

CHAPTER XI.

A SLIGHT INDISCRETION.

During the remainder of the evening, Miss Belinda was a prey to wretchedness and despair. When she raised her eyes to her hostess, she met with a glance full of icy significance; when she looked across the tea-table, she saw Octavia seated next to Mr. Francis Barold, monopolizing his attention, and apparently in the very best possible spirits. It only made matters worse, that Mr. Francis Barold seemed to find her remarks worthy of his attention. He drank very little tea, and now and then appeared much interested and amused. In fact, he found Miss Octavia even more entertaining than he had found her during their journey. She did not hesitate at all to tell him that she was delighted to see him again at this particular juncture.

"You don't know how glad I was to see you come in," she said.

She met his rather startled glance with the most open candor as she spoke.

"It is very civil of you to say so," he said; "but you can hardly expect me to believe it, you know. It is too good to be true."

"I thought it was too good to be true when the door opened," she answered

cheerfully. "I should have been glad to see anybody, almost"--

"Well, that," he interposed, "isn't quite so civil."

"It is not quite so civil to"--

But there she checked herself, and asked him a question with the most naive seriousness.

"Are you a great friend of Lady Theobald's?" she said.

"No," he answered. "I am a relative."

"That's worse," she remarked.

"It is," he replied. "Very much worse."

"I asked you," she proceeded, with an entrancing little smile of irreverent approval, "because I was going to say that my last speech was not quite so civil to Lady Theobald."

"That is perfectly true," he responded. "It wasn't civil to her at all."

He was passing his time very comfortably, and was really surprised to feel that he was more interested in these simple audacities than he had been in any conversation for some time. Perhaps it was because his

companion was so wonderfully pretty, but it is not unlikely that there were also other reasons. She looked him straight in the eyes, she comported herself after the manner of a young lady who was enjoying herself, and yet he felt vaguely that she might have enjoyed herself quite as much with Burmestone, and that it was probable that she would not think a second time of him, or of what she said to him.

After tea, when they returned to the drawing-room, the opportunities afforded for conversation were not numerous. The piano was opened, and one after another of the young ladies were invited to exhibit their prowess. Upon its musical education Slowbridge prided itself. "Few towns," Miss Pilcher frequently remarked, "could be congratulated upon the possession of such talent and such cultivation." The Misses Egerton played a duet, the Misses Loftus sang, Miss Abercrombie "executed" a sonata with such effect as to melt Miss Pilcher to tears; and still Octavia had not been called upon. There might have been a reason for this, or there might not; but the moment arrived, at length, when Lady Theobald moved toward Miss Belinda with evidently fell intent.

"Perhaps," she said, "perhaps your niece, Miss Octavia, will favor us."

Miss Belinda replied in a deprecatory and uncertain murmur.

"I--am not sure. I really don't know. Perhaps--Octavia, my dear."

Octavia raised a smiling face.

"I don't play," she said. "I never learned."

"You do not play!" exclaimed Lady Theobald. "You do not play at all!"

"No," answered Octavia. "Not a note. And I think I am rather glad of it; because, if I tried, I should be sure to do it worse than other people. I would rather," with unimpaired cheerfulness, "let some one else do it."

There were a few seconds of dead silence. A dozen people seated around her had heard. Miss Pilcher shuddered; Miss Belinda looked down; Mr. Francis Barold preserved an entirely unmoved countenance, the general impression being that he was very much shocked, and concealed his disgust with an effort.

"My dear," said Lady Theobald, with an air of much condescension and some grave pity, "I should advise you to try to learn. I can assure you that you would find it a great source of pleasure."

"If you could assure me that my friends would find it a great source of pleasure, I might begin," answered the mistaken young person, still cheerfully; "but I am afraid they wouldn't."

It seemed that fate had marked her for disgrace. In half an hour from that time she capped the climax of her indiscretions.

The evening being warm, the French windows had been left open; and, in passing one of them, she stopped a moment to look out at the brightly moonlit grounds.

Barold, who was with her, paused too.

"Looks rather nice, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes," she replied. "Suppose we go out on the terrace."

He laughed in an amused fashion she did not understand.

"Suppose we do," he said. "By Jove, that's a good idea!"

He laughed as he followed her.

"What amuses you so?" she inquired.

"Oh!" he replied, "I am merely thinking of Lady Theobald."

"Well," she commented, "I think it's rather disrespectful in you to laugh. Isn't it a lovely night? I didn't think you had such moonlight nights in England. What a night for a drive!"

"Is that one of the things you do in America--drive by moonlight?"

"Yes. Do you mean to say you don't do it in England?"

"Not often. Is it young ladies who drive by moonlight in America?"

"Well, you don't suppose they go alone, do you?" quite ironically. "Of course they have some one with them."

"Ah! Their papas?"

"No."

"Their mammas?"

"No."

"Their governesses, their uncles, their aunts?"

"No," with a little smile.

He smiled also.

"That is another good idea," he said. "You have a great many nice ideas in America."

She was silent a moment or so, swinging her fan slowly to and fro by its ribbon, and appearing to reflect.

"Does that mean," she said at length, "that it wouldn't be considered proper in England?"

"I hope you won't hold me responsible for English fallacies," was his sole answer.

"I don't hold anybody responsible for them," she returned with some spirit. "I don't care one thing about them."

"That is fortunate," he commented. "I am happy to say I don't, either. I take the liberty of pleasing myself. I find it pays best."

"Perhaps," she said, returning to the charge, "perhaps Lady Theobald will think this is improper."

He put his hand up, and stroked his mustache lightly, without replying.

"But it is not," she added emphatically: "it is not!"

"No," he admitted, with a touch of irony, "it is not!"

"Are you any the worse for it?" she demanded.

"Well, really, I think not--as yet," he replied.

"Then we won't go in," she said, the smile returning to her lips again.