

CHAPTER XIV.

A CLERICAL VISIT.

It was indeed true that the Rev. Arthur Poppleton had spent the greater part of his afternoon in Miss Belinda Bassett's front parlor, and that Octavia had entertained him in such a manner that he had been beguiled into forgetting the clerical visits he had intended to make, and had finally committed himself by a promise to return a day or two later to play croquet. His object in calling had been to request Miss Belinda's assistance in a parochial matter. His natural timorousness of nature had indeed led him to put off making the visit for as long a time as possible. The reports he had heard of Miss Octavia Bassett had inspired him with great dread. Consequently he had presented himself at Miss Belinda's front door with secret anguish.

"Will you say," he had faltered to Mary Anne, "that it is Mr. Poppleton, to see Miss Bassett--Miss Belinda Bassett?"

And then he had been handed into the parlor, the door had been closed behind him, and he had found himself shut up entirely alone in the room with Miss Octavia Bassett herself.

His first impulse was to turn, and flee precipitately: indeed, he even went so far as to turn, and clutch the handle of the door; but somehow a

second thought arrived in time to lead him to control himself.

This second thought came with his second glance at Octavia.

She was not at all what he had pictured her. Singularly enough, no one had told him that she was pretty; and he had thought of her as a gaunt young person, with a determined and manly air. She struck him, on the contrary, as being extremely girlish and charming to look upon. She wore the pale pink gown; and as he entered he saw her give a furtive little dab to her eyes with a lace handkerchief, and hurriedly crush an open letter into her pocket. Then, seeming to dismiss her emotion with enviable facility, she rose to greet him.

"If you want to see aunt Belinda," she said, "perhaps you had better sit down. She will be here directly." He plucked up spirit to take a seat, suddenly feeling his terror take wing. He was amazed at his own courage.

"Th-thank you," he said. "I have the pleasure of"--There, it is true, he stopped, looked at her, blushed, and finished somewhat disjointedly.

"Miss Octavia Bassett, I believe."

"Yes," she answered, and sat down near him.

When Miss Belinda descended the stairs, a short time afterward, her ears were greeted by the sound of brisk conversation, in which the Rev. Arthur Poppleton appeared to be taking part with before-unheard-of spirit. When

he arose at her entrance, there was in his manner an air of mild buoyancy which astonished her beyond measure. When he re-seated himself, he seemed quite to forget the object of his visit for some minutes, and was thus placed in the embarrassing position of having to refer to his note-book.

Having done so, and found that he had called to ask assistance for the family of one of his parishioners, he recovered himself somewhat. As he explained the exigencies of the case, Octavia listened.

"Well," she said, "I should think it would make you quite uncomfortable, if you see things like that often."

"I regret to say I do see such things only too frequently," he answered.

"Gracious!" she said; but that was all.

He was conscious of being slightly disappointed at her apathy; and perhaps it is to be deplored that he forgot it afterward, when Miss Belinda had bestowed her mite, and the case was dismissed for the time being. He really did forget it, and was beguiled into making a very long call, and enjoying himself as he had never enjoyed himself before.

When, at length, he was recalled to a sense of duty by a glance at the clock, he had already before his eyes an opening vista of delights, taking the form of future calls, and games of croquet played upon Miss

Belinda's neatly-shaven grass-plat. He had bidden the ladies adieu in the parlor, and, having stepped into the hall, was fumbling rather excitedly in the umbrella-stand for his own especially slender clerical umbrella, when he was awakened to new rapture by hearing Miss Octavia's tone again.

He turned, and saw her standing quite near him, looking at him with rather an odd expression, and holding something in her hand.

"Oh!" she said. "See here,--those people."

"I--beg pardon," he hesitated. "I don't quite understand."

"Oh, yes!" she answered. "Those desperately poor wretches, you know, with fever, and leaks in their house, and all sorts of disagreeable things the matter with them. Give them this, won't you?"

"This" was a pretty silk purse, through whose meshes he saw the gleam of gold coin.

"That?" he said. "You don't mean--isn't there a good deal--I beg pardon--but really"--

"Well, if they are as poor as you say they are, it won't be too much," she replied. "I don't suppose they'll object to it: do you?"

She extended it to him as if she rather wished to get it out of her

hands.

"You'd better take it," she said. "I shall spend it on something I don't need, if you don't. I'm always spending money on things I don't care for afterward."

He was filled with remorse, remembering that he had thought her apathetic.

"I--I really thought you were not interested at all," he burst forth.

"Pray forgive me. This is generous indeed."

She looked down at some particularly brilliant rings on her hand, instead of looking at him.

"Oh, well!" she said, "I think it must be simply horrid to have to do without things. I can't see how people live. Besides, I haven't denied myself any thing. It would be worth talking about if I had, I suppose. Oh! By the by, never mind telling any one, will you?"

Then, without giving him time to reply, she raised her eyes to his face, and plunged into the subject of the croquet again, pursuing it until the final moment of his exit and departure, which was when Mrs. Burnham and Miss Pilcher had been scandalized at the easy freedom of her adieus.