

## CHAPTER XV.

### SUPERIOR ADVANTAGES.

When Mr. Francis Barold called to pay his respects to Lady Theobald, after partaking of her hospitality, Mr. Burmestone accompanied him; and, upon almost every other occasion of his presenting himself to her ladyship, Mr. Burmestone was his companion.

It may as well be explained at the outset, that the mill-owner of Burmestone Mills was a man of decided determination of character, and that, upon the evening of Lady Theobald's tea, he had arrived at the conclusion that he would spare no effort to gain a certain end he felt it would add to his happiness to accomplish.

"I stand rather in awe of Lady Theobald, as any ordinary man would," he had said dryly to Barold, on their return to his house. "But my awe of her is not so great yet that I shall allow it to interfere with any of my plans."

"Have you any especial plan?" inquired Barold carelessly, after a pause.

"Yes," answered Mr. Burmestone,--"several. I should like to go to

Oldclough rather often."

"I feel it the civil thing to go to Oldclough oftener than I like. Go with me."

"I should like to be included in all the invitations to tea for the next six months."

"I shall be included in all the invitations so long as I remain here; and it is not likely you will be left out in the cold. After you have gone the rounds once, you won't be dropped."

"Upon the whole, it appears so," said Mr. Burmistone. "Thanks."

So, at each of the tea-parties following Lady Theobald's, the two men appeared together. The small end of the wedge being inserted into the social stratum, the rest was not so difficult. Mrs. Burnham was at once surprised and overjoyed by her discoveries of the many excellences of the man they had so hastily determined to ignore. Mrs. Abercrombie found Mr. Burmistone's manner all that could be desired. Miss Pilcher expressed the highest appreciation of his views upon feminine education and "our duty to the young in our charge." Indeed, after Mrs. Egerton's evening, the tide of public opinion turned suddenly in his favor.

Public opinion did not change, however, as far as Octavia was concerned. Having had her anxiety set at rest by several encouraging paternal

letters from Nevada, she began to make up her mind to enjoy herself, and was, it is to be regretted, betrayed by her youthful high spirits into the committing of numerous indiscretions. Upon each festal occasion she appeared in a new and elaborate costume: she accepted the attentions of Mr. Francis Barold, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that they should be offered; she joked--in what Mrs. Burnham designated "her Nevada way"--with the Rev. Arthur Poppleton, who appeared more frequently than had been his habit at the high teas. She played croquet with that gentleman and Mr. Barold day after day, upon the grass-plat, before all the eyes gazing down upon her from the neighboring windows; she managed to coerce Mr. Burmestone into joining these innocent orgies; and, in fact, to quote Miss Pilcher, there was "no limit to the shamelessness of her unfeminine conduct."

Several times much comment had been aroused by the fact that Lucia Gaston had been observed to form one of the party of players. She had indeed played with Barold, against Octavia and Mr. Poppleton, on the memorable day upon which that gentleman had taken his first lesson.

Barold had availed himself of the invitation extended to him by Octavia, upon several occasions, greatly to Miss Belinda's embarrassment. He had dropped in the evening after the curate's first call.

"Is Lady Theobald very fond of you?" Octavia had asked, in the course of this visit.

"It is very kind of her, if she is," he replied with languid irony.

"Isn't she fond enough of you to do any thing you ask her?" Octavia inquired.

"Really, I think not," he replied. "Imagine the degree of affection it requires! I am not fond enough of any one to do any thing they ask me."

Octavia bestowed a long look upon him.

"Well," she remarked, after a pause, "I believe you are not. I shouldn't think so."

Barold colored very faintly.

"I say," he said, "is that an imputation, or something of that character? It sounds like it, you know."

Octavia did not reply directly. She laughed a little.

"I want you to ask Lady Theobald to do something," she said.

"I am afraid I am not in such favor as you imagine," he said, looking slightly annoyed.

"Well, I think she won't refuse you this thing," she went on. "If she didn't loathe me so, I would ask her myself."

He deigned to smile.

"Does she loathe you?" he inquired.

"Yes," nodding. "She would not speak to me if it weren't for aunt Belinda. She thinks I am fast and loud. Do you think I am fast and loud?"

He was taken aback, and not for the first time, either. She had startled and discomposed him several times in the course of their brief acquaintance; and he always resented it, priding himself in private, as he did, upon his coolness and immobility. He could not think of the right thing to say just now, so he was silent for a second.

"Tell me the truth," she persisted. "I shall not care--much."

"I do not think you would care at all."

"Well, perhaps I shouldn't. Go on. Do you think I am fast?"

"I am happy to say I do not find you slow."

She fixed her eyes on him, smiling faintly.

"That means I am fast," she said. "Well, no matter. Will you ask Lady Theobald what I want you to ask her?"

"I should not say you were fast at all," he said rather stiffly. "You have not been educated as--as Lady Theobald has educated Miss Gaston, for instance."

"I should rather think not," she replied. Then she added, very deliberately, "She has had what you might call very superior advantages, I suppose."

Her expression was totally incomprehensible to him. She spoke with the utmost seriousness, and looked down at the table. "That is derision, I suppose," he remarked restively.

She glanced up again.

"At all events," she said, "there is nothing to laugh at in Lucia Gaston. Will you ask Lady Theobald? I want you to ask her to let Lucia Gaston come and play croquet with us on Tuesday. She is to play with you against Mr. Poppleton and me."

"Who is Mr. Poppleton?" he asked, with some reserve. He did not exactly fancy sharing his entertainment with any ordinary outsider. After all, there was no knowing what this little American might do.

"He is the curate of the church," she replied, undisturbed. "He is very nice, and little, and neat, and blushes all over to the toes of his boots. He came to see aunt Belinda, and I asked him to come and be taught to play."

"Who is to teach him?"

"I am. I have taught at least twenty men in New York and San Francisco."

"I hope he appreciates your kindness."

"I mean to try if I can make him forget to be frightened," she said, with a gay laugh.

It was certainly nettling to find his air of reserve and displeasure met with such inconsequent lightness. She never seemed to recognize the subtle changes of temperature expressed in his manner. Only his sense of what was due to himself prevented his being very chilly indeed; but as she went on with her gay chat, in utter ignorance of his mood, and indulged in some very pretty airy nonsense, he soon recovered himself, and almost forgot his private grievance.

Before going away, he promised to ask Lady Theobald's indulgence in the matter of Lucia's joining them in their game. One speech of Octavia's, connected with the subject, he had thought very pretty, as well as kind.

"I like Miss Gaston," she said. "I think we might be friends if Lady Theobald would let us. Her superior advantages might do me good. They might improve me," she went on, with a little laugh, "and I suppose I need improving very much. All my advantages have been of one kind."

When he had left her, she startled Miss Belinda by saying,--

"I have been asking Mr. Barold if he thought I was fast; and I believe he does--in fact, I am sure he does."

"Ah, my dear, my dear!" ejaculated Miss Belinda, "what a terrible thing to say to a gentleman! What will he think?"

Octavia smiled one of her calmest smiles.

"Isn't it queer how often you say that!" she remarked. "I think I should perish if I had to pull myself up that way as you do. I just go right on, and never worry. I don't mean to do any thing queer, and I don't see why any one should think I do."