

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ADVANTAGES.

The game over, Octavia deserted her partner. She walked lightly, and with the air of a victor, to where Barold was standing. She was smiling, and slightly flushed, and for a moment or so stood fanning herself with a gay Japanese fan.

"Don't you think I am a good teacher?" she asked at length.

"I should say so," replied Barold, without enthusiasm. "I am afraid I am not a judge."

She waved her fan airily.

"I had a good pupil," she said. Then she held her fan still for a moment, and turned fully toward him. "I have done something you don't like," she said. "I knew I had."

Mr. Francis Barold retired within himself at once. In his present mood it really appeared that she was assuming that he was very much interested indeed.

"I should scarcely take the liberty upon a limited acquaintance," he

began.

She looked at him steadily, fanning herself with slow, regular movements.

"Yes," she remarked. "You're mad. I knew you were."

He was so evidently disgusted by this observation, that she caught at the meaning of his look, and laughed a little.

"Ah!" she said, "that's an American word, ain't it? It sounds queer to you. You say 'vexed' instead of 'mad.' Well, then, you are vexed."

"If I have been so clumsy as to appear ill-humored," he said, "I beg pardon. Certainly I have no right to exhibit such unusual interest in your conduct."

He felt that this was rather decidedly to the point, but she did not seem overpowered at all. She smiled anew.

"Anybody has a right to be mad--I mean vexed," she observed. "I should like to know how people would live if they hadn't. I am mad--I mean vexed--twenty times a day."

"Indeed?" was his sole reply.

"Well," she said, "I think it's real mean in you to be so cool about it

when you remember what I told you the other day."

"I regret to say I don't remember just now. I hope it was nothing very serious."

To his astonishment she looked down at her fan, and spoke in a slightly lowered voice:--

"I told you that I wanted to be improved."

It must be confessed that he was mollified. There was a softness in her manner which amazed him. He was at once embarrassed and delighted. But, at the same time, it would not do to commit himself to too great a seriousness.

"Oh!" he answered, "that was a rather good joke, I thought."

"No, it wasn't," she said, perhaps even half a tone lower. "I was in earnest."

Then she raised her eyes.

"If you told me when I did any thing wrong, I think it might be a good thing," she said.

He felt that this was quite possible, and was also struck with the idea that he might find the task of mentor--so long as he remained entirely non-committal--rather interesting. Still, he could not afford to descend at once from the elevated stand he had taken.

"I am afraid you would find it rather tiresome," he remarked.

"I am afraid you would," she answered. "You would have to tell me of things so often."

"Do you mean seriously to tell me that you would take my advice?" he inquired.

"I mightn't take all of it," was her reply; "but I should take some--perhaps a great deal."

"Thanks," he remarked. "I scarcely think I should give you a great deal."

She simply smiled.

"I have never had any advice at all," she said. "I don't know that I should have taken it if I had--just as likely as not I shouldn't; but I have never had any. Father spoiled me. He gave me all my own way. He said he didn't care, so long as I had a good time; and I must say I have generally had a good time. I don't see how I could help it--with all my own way, and no one to worry. I wasn't sick, and I could buy any thing I liked, and all that: so I had a good time. I've read of girls, in books,

wishing they had mothers to take care of them. I don't know that I ever wished for one particularly. I can take care of myself. I must say, too, that I don't think some mothers are much of an institution. I know girls who have them, and they are always worrying."

He laughed in spite of himself; and though she had been speaking with the utmost seriousness and naiveté, she joined him.

When they ceased, she returned suddenly to the charge.

"Now tell me what I have done this afternoon that isn't right," she said,--"that Lucia Gaston wouldn't have done, for instance. I say that, because I shouldn't mind being a little like Lucia Gaston--in some things."

"Lucia ought to feel gratified," he commented.

"She does," she answered. "We had a little talk about it, and she was as pleased as could be. I didn't think of it in that way until I saw her begin to blush. Guess what she said."

"I am afraid I can't."

"She said she saw so many things to envy in me, that she could scarcely believe I wanted to be at all like her."

"It was a very civil speech," said Barold ironically. "I scarcely thought Lady Theobald had trained her so well."

"She meant it," said Octavia. "You mayn't believe it, but she did. I know when people mean things, and when they don't."

"I wish I did," said Barold.

Octavia turned her attention to her fan.

"Well, I am waiting," she said.

"Waiting?" he repeated.

"To be told of my faults."

"But I scarcely see of what importance my opinion can be."

"It is of some importance to me--just now."

The last two words rendered him really impatient, and, it may be, spurred him up.

"If we are to take Lucia Gaston as a model," he said, "Lucia Gaston would possibly not have been so complaisant in her demeanor toward our clerical friend."

"Complaisant!" she exclaimed, opening her lovely eyes. "When I was actually plunging about the garden, trying to teach him to play. Well, I shouldn't call that being complaisant."

"Lucia Gaston," he replied, "would not say that she had been 'plunging' about the garden."

She gave herself a moment for reflection.

"That's true," she remarked, when it was over: "she wouldn't. When I compare myself with the Slowbridge girls, I begin to think I must say some pretty awful things."

Barold made no reply, which caused her to laugh a little again.

"You daren't tell me," she said. "Now, do I? Well, I don't think I want to know very particularly. What Lady Theobald thinks will last quite a good while. Complaisant!"

"I am sorry you object to the word," he said.

"Oh, I don't!" she answered. "I like it. It sounds so much more polite than to say I was flirting and being fast."

