and unmistakable diamonds in her little ears.

"There is not a shadow of timidity about her," cried Mrs. Burnham under her breath. "This is actual boldness."

But this was a very severe term to use, notwithstanding that it was born

of righteous indignation. It was not boldness at all: it was only the serenity of a young person who was quite unconscious that there was any thing to fear in the rather unimposing party before her. Octavia was accustomed to entering rooms full of strangers. She had spent several years of her life in hotels, where she had been stared out of countenance by a few score new people every day. She was even used to being, in some sort, a young person of note. It was nothing unusual for her to know that she was being pointed out. "That pretty blonde," she often heard it said, "is Martin Bassett's daughter: sharp fellow, Bassett,--and lucky fellow too; more money than he can count."

So she was not at all frightened when she walked in behind Miss Belinda. She glanced about her cheerfully, and, catching sight of Lucia, smiled at her as she advanced up the room. The call of state Lady Theobald had made with her grand-daughter had been a very brief one; but Octavia had taken a decided fancy to Lucia, and was glad to see her again.

"I am glad to see you, Belinda," said her ladyship, shaking hands. "And you also, Miss Octavia."

"Thank you," responded Octavia.

"You are very kind," Miss Belinda murmured gratefully.

"I hope you are both well?" said Lady Theobald with majestic condescension, and in tones to be heard all over the room.

"Quite well, thank you," murmured Miss Belinda again. "Very well indeed;" rather as if this fortunate state of affairs was the result of her ladyship's kind intervention with the fates.

She felt terribly conscious of being the centre of observation, and rather overpowered by the novelty of her attire, which was plainly creating a sensation. Octavia, however, who was far more looked at, was entirely oblivious of the painful prominence of her position. She remained standing in the middle of the room, talking to Lucia, who had approached to greet her. She was so much taller than Lucia, that she looked very tall indeed by contrast, and also very wonderfully dressed. Lucia's white muslin was one of Miss Chickie's fifteen, and was, in a "genteel" way, very suggestive of Slowbridge. Suspended from Octavia's waist by a long loop of the embroidered ribbon, was a little round fan, of downy pale-blue feathers, and with this she played as she talked; but Lucia, having nothing to play with, could only stand with her little hands hanging at her sides.

"I have never been to an afternoon tea like this before," Octavia said.

"It is nothing like a kettle-drum."

"I am not sure that I know what a kettle-drum is," Lucia answered. "They have them in London, I think; but I have never been to London."

"They have them in New York," said Octavia; "and they are a crowded sort

of afternoon parties, where ladies go in carriage-toilet, not evening dress. People are rushing in and out all the time."

Lucia glanced around the room and smiled.

"That is very unlike this," she remarked.

"Well," said Octavia, "I should think that, after all, this might be nicer."

Which was very civil.

Lucia glanced around again--this time rather stealthily--at Lady Theobald. Then she glanced back at Octavia.

"But it isn't," she said, in an undertone.

Octavia began to laugh. They were on a new and familiar footing from that moment.

"I said 'it might,'" she answered.

She was not afraid, any longer, of finding the evening stupid. If there were no young men, there was at least a young woman who was in sympathy with her. She said,--

"I hope that I shall behave myself pretty well, and do the things I am expected to do."

"Oh!" said Lucia, with a rather alarmed expression, "I hope so. I--I am afraid you would not be comfortable if you didn't."

Octavia opened her eyes, as she often did at Miss Belinda's remarks, and then suddenly she began to laugh again.

"What would they do?" she said disrespectfully. "Would they turn me out, without giving me any tea?"

Lucia looked still more frightened.

"Don't let them see you laughing," she said. "They--they will say you are giddy."

"Giddy!" replied Octavia. "I don't think there is any thing to make me giddy here."

"If they say you are giddy," said Lucia, "your fate will be sealed; and, if you are to stay here, it really will be better to try to please them a little."

Octavia reflected a moment.

"I don't mean to displease them," she said, "unless they are very easily displeased. I suppose I don't think very much about what people are saying of me. I don't seem to notice."

"Will you come now and let me introduce Miss Egerton and her sister?" suggested Lucia hurriedly. "Grandmamma is looking at us."

In the innocence of her heart Octavia glanced at Lady Theobald, and saw that she was looking at them, and with a disapproving air. "I wonder what that's for?" she said to herself; but she followed Lucia across the room.

She made the acquaintance of the Misses Egerton, who seemed rather fluttered, and, after the first exchange of civilities, subsided into monosyllables and attentive stares. They were, indeed, very anxious to hear Octavia converse, but had not the courage to attempt to draw her out, unless a sudden query of Miss Lydia's could be considered such an attempt.

"Do you like England?" she asked.

"Is this England?" inquired Octavia.

"It is a part of England, of course," replied the young lady, with calm literalness.

"Then, of course, I like it very much," said Octavia, slightly waving her fan and smiling.

Miss Lydia Egerton and Miss Violet Egerton each regarded her in dubious silence for a moment. They did not think she looked as if she were "clever;" but the speech sounded to both as if she were, and as if she meant to be clever a little at their expense.

Naturally, after that they felt slightly uncomfortable, and said less than before; and conversation lagged to such an extent that Octavia was not sorry when tea was announced.

And it so happened that tea was not the only thing announced. The ladies had all just risen from their seats with a gentle rustle, and Lady Theobald was moving forward to marshal her procession into the dining-room, when Dobson appeared at the door again.

"Mr. Barold, my lady," he said, "and Mr. Burmestone."

Everybody glanced first at the door, and then at Lady Theobald. Mr. Francis Barold crossed the threshold, followed by the tall, square-shouldered builder of mills, who was a strong, handsome man, and bore himself very well, not seeming to mind at all the numerous eyes fixed upon him.

"I did not know," said Barold, "that we should find you had guests. Beg pardon, I'm sure, and so does Burmistone, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at Broadoaks, and who was good enough to invite me to return with him." Lady Theobald extended her hand to the gentleman specified.

"I am glad," she said rigidly, "to see Mr. Burmistone."

Then she turned to Barold.

"This is very fortunate," she announced. "We are just going in to take tea, in which I hope you will join us. Lucia"--

Mr. Francis Barold naturally turned, as her ladyship uttered her granddaughter's name in a tone of command. It may be supposed that his first intention in turning was to look at Lucia; but he had scarcely done so, when his attention was attracted by the figure nearest to her,--the figure of a young lady, who was playing with a little blue fan, and smiling at him brilliantly and unmistakably.

The next moment he was standing at Octavia Bassett's side, looking rather pleased, and the blood of Slowbridge was congealing, as the significance of the situation was realized.

One instant of breathless--of awful--suspense, and her ladyship recovered herself.

"We will go in to tea," she said. "May I ask you, Mr. Burmestone, to accompany Miss Pilcher?"