

CHAPTER XIX.

AN EXPERIMENT.

Much to her own astonishment, Lucia found herself allowed new liberty. She was permitted to spend the afternoon frequently with Octavia; and on several occasions that young lady and Miss Bassett were invited to partake of tea at Oldclough in company with no other guest than Francis Barold.

"I don't know what it means, and I think it must mean something," said Lucia to Octavia; "but it is very pleasant. I never was allowed to be so intimate with any one before."

"Perhaps," suggested Octavia sagely, "she thinks, that, if you see me often enough, you will get sick of me, and it will be a lesson to you."

"The more I see of you," answered Lucia with a serious little air, "the fonder I am of you. I understand you better. You are not at all like what I thought you at first, Octavia."

"But I don't know that there's much to understand in me."

"There is a great deal to understand in you," she replied. "You are a puzzle to me often. You seem so frank, and yet one knows so little about

you after all. For instance," Lucia went on, "who would imagine that you are so affectionate?"

"Am I affectionate?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Lucia: "I am sure you are very affectionate. I have found it out gradually. You would suffer things for any one you loved."

Octavia thought the matter over.

"Yes," she said at length, "I would."

"You are very fond of Miss Bassett," proceeded Lucia, as if arraigning her at the bar of justice. "You are very fond of your father; and I am sure there are other people you are very fond of--very fond of indeed."

Octavia pondered seriously again.

"Yes, there are," she remarked; "but no one would care about them here, and so I'm not going to make a fuss. You don't want to make a fuss over people you l-like."

"You don't," said Lucia. "You are like Francis Barold in one way, but you are altogether different in another. Francis Barold does not wish to show emotion; and he is so determined to hedge himself around, that one can't help suspecting that he is always guarding himself against one. He

seems always to be resenting any interference; but you do not appear to care at all, and so it is not natural that one should suspect you. I did not suspect you."

"What do you suspect me of now?"

"Of thinking a great deal," answered Lucia affectionately. "And of being very clever and very good."

Octavia was silent for a few moments.

"I think," she said after the pause,--"I think you'll find out that it's a mistake."

"No, I shall not," returned Lucia, quite glowing with enthusiasm. "And I know I shall learn a great deal from you."

This was such a startling proposition that Octavia felt decidedly uncomfortable. She flushed rosy red.

"I'm the one who ought to learn things, I think," she said. "I'm always doing things that frighten aunt Belinda, and you know how the rest regard me."

"Octavia," said Lucia, very naively indeed, "suppose we try to help each other. If you will tell me when I am wrong, I will try to--to have the

courage to tell you. That will be good practice for me. What I want most is courage and frankness, and I am sure it will take courage to make up my mind to tell you of your--of your mistakes."

Octavia regarded her with mingled admiration and respect.

"I think that's a splendid idea," she said.

"Are you sure," faltered Lucia, "are you sure you won't mind the things I may have to say? Really, they are quite little things in themselves--hardly worth mentioning"--

"Tell me one of them, right now," said Octavia, point-blank.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Lucia, starting. "I'd rather not--just now."

"Well," commented Octavia, "that sounds as if they must be pretty unpleasant. Why don't you want to? They will be quite as bad to-morrow. And to refuse to tell me one is a bad beginning. It looks as if you were frightened; and it isn't good practice for you to be frightened at such a little thing."

Lucia felt convicted. She made an effort to regain her composure.

"No, it is not," she said. "But that is always the way. I am continually telling myself that I will be courageous and candid; and, the first

time any thing happens, I fail. I will tell you one thing."

She stopped short here, and looked at Octavia guiltily.

"It is something--I think I would do if--if I were in your place," Lucia stammered. "A very little thing indeed."

"Well?" remarked Octavia anxiously.

Lucia lost her breath, caught it again, and proceeded cautiously, and with blushes at her own daring.

"If I were in your place," she said, "I think--that, perhaps--only perhaps, you know--I would not wear--my hair--quite so low down--over my forehead."

Octavia sprang from her seat, and ran to the pier-glass over the mantle. She glanced at the reflection of her own startled, pretty face, and then, putting her hand up to the soft blonde "bang" which met her brows, turned to Lucia.

"Isn't it becoming?" she asked breathlessly.

"Oh, yes!" Lucia answered. "Very."

Octavia started.

"Then, why wouldn't you wear it?" she cried. "What do you mean?"

Lucia felt her position truly a delicate one. She locked her hands, and braced herself; but she blushed vividly.

