

CHAPTER XX.

PECULIAR TO NEVADA.

Whether, or not, Lucia was right in accusing Octavia Bassett of being clever, and thinking a great deal, is a riddle which those who are interested in her must unravel as they read; but, whether the surmise was correct or incorrect, it seemed possible that she had thought a little after the interview. When Barold saw her next, he was struck by a slight but distinctly definable change he recognized in her dress and coiffure. Her pretty hair had a rather less "professional" appearance: he had the pleasure of observing, for the first time, how very white her forehead was, and how delicate the arch of her eyebrows; her dress had a novel air of simplicity, and the diamond rings were nowhere to be seen.

"She's better dressed than usual," he said to himself. "And she's always well dressed,--rather too well dressed, fact is, for a place like this. This sort of thing is in better form, under the circumstances." It was so much "better form," and he so far approved of it, that he quite thawed, and was very amiable and very entertaining indeed.

Octavia was entertaining too. She asked several most interesting questions.

"Do you think," she inquired, "that it is bad taste to wear diamonds?"

"My mother wears them--occasionally."

"Have you any sisters?"

"No."

"Any cousins--as young as I am?"

"Ya-as."

"Do they wear them?"

"I must admit," he replied, "that they don't. In the first place, you know, they haven't any; and, in the second, I am under the impression that Lady Beauchamp--their mamma, you know--wouldn't permit it if they had."

"Wouldn't permit it!" said Octavia. "I suppose they always do as she tells them?"

He smiled a little.

"They would be very courageous young women if they didn't," he remarked.

"What would she do if they tried it?" she inquired. "She couldn't beat

them."

"They will never try it," he answered dryly. "And though I have never seen her beat them, or heard their lamentations under chastisement, I should not like to say that Lady Beauchamp could not do any thing. She is a very determined person--for a gentlewoman."

Octavia laughed.

"You are joking," she said.

"Lady Beauchamp is a serious subject for jokes," he responded. "My cousins think so, at least."

"I wonder if she is as bad as Lady Theobald," Octavia reflected aloud.

"She says I have no right to wear diamonds at all until I am married. But I don't mind Lady Theobald," she added, as a cheerful afterthought. "I am not fond enough of her to care about what she says."

"Are you fond of any one?" Barold inquired, speaking with a languid air, but at the same time glancing at her with some slight interest from under his eyelids.

"Lucia says I am," she returned, with the calmness of a young person who wished to regard the matter from an unembarrassed point of view. "Lucia says I am affectionate."

"Ah!" deliberately. "Are you?"

She turned, and looked at him serenely.

"Should you think so?" she asked.

This was making such a personal matter of the question, that he did not exactly enjoy it. It was certainly not "good form" to pull a man up in such cool style.

"Really," he replied, "I--ah--have had no opportunity of judging."

He had not the slightest intention of being amusing, but to his infinite disgust he discovered as soon as he spoke that she was amused. She laughed outright, and evidently only checked herself because he looked so furious. In consideration for his feelings she assumed an air of mild but preternatural seriousness.

"No," she remarked, "that is true: you haven't, of course."

He was silent. He did not enjoy being amusing at all, and he made no pretence of appearing to submit to the indignity calmly.

She bent forward a little.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you are mad again--I mean, you are vexed. I am always vexing you."

There was a hint of appeal in her voice, which rather pleased him; but he had no intention of relenting at once.

"I confess I am at a loss to know why you laughed," he said.

"Are you," she asked, "really?" letting her eyes rest upon him anxiously for a moment. Then she actually gave vent to a little sigh. "We look at things so differently, that's it," she said.

"I suppose it is," he responded, still chillingly.

In spite of this, she suddenly assumed a comparatively cheerful aspect. A happy thought occurred to her.

"Lucia would beg your pardon," she said. "I am learning good manners from Lucia. Suppose I beg your pardon."

"It is quite unnecessary," he replied.

"Lucia wouldn't think so," she said. "And why shouldn't I be as well-behaved as Lucia? I beg your pardon."

He felt rather absurd, and yet somewhat mollified. She had a way of

looking at him, sometimes, when she had been unpleasant, which rather soothed him. In fact, he had found of late, a little to his private annoyance, that it was very easy for her either to soothe or disturb him.

And now, just as Octavia had settled down into one of the prettiest and least difficult of her moods, there came a knock at the front door, which, being answered by Mary Anne, was found to announce the curate of St. James.

Enter, consequently, the Rev. Arthur Poppleton,--blushing, a trifle timorous perhaps, but happy beyond measure to find himself in Miss Belinda's parlor again, with Miss Belinda's niece.

Perhaps the least possible shade of his joyousness died out when he caught sight of Mr. Francis Barold, and certainly Mr. Francis Barold was not at all delighted to see him.

"What does the fellow want?" that gentleman was saying inwardly. "What does he come simpering and turning pink here for? Why doesn't he go and see some of his old women, and read tracts to them? That's his business." Octavia's manner toward her visitor formed a fresh grievance for Barold. She treated the curate very well indeed. She seemed glad to see him, she was wholly at her ease with him, she made no trying remarks to him, she never stopped to fix her eyes upon him in that inexplicable style, and she did not laugh when there seemed nothing to laugh at. She was so gay and good-humored that the Rev. Arthur

Poppleton beamed and flourished under her treatment, and forgot to change color, and even ventured to talk a good deal, and make divers quite presentable little jokes.

