

CHAPTER XII.

AN INVITATION.

In the mean time Mr. Burmistone was improving his opportunities within doors. He had listened to the music with the most serious attention; and on its conclusion he had turned to Mrs. Burnham, and made himself very agreeable indeed. At length, however, he arose, and sauntered across the room to a table at which Lucia Gaston chanced to be standing alone, having just been deserted by a young lady whose mamma had summoned her.

She wore, Mr. Burmistone regretted to see, as he advanced, a troubled and anxious expression; the truth being that she had a moment before remarked the exit of Miss Belinda's niece and her companion. It happened oddly that Mr. Burmistone's first words touched upon the subject of her thought. He began quite abruptly with it.

"It seems to me," he said, "that Miss Octavia Bassett"--

Lucia stopped him with a courage which surprised herself.

"Oh, if you please," she implored, "don't say any thing unkind about her!"

Mr. Burmistone looked down into her soft eyes with a good deal of

feeling.

"I was not going to say any thing unkind," he answered. "Why should I?"

"Everybody seems to find a reason for speaking severely of her," Lucia faltered. "I have heard so many unkind things tonight, that I am quite unhappy. I am sure--I am sure she is very candid and simple."

"Yes," answered Mr. Burmestone, "I am sure she is very candid and simple."

"Why should we expect her to be exactly like ourselves?" Lucia went on. "How can we be sure that our way is better than any other? Why should they be angry because her dress is so expensive and pretty? Indeed, I only wish I had such a dress. It is a thousand times prettier than any we ever wear. Look around the room, and see if it is not. And as to her not having learned to play on the piano, or to speak French--why should she be obliged to do things she feels she would not be clever at? I am not clever, and have been a sort of slave all my life, and have been scolded and blamed for what I could not help at all, until I have felt as if I must be a criminal. How happy she must have been to be let alone!"

She had clasped her little hands, and, though she spoke in a low voice, was quite impassioned in an unconscious way. Her brief girlish life had not been a very happy one, as may be easily imagined; and a glimpse of the liberty for which she had suffered roused her to a

sense of her own wrongs.

"We are all cut out after the same pattern," she said. "We learn the same things, and wear the same dresses, one might say. What Lydia Egerton has been taught, I have been taught; yet what two creatures could be more unlike each other, by nature, than we are?"

Mr. Burmestone glanced across the room at Miss Egerton. She was a fine, robust young woman, with a high nose and a stolid expression of countenance.

"That is true," he remarked.

"We are afraid of every thing," said Lucia bitterly. "Lydia Egerton is afraid--though you might not think so. And, as for me, nobody knows what a coward I am but myself. Yes, I am a coward! When grandmamma looks at me, I tremble. I dare not speak my mind, and differ with her, when I know she is unjust and in the wrong. No one could say that of Miss Octavia Bassett."

"That is perfectly true," said Mr. Burmestone; and he even went so far as to laugh as he thought of Miss Octavia trembling in the august presence of Lady Theobald.

The laugh checked Lucia at once in her little outburst of eloquence. She began to blush, the color mounting to her forehead.

"Oh!" she began, "I did not mean to--to say so much. I"--

There was something so innocent and touching in her sudden timidity and confusion, that Mr. Burmestone forgot altogether that they were not very old friends, and that Lady Theobald might be looking.

He bent slightly forward, and looked into her upraised, alarmed eyes.

"Don't be afraid of me" he said; "don't, for pity's sake!"

He could not have hit upon a luckier speech, and also he could not have uttered it more feelingly than he did. It helped her to recover herself, and gave her courage.

"There," she said, with a slight catch of the breath, "does not that prove what I said to be true? I was afraid, the very moment I ceased to forget myself. I was afraid of you and of myself. I have no courage at all."

"You will gain it in time," he said.

"I shall try to gain it," she answered. "I am nearly twenty, and it is time that I should learn to respect myself. I think it must be because I have no self-respect that I am such a coward."

It seemed that her resolution was to be tried immediately; for at that very moment Lady Theobald turned, and, on recognizing the full significance of Lucia's position, was apparently struck temporarily dumb and motionless. When she recovered from the shock, she made a majestic gesture of command.

Mr. Burmestone glanced at the girl's face, and saw that it changed color a little. "Lady Theobald appears to wish to speak to you," he said.

Lucia left her seat, and walked across the room with a steady air. Lady Theobald did not remove her eye from her until she stopped within three feet of her. Then she asked a rather unnecessary question:--

"With whom have you been conversing?"

"With Mr. Burmestone."

"Upon what subject?"

"We were speaking of Miss Octavia Bassett."

Her ladyship glanced around the room, as if a new idea had occurred to her, and said,--

"Where is Miss Octavia Bassett?"

Here it must be confessed that Lucia faltered.

"She is on the terrace with Mr. Barold."

"She is on"--

Her ladyship stopped short in the middle of her sentence. This was too much for her. She left Lucia, and crossed the room to Miss Belinda.

"Belinda," she said, in an awful undertone, "your niece is out upon the terrace with Mr. Barold. Perhaps it would be as well for you to intimate to her that in England it is not customary--that--Belinda, go and bring her in."

Miss Belinda arose, actually looking pale. She had been making such strenuous efforts to converse with Miss Pilcher and Mrs. Burnham, that she had been betrayed into forgetting her charge. She could scarcely believe her ears. She went to the open window, and looked out, and then turned paler than before.

"Octavia, my dear," she said faintly.

"Francis!" said Lady Theobald, over her shoulder.

Mr. Francis Barold turned a rather bored countenance toward them; but it was evidently not Octavia who had bored him.

"Octavia," said Miss Belinda, "how imprudent! In that thin dress--the night air! How could you, my dear, how could you?"

"Oh! I shall not catch cold," Octavia answered. "I am used to it. I have been out hours and hours, on moonlight nights, at home."

But she moved toward them.

"You must remember," said Lady Theobald, "that there are many things which may be done in America which would not be safe in England."

And she made the remark in an almost sepulchral tone of warning.

How Miss Belinda would have supported herself if the coach had not been announced at this juncture, it would be difficult to say. The coach was announced, and they took their departure. Mr. Barold happening to make his adieus at the same time, they were escorted by him down to the vehicle from the Blue Lion.

When he had assisted them in, and closed the door, Octavia bent forward, so that the moonlight fell full on her pretty, lace-covered head, and the sparkling drops in her ears.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "if you stay here at all, you must come and see us.--Aunt Belinda, ask him to come and see us."

Miss Belinda could scarcely speak.

"I shall be most--most happy," she fluttered, "Any--friend of dear Lady Theobald's, of course"--

"Don't forget," said Octavia, waving her hand.

The coach moved off, and Miss Belinda sank back into a dark corner.

"My dear," she gasped, "what will he think?"

Octavia was winding her lace scarf around her throat.

"He'll think I want him to call," she said serenely. "And I do."