"Were you flirting?" he inquired coldly.

He objected to her ready serenity very much.

She looked a little puzzled.

"You are very like aunt Belinda," she said.

He drew himself up. He did not think there was any point of resemblance at all between Miss Belinda and himself.

She went on, without observing his movement.

"You think every thing means something, or is of some importance. You said that just as aunt Belinda says, 'What will they think?' It never occurs to me that they'll think at all. Gracious! Why should they?"

"You will find they do," he said.

"Well," she said, glancing at the group gathered under the laburnum-tree, "just now aunt Belinda thinks we had better go over to her; so, suppose we do it? At any rate, I found out that I was too complaisant to Mr. Poppleton."

When the party separated for the afternoon, Barold took Lucia home, and Mr. Burmestone and the curate walked down the street together.



Mr. Poppleton was indeed most agreeably exhilarated. His expressive little countenance beamed with delight.

"What a very charming person Miss Bassett is!" he exclaimed, after they had left the gate. "What a very charming person indeed!"

"Very charming," said Mr. Burmestone with much seriousness. "A prettier young person I certainly have never seen; and those wonderful gowns of hers"--

"Oh!" interrupted Mr. Poppleton, with natural confusion, "I--referred to Miss Belinda Bassett; though, really, what you say is very true. Miss Octavia Bassett--indeed--I think--in fact, Miss Octavia Bassett is quite, one might almost say even more, charming than her aunt."

"Yes," admitted Mr. Burmestone; "perhaps one might. She is less ripe, it is true; but that is an objection time will remove."

"There is such a delightful gayety in her manner!" said Mr. Poppleton; "such an ingenuous frankness! such a--a--such spirit! It quite carries me away with it,--quite."

He walked a few steps, thinking over this delightful gayety and ingenuous frankness; and then burst out afresh,--

"And what a remarkable life she has had too! She actually told me, that,

once in her childhood, she lived for months in a gold-diggers' camp,--the only woman there. She says the men were kind to her, and made a pet of her. She has known the most extraordinary people."

In the mean time Francis Barold returned Lucia to Lady Theobald's safe keeping. Having done so, he made his adieus, and left the two to themselves. Her ladyship was, it must be confessed, a little at a loss to explain to herself what she saw, or fancied she saw, in the manner and appearance of her young relative. She was persuaded that she had never seen Lucia look as she looked this afternoon. She had a brighter color in her cheeks than usual, her pretty figure seemed more erect, her eyes had a spirit in them which was quite new. She had chatted and laughed gayly with Francis Barold, as she approached the house; and after his departure she moved to and fro with a freedom not habitual to her.

"He has been making himself agreeable to her," said my lady, with grim pleasure. "He can do it if he chooses; and he is just the man to please a girl,--good-looking, and with a fine, domineering air."

"How did you enjoy yourself?" she asked.

"Very much," said Lucia; "never more, thank you."

"Oh!" ejaculated my lady. "And which of her smart New York gowns did Miss Octavia Bassett wear?"

They were at the dinner-table; and, instead of looking down at her soup, Lucia looked quietly and steadily across the table at her grandmother.

"She wore a very pretty one," she said: "it was pale fawn-color, and fitted her like a glove. She made me feel very old-fashioned and badly dressed."

Lady Theobald laid down her spoon.

"She made you feel old-fashioned and badly dressed,--you!"

"Yes," responded Lucia: "she always does. I wonder what she thinks of the things we wear in Slowbridge." And she even went to the length of smiling a little.

"What she thinks of what is worn in Slowbridge!" Lady Theobald ejaculated. "She! may I ask what weight the opinion of a young woman from America--from Nevada--is supposed to have in Slowbridge?"

Lucia took a spoonful of soup in a leisurely manner.

"I don't think it is supposed to have any; but--but I don't think she minds that. I feel as if I shouldn't if I were in her place. I have always thought her very lucky."

"You have thought her lucky!" cried my lady. "You have envied a Nevada

young woman, who dresses like an actress, and loads herself with jewels like a barbarian? A girl whose conduct toward men is of a character to--to chill one's blood!"

"They admire her," said Lucia simply, "more than they admire Lydia Egerton, and more than they admire me."

"Do you admire her?" demanded my lady.

"Yes, grandmamma," replied Lucia courageously. "I think I do."

Never had my lady been so astounded in her life. For a moment she could scarcely speak. When she recovered herself she pointed to the door.

"Go to your room," she commanded. "This is American freedom of speech, I suppose. Go to your room."

Lucia rose obediently. She could not help wondering what her ladyship's course would be if she had the hardihood to disregard her order. She really looked quite capable of carrying it out forcibly herself. When the girl stood at her bedroom window, a few minutes later, her cheeks were burning and her hands trembling.

"I am afraid it was very badly done," she said to herself. "I am sure it was; but--but it will be a kind of practice. I was in such a hurry to try if I were equal to it, that I didn't seem to balance things quite

rightly. I ought to have waited until I had more reason to speak out. Perhaps there wasn't enough reason then, and I was more aggressive than I ought to have been. Octavia is never aggressive. I wonder if I was at all pert. I don't think Octavia ever means to be pert. I felt a little as if I meant to be pert. I must learn to balance myself, and only be cool and frank."

Then she looked out of the window, and reflected a little.

"I was not so very brave, after all," she said, rather reluctantly. "I didn't tell her Mr. Burmestone was there. I daren't have done that. I am afraid I am sly--that sounds sly, I am sure."