

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONTRAST.

"Lady Theobald will put a stop to it," was the general remark. "It will certainly not occur again."

This was said upon the evening of the first gathering upon Miss Belinda's grass-plot, and at the same time it was prophesied that Mr. Francis Barold would soon go away.

But neither of the prophecies proved true. Mr. Francis Barold did not return to London; and, strange to say, Lucia was seen again and again playing croquet with Octavia Bassett, and was even known to spend evenings with her.

Perhaps it might be that an appeal made by Miss Belinda to her ladyship had caused her to allow of these things. Miss Belinda had, in fact, made a private call upon my lady, to lay her case before her.

"I feel so very timid about every thing," she said, almost with tears, "and so fearful of trusting myself, that I really find it quite a trial. The dear child has such a kind heart--I assure you she has a kind heart, dear Lady Theobald,--and is so innocent of any intention to do wrong--I am sure she is innocent,--that it seems cruel to judge her severely. If

she had had the benefit of such training as dear Lucia's. I am convinced that her conduct would have been most exemplary. She sees herself that she has faults: I am sure she does. She said to me only last night, in that odd way of hers,--she had been sitting, evidently thinking deeply, for some minutes,--and she said, 'I wonder if I shouldn't be nicer if I were more like Lucia Gaston.' You see what turn her mind must have taken. She admires Lucia so much."

"Yesterday evening at dinner," said Lady Theobald severely, "Lucia informed me that she admired your niece. The feeling seems to be mutual."

Miss Belinda colored, and brightened visibly.

"Did she, indeed?" she exclaimed. "How pleased Octavia will be to hear it! Did she, indeed?" Then, warned by a chilliness, and lack of response, in her ladyship's manner, she modified her delight, and became apologetic again. "These young people are more--are less critical than we are," she sighed. "Octavia's great prettiness"--

"I think," Lady Theobald interposed, "that Lucia has been taught to feel that the body is corruptible, and subject to decay, and that mere beauty is of small moment."

Miss Belinda sighed again.

"That is very true," she admitted deprecatingly; "very true indeed."

"It is to be hoped that Octavia's stay in Slowbridge will prove beneficial to her," said her ladyship in her most judicial manner. "The atmosphere is wholly unlike that which has surrounded her during her previous life."

"I am sure it will prove beneficial to her," said Miss Belinda eagerly.

"The companionship of well-trained and refined young people cannot fail to be of use to her. Such a companion as Lucia would be, if you would kindly permit her to spend an evening with us now and then, would certainly improve and modify her greatly. Mr. Francis Barold is--is, I think, of the same opinion; at least, I fancied I gathered as much from a few words he let fall."

"Francis Barold?" repeated Lady Theobald. "And what did Francis Barold say?"

"Of course it was but very little," hesitated Miss Belinda; "but--but I could not help seeing that he was drawing comparisons, as it were. Octavia was teaching Mr. Poppleton to play croquet; and she was rather exhilarated, and perhaps exhibited more--freedom of manner, in an innocent way,--quite in an innocent, thoughtless way,--than is exactly customary; and I saw Mr. Barold glance from her to Lucia, who stood near; and when I said, 'You are thinking of the contrast between them,' he answered, 'Yes, they differ very greatly, it is true;' and of course I

knew that my poor Octavia could not have the advantage in his eyes. She feels this herself, I know. She shocked me the other day, beyond expression, by telling me that she had asked him if he thought she was really fast, and that she was sure he did. Poor child! she evidently did not comprehend the dreadful significance of such terms."

"A man like Francis Barold does understand their significance," said Lady Theobald; "and it is to be deplored that your niece cannot be taught what her position in society will be if such a reputation attaches itself to her. The men of the present day fight shy of such characters."

This dread clause so impressed poor Miss Belinda by its solemnity, that she could not forbear repeating it to Octavia afterward, though it is to be regretted that it did not produce the effect she had hoped.

"Well, I must say," she observed, "that if some men fought a little shyer than they do, I shouldn't mind it. You always do have about half a dozen dangling around, who only bore you, and who will keep asking you to go to places, and sending you bouquets, and asking you to dance when they can't dance at all, and only tear your dress, and stand on your feet. If they would 'fight shy,' it would be splendid."

To Miss Belinda, who certainly had never been guilty of the indecorum of having any member of the stronger sex "dangling about" at all, this was very trying.

"My dear," she said, "don't say 'you always have;' it--it really seems to make it so personal."

Octavia turned around, and fixed her eyes wonderingly upon her blushing countenance. For a moment she made no remark, a marvellous thought shaping itself slowly in her mind.

"Aunt Belinda," she said at length, "did nobody ever"--

"Ah, no, my dear! No, no, I assure you!" cried Miss Belinda, in the greatest possible trepidation. "Ah, dear, no! Such--such things rarely--very rarely happen in--Slowbridge; and, besides, I couldn't possibly have thought of it. I couldn't, indeed!"

She was so overwhelmed with maidenly confusion at the appalling thought, that she did not recover herself for half an hour at least. Octavia, feeling that it would not be safe to pursue the subject, only uttered one word of comment,--

"Gracious!"