"I should like to know," thought Barold, growing sulkier as the others grew merrier,--"I should like to know what she finds so interesting in him, and why she chooses to treat him better than she treats me; for she certainly does treat him better."

It was hardly fair, however, that he should complain; for, at times, he was treated extremely well, and his intimacy with Octavia progressed quite rapidly. Perhaps, if the truth were told, it was always himself who was the first means of checking it, by some suddenly prudent instinct which led him to feel that perhaps he was in rather a delicate position, and had better not indulge in too much of a good thing. He had not been an eligible and unimpeachable desirable parti for ten years without acquiring some of that discretion which is said to be the better part of valor. The matter-of-fact air with which Octavia accepted his attentions caused him to pull himself up sometimes. If he had been Brown, or Jones, or even Robinson, she could not have appeared to regard them as more entirely natural. When--he had gone so far, once or twice--he had deigned to make a more than usually agreeable speech to her, it was received with none of that charming sensitive tremor to which he was accustomed. Octavia neither blushed, nor dropped her eyes.

It did not add to Barold's satisfaction to find her as cheerful and ready

to be amused by a mild little curate, who blushed and stammered, and was neither brilliant, graceful, nor distinguished. Could not Octavia see the wide difference between the two? Regarding the matter in this light, and watching Octavia as she encouraged her visitor, and laughed at his jokes, and never once tripped him up by asking him a startling question, did not, as already has been said, improve Mr. Francis Barold's temper; and, by the time his visit was over, he had lapsed into his coldest and most haughty manner. As soon as Miss Belinda entered, and engaged Mr. Poppleton for a moment, he rose, and crossed the little room to Octavia's side.

"I must bid you good-afternoon," he said.

Octavia did not rise.

"Sit down a minute, while aunt Belinda is talking about red-flannel nightcaps and lumbago," she said. "I wanted to ask you something. By the way, what is lumbago?"

"Is that what you wished to ask me?" he inquired stiffly.

"No. I just thought of that. Have you ever had it? and what is it like? All the old people in Slowbridge have it, and they tell you all about it when you go to see them. Aunt Belinda says so. What I wanted to ask you was different"--

"Possibly Miss Bassett might be able to tell you," he remarked.

"About the lumbago? Well, perhaps she might. I'll ask her. Do you think it bad taste in me to wear diamonds?"

She said this with the most delightful seriousness, fixing her eyes upon him with her very prettiest look of candid appeal, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should apply to him for information. He felt himself faltering again. How white that bit of forehead was! How soft that blonde, waving fringe of hair! What a lovely shape her eyes were, and how large and clear as she raised them!

"Why do you ask me?" he inquired.

"Because I think you are an unprejudiced person. Lady Theobald is not. I have confidence in you. Tell me."

There was a slight pause.

"Really," he said, after it, "I can scarcely believe that my opinion can be of any value in your eyes. I am--can only tell you that it is hardly customary in--an--in England for young people to wear a profusion of ornament."

"I wonder if I wear a profusion."

"You don't need any," he condescended. "You are too young, and--all that sort of thing."

She glanced down at her slim, unringed hands for a moment, her expression quite thoughtful.

"Lucia and I almost quarrelled the other day," she said--"at least, I almost quarrelled. It isn't so nice to be told of things, after all. I must say I don't like it as much as I thought I should."

He kept his seat longer than, he had intended; and, when he rose to go, the Rev. Arthur Poppleton was shaking hands with Miss Belinda, and so it fell out that they left the house together.

"You know Miss Octavia Bassett well, I suppose," remarked Barold, with condescension, as they passed through the gate. "You clergymen are fortunate fellows."

"I wish that others knew her as well, sir," said the little gentleman, kindling. "I wish they knew her--her generosity and kindness of heart and ready sympathy with misfortune!"

"Ah!" commented Mr. Barold, twisting his mustache with somewhat of an incredulous air. This was not at all the sort of thing he had expected to hear. For his own part, it would not have occurred to him to suspect her of the possession of such desirable and orthodox qualities.

"There are those who--misunderstand her," cried the curate, warming with his subject, "who misunderstand, and--yes, and apply harsh terms to her innocent gayety and freedom of speech: if they knew her as I do, they would cease to do so."

"I should scarcely have thought"--began Barold.

"There are many who scarcely think it,--if you will pardon my interrupting you," said the curate. "I think they would scarcely believe it if I felt at liberty to tell them, which I regret to say I do not. I am almost breaking my word in saying what I cannot help saying to yourself. The poor under my care are better off since she came, and there are some who have seen her more than once, though she did not go as a teacher or to reprove them for faults; and her way of doing what she did was new to them, and perhaps much less serious than they were accustomed to, and they liked it all the better."

"Ah!" commented Barold again. "Flannel under-garments, and--that sort of thing."

"No," with much spirit, "not at all, sir; but what, as I said, they liked much better. It is not often they meet a beautiful creature who comes among them with open hands, and the natural, ungrudging way of giving which she has. Sometimes they are at a loss to understand, as well as the

rest. They have been used to what is narrower and more--more exacting."

"They have been used to Lady Theobald," observed Barold, with a faint smile.

"It would not become me to--to mention Lady Theobald in any disparaging manner," replied the curate: "but the best and most charitable among us do not always carry out our good intentions in the best way. I dare say Lady Theobald would consider Miss Octavia Bassett too readily influenced and too lavish."

"She is as generous with her money as with her diamonds perhaps," said Barold. "Possibly the quality is peculiar to Nevada. We part here, Mr. Poppleton, I believe. Good-morning."