"It may sound rather silly when I tell you why, Octavia," she said; "but I really do think it is a sort of reason. You know, in those absurd pictures of actresses, bangs always seem to be the principal feature. I saw some in the shop-windows when I went to Harriford with grandmamma. And they were such dreadful women,--some of them,--and had so very few clothes on, that I can't help thinking I shouldn't like to look like them, and"--

"Does it make me look like them?"

"Oh, very little!" answered Lucia; "very little indeed, of course; but"--

"But it's the same thing after all," put in Octavia. "That's what you mean."

"It is so very little," faltered Lucia, "that--that perhaps it isn't a reason."

Octavia looked at herself in the glass again.

"It isn't a very good reason," she remarked, "but I suppose it will do."

She paused, and looked Lucia in the face.

"I don't think that's a little thing," she said. "To be told you look like an opéra bouffe actress."

"I did not mean to say so," cried Lucia, filled with the most poignant distress. "I beg your pardon, indeed--I--oh, dear! I was afraid you wouldn't like it. I felt that it was taking a great liberty."

"I don't like it," answered Octavia; "but that can't be helped. I didn't exactly suppose I should. But I wasn't going to say any thing about your hair when I began," glancing at poor Lucia's coiffure, "though I suppose I might."

"You might say a thousand things about it!" cried Lucia piteously. "I know that mine is not only in bad taste, but it is ugly and unbecoming."

"Yes," said Octavia cruelly, "it is."

"And yours is neither the one nor the other," protested Lucia. "You know I told you it was pretty, Octavia."

Octavia walked over to the table, upon which stood Miss Belinda's work-basket, and took therefrom a small and gleaming pair of scissors, returning to the mantle-glass with them.

"How short shall I cut it?" she demanded.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lucia, "don't, don't!"

For answer, Octavia raised the scissors, and gave a snip. It was a savage snip, and half the length and width of her love-locks fell on the mantle; then she gave another snip, and the other half fell.

Lucia scarcely dared to breathe.

For a moment Octavia stood gazing at herself, with pale face and dilated eyes. Then suddenly the folly of the deed she had done seemed to reveal itself to her.

"Oh!" she cried out. "Oh, how diabolical it looks!"

She turned upon Lucia.

"Why did you make me do it?" she exclaimed. "It's all your fault--every bit of it;" and, flinging the scissors to the other end of the room, she threw herself into a chair, and burst into tears.

Lucia's anguish of mind was almost more than she could bear. For at least three minutes she felt herself a criminal of the deepest dye; after the three minutes had elapsed, however, she began to reason, and called to

mind the fact that she was failing as usual under her crisis.

"This is being a coward again," she said to herself. "It is worse than to have said nothing. It is true that she will look more refined, now one can see a little of her forehead; and it is cowardly to be afraid to stand firm when I really think so. I--yes, I will say something to her."

"Octavia," she began aloud, "I am sure you are making a mistake again." This as decidedly as possible, which was not very decidedly. "You--you look very much--nicer."

"I look ghastly!" said Octavia, who began to feel rather absurd.

"You do not. Your forehead--you have the prettiest forehead I ever saw, Octavia," said Lucia eagerly; "and your eyebrows are perfect. I--wish you would look at yourself again."

Rather to her surprise, Octavia began to laugh under cover of her handkerchief: reaction had set in, and, though the laugh was a trifle hysterical, it was still a laugh. Next she gave her eyes a final little dab, and rose to go to the glass again. She looked at herself, touched up the short, waving fringe left on her forehead, and turned to Lucia, with a resigned expression.

"Do you think that any one who was used to seeing it the other way would--would think I looked horrid?" she inquired anxiously.

"They would think you prettier,--a great deal," Lucia answered earnestly.

"Don't you know, Octavia, that nothing could be really unbecoming to you?

You have that kind of face."

For a few seconds Octavia seemed to lose herself in thought of a speculative nature.

"Jack always said so," she remarked at length.

"Jack!" repeated Lucia timidly.

Octavia roused herself, and smiled with candid sweetness.

"He is some one I knew in Nevada," she explained. "He worked in father's mine once."

"You must have known him very well," suggested Lucia, somewhat awed.

"I did," she replied calmly. "Very well."

She tucked away her pocket-handkerchief in the jaunty pocket at the back of her basque, and returned to her chair. Then she turned again to Lucia.

"Well," she said, "I think you have found out that you were mistaken, haven't you, dear? Suppose you tell me of something else."

Lucia colored.

"No," she answered: "that is enough for to-day."