

CHAPTER XVI.

CROQUET.

Lucia was permitted to form one of the players in the game of croquet, being escorted to and from the scene by Francis Barold. Perhaps it occurred to Lady Theobald that the contrast of English reserve and maidenliness with the free-and-easy manners of young women from Nevada might lead to some good result.

"I trust your conduct will be such as to show that you at least have resided in a civilized land," she said. "The men of the present day may permit themselves to be amused by young persons whose demeanor might bring a blush to the cheek of a woman of forty, but it is not their habit to regard them with serious intentions."

Lucia reddened. She did not speak, though she wished very much for the courage to utter the words which rose to her lips. Lately she had found that now and then, at times when she was roused to anger, speeches of quite a clever and sarcastic nature presented themselves to her mind. She was never equal to uttering them aloud; but she felt that in time she might, because of course it was quite an advance in spirit to think them, and face, even in imagination, the probability of astounding and striking Lady Theobald dumb with their audacity.

"It ought to make me behave very well," she was saying now to herself, "to have before me the alternative of not being regarded with serious intentions. I wonder if it is Mr. Poppleton or Francis Barold who might not regard me seriously. And I wonder if they are any coarser in America than we can be in England when we try."

She enjoyed the afternoon very much, particularly the latter part of it, when Mr. Burmestone, who was passing, came in, being invited by Octavia across the privet hedge. Having paid his respects to Miss Belinda, who sat playing propriety under a laburnum-tree, Mr. Burmestone crossed the grass-plot to Lucia herself. She was awaiting her "turn," and laughing at the ardent enthusiasm of Mr. Poppleton, who, under Octavia's direction, was devoting all his energies to the game: her eyes were bright, and she had lost, for the time being, her timid air of feeling herself somehow in the wrong.

"I am glad to see you here," said Mr. Burmestone.

"I am glad to be here," she answered. "It has been such a happy afternoon. Every thing has seemed so bright and--and different!"

"Different' is a very good word," he said, laughing.

"It isn't a very bad one," she returned, "and it expresses a good deal."

"It does indeed," he commented.

"Look at Mr. Poppleton and Octavia," she began.

"Have you got to 'Octavia'?" he inquired.

She looked down and blushed.

"I shall not say 'Octavia' to grandmamma."

Then suddenly she glanced up at him.

"That is sly, isn't it?" she said. "Sometimes I think I am very sly, though I am sure it is not my nature to be so. I would rather be open and candid."

"It would be better," he remarked.

"You think so?" she asked eagerly.

He could not help smiling.

"Do you ever tell untruths to Lady Theobald?" he inquired. "If you do, I shall begin to be alarmed."

"I act them," she said, blushing more deeply. "I really do--paltry sorts of untruths, you know; pretending to agree with her when I don't;

pretending to like things a little when I hate them. I have been trying to improve myself lately, and once or twice it has made her very angry. She says I am disobedient and disrespectful. She asked me, one day, if it was my intention to emulate Miss Octavia Bassett. That was when I said I could not help feeling that I had wasted time in practising."

She sighed softly as she ended.

In the mean time Octavia had Mr. Poppleton and Mr. Francis Barold upon her hands, and was endeavoring to do her duty as hostess by both of them. If it had been her intention to captivate these gentlemen, she could not have complained that Mr. Poppleton was wary or difficult game. His first fears allayed, his downward path was smooth, and rapid in proportion. When he had taken his departure with the little silk purse in his keeping, he had carried under his clerical vest a warmed and thrilled heart. It was a heart which, it must be confessed, was of the most inexperienced and susceptible nature. A little man of affectionate and gentle disposition, he had been given from his earliest youth to indulging in timid dreams of mild future bliss,--of bliss represented by some lovely being whose ideals were similar to his own, and who preferred the wealth of a true affection to the glitter of the giddy throng. Upon one or two occasions, he had even worshipped from afar; but as on each of these occasions his hopes had been nipped in the bud by the union of their object with some hollow worldling, his dream had, so far, never attained very serious proportions. Since he had taken up his abode in Slowbridge, he had felt himself a little overpowered by circumstances. It

had been a source of painful embarrassment to him, to find his innocent presence capable of producing confusion in the breasts of young ladies who were certainly not more guileless than himself. He had been conscious that the Misses Egerton did not continue their conversation with freedom when he chanced to approach the group they graced; and he had observed the same thing in their companions,--an additional circumspection of demeanor, so to speak, a touch of new decorum, whose object seemed to be to protect them from any appearance of imprudence.

"It is almost as if they were afraid of me," he had said to himself once or twice. "Dear me! I hope there is nothing in my appearance to lead them to"--

He was so much alarmed by this dreadful thought, that he had ever afterward approached any of these young ladies with a fear and trembling which had not added either to his comfort or their own; consequently his path had not been a very smooth one.

"I respect the young ladies of Slowbridge," he remarked to Octavia that very afternoon. "There are some very remarkable young ladies here,--very remarkable indeed. They are interested in the church, and the poor, and the schools, and, indeed, in every thing, which is most unselfish and amiable. Young ladies have usually so much to distract their attention from such matters."

"If I stay long enough in Slowbridge," said Octavia, "I shall be

interested in the church, and the poor, and the schools."

It seemed to the curate that there had never been any thing so delightful in the world as her laugh and her unusual remarks. She seemed to him so beautiful, and so exhilarating, that he forgot all else but his admiration for her. He enjoyed himself so much this afternoon, that he was almost brilliant, and excited the sarcastic comment of Mr. Francis Barold, who was not enjoying himself at all.

"Confound it!" said that gentleman to himself, as he looked on. "What did I come here for? This style of thing is just what I might have expected. She is amusing herself with that poor little cad now, and I am left in the cold. I suppose that is her habit with the young men in Nevada."

He had no intention of entering the lists with the Rev. Arthur Poppleton, or of concealing the fact that he felt that this little Nevada flirt was making a blunder. The sooner she knew it, the better for herself; so he played his game as badly as possible, and with much dignity.

But Octavia was so deeply interested in Mr. Poppleton's ardent efforts to do credit to her teaching, that she was apparently unconscious of all else. She played with great cleverness, and carried her partner to the terminus, with an eager enjoyment of her skill quite pleasant to behold. She made little darts here and there, advised, directed, and controlled his movements, and was quite dramatic in a small way when he made a failure.

Mrs. Burnham, who was superintending the proceeding, seated in her own easy-chair behind her window-curtains, was roused to virtuous indignation by her energy.

"There is no repose whatever in her manner," she said. "No dignity. Is a game of croquet a matter of deep moment? It seems to me that it is almost impious to devote one's mind so wholly to a mere means of recreation."

"She seems to be enjoying it, mamma," said Miss Laura Burnham, with a faint sigh. Miss Laura had been looking on over her parent's shoulder.

"They all seem to be enjoying it. See how Lucia Gaston and Mr. Burmestone are laughing. I never saw Lucia look like that before. The only one who seems a little dull is Mr. Barold."

"He is probably disgusted by a freedom of manner to which he is not accustomed," replied Mrs. Burnham. "The only wonder is that he has not been disgusted by it before."