

CHAPTER XXI.

LORD LANSDOWNE.

One morning in the following week Mrs. Burnham attired herself in her second-best black silk, and, leaving the Misses Burnham practising diligently, turned her steps toward Oldclough Hall. Arriving there, she was ushered into the blue drawing-room by Dobson, in his character of footman; and in a few minutes Lucia appeared.

When Mrs. Burnham saw her, she assumed a slight air of surprise.

"Why, my dear," she said, as she shook hands, "I should scarcely have known you."

And, though this was something of an exaggeration, there was some excuse for the exclamation. Lucia was looking very charming, and several changes might be noted in her attire and appearance. The ugly twist had disappeared from her delicate head; and in its place were soft, loose waves and light puffs; she had even ventured on allowing a few ringed locks to stray on to her forehead; her white morning-dress no longer wore the trade-mark of Miss Chickie, but had been remodelled by some one of more taste.

"What a pretty gown, my dear!" said Mrs. Burnham, glancing at it

curiously. "A Watteau plait down the back--isn't it a Watteau plait?--and little ruffles down the front, and pale pink bows. It is quite like some of Miss Octavia Bassett's dresses, only not so over-trimmed."

"I do not think Octavia's dresses would seem over-trimmed if she wore them in London or Paris," said Lucia bravely. "It is only because we are so very quiet, and dress so little in Slowbridge, that they seem so."

"And your hair!" remarked Mrs. Burnham. "You drew your idea of that from some style of hers, I suppose. Very becoming, indeed. Well, well! And how does Lady Theobald like all this, my dear?"

"I am not sure that"--Lucia was beginning, when her ladyship interrupted her by entering.

"My dear Lady Theobald," cried her visitor, rising, "I hope you are well. I have just been complimenting Lucia upon her pretty dress, and her new style of dressing her hair. Miss Octavia Bassett has been giving her the benefit of her experience, it appears. We have not been doing her justice. Who would have believed that she had come from Nevada to improve us?"

"Miss Octavia Bassett," said my lady sonorously, "has come from Nevada to teach our young people a great many things,--new fashions in duty, and demeanor, and respect for their elders. Let us hope they will be benefited."

"If you will excuse me, grandmamma," said Lucia, speaking in a soft, steady voice, "I will go and write the letters you wished written."

"Go," said my lady with majesty; and, having bidden Mrs. Burnham good-morning, Lucia went.

If Mrs. Burnham had expected any explanation of her ladyship's evident displeasure, she was doomed to disappointment. That excellent and rigorous gentlewoman had a stern sense of dignity, which forbade her condescending to the confidential weakness of mere ordinary mortals. Instead of referring to Lucia, she broached a more commonplace topic.

"I hope your rheumatism does not threaten you again, Mrs. Burnham," she remarked.

"I am very well, thank you, my dear," said Mrs. Burnham; "so well, that I am thinking quite seriously of taking the dear girls to the garden-party, when it comes off."

"To the garden-party!" repeated her ladyship. "May I ask who thinks of giving a garden-party in Slowbridge?"

"It is no one in Slowbridge," replied this lady cheerfully. "Some one who lives a little out of Slowbridge,--Mr. Burmestone, my dear Lady Theobald, at his new place."

"Mr. Burmestone!"

"Yes, my dear; and a most charming affair it is to be, if we are to believe all we hear. Surely you have heard something of it from Mr. Barold."

"Mr. Barold has not been to Oldclough for several days."

"Then, he will tell you when he comes; for I suppose he has as much to do with it as Mr. Burmestone."

"I have heard before," announced my lady, "of men of Mr. Burmestone's class securing the services of persons of established position in society when they wished to spend their money upon entertainments; but I should scarcely have imagined that Francis Barold would have allowed himself to be made a party to such a transaction."

"But," put in Mrs. Burnham rather eagerly, "it appears that Mr. Burmestone is not such an obscure person, after all. He is an Oxford man, and came off with honors: he is quite a well-born man, and gives this entertainment in honor of his friend and relation, Lord Lansdowne."

"Lord Lansdowne!" echoed her ladyship, sternly.

"Son of the Marquis of Lauderdale, whose wife was Lady Honora Erroll."

"Did Mr. Burmestone give you this information?" asked Lady Theobald with ironic calmness.

Mrs. Burnham colored never so faintly.

"I--that is to say--there is a sort of acquaintance between one of my maids and the butler at the Burmestone place; and, when the girl was doing Lydia's hair, she told her the story. Lord Lansdowne and his father are quite fond of Mr. Burmestone, it is said."

"It seems rather singular to my mind that we should not have known of this before."

"But how should we learn? We none of us know Lord Lansdowne, or even the marquis. I think he is only a second or third cousin. We are a little--just a little set in Slowbridge, you know, my dear: at least, I have thought so sometimes lately."

"I must confess," remarked my lady, "that I have not regarded the matter in that light."

"That is because you have a better right to--to be a little set than the rest of us," was the amiable response.

Lady Theobald did not disclaim the privilege. She felt the sentiment an extremely correct one. But she was not very warm in her manner during the remainder of the call; and, incongruous as such a statement may appear, it must be confessed that she felt that Miss Octavia Bassett must have something to do with, these defections on all sides, and that garden-parties, and all such swervings from established Slowbridge custom, were the natural result of Nevada frivolity and freedom of manners. It may be that she felt remotely that even Lord Lansdowne and the Marquis of Lauderdale were to be referred to the same reprehensible cause, and that, but for Octavia Bassett, Mr. Burmestone would not have been educated at Oxford and have come off with honors, and have turned out to be related to respectable people, but would have remained in appropriate obscurity.

"I suppose," she said afterward to Lucia, "that your friend Miss Octavia Bassett is in Mr. Burmestone's confidence, if no one else has been permitted to have that honor. I have no doubt she has known of this approaching entertainment for some weeks."

"I do not know, grandmamma," replied Lucia, putting her letters together, and gaining color as she bent over them. She was wondering, with inward trepidation, what her ladyship would say if she knew the whole truth,--if she knew that it was her granddaughter, and not Octavia Bassett, who enjoyed Mr. Burmestone's confidence.

"Ah!" she thought, "how could I ever dare to tell her?"

The same day Francis Barold sauntered up to pay them a visit; and then, as Mrs. Burnham had prophesied, Lady Theobald heard all she wished to hear, and, indeed, a great deal more.

"What is this I am told of Mr. Burmestone, Francis?" she inquired.

"That he intends to give a garden-party, and that Lord Lansdowne is to be one of the guests, and that he has caused it to be circulated that they are cousins."

"That Lansdowne has caused it to be circulated--or Burmestone?"

"It is scarcely likely that Lord Lansdowne"--

"Beg pardon," he interrupted, fixing his single glass dexterously in his right eye, and gazing at her ladyship through it. "Can't see why Lansdowne should object. Fact is, he is a great deal fonder of Burmestone than relations usually are of each other. Now, I often find that kind of thing a bore; but Lansdowne doesn't seem to. They were at school together, it seems, and at Oxford too; and Burmestone is supposed to have behaved pretty well towards Lansdowne at one time, when he was rather a wild fellow--so the father and mother say. As to Burmestone 'causing it to be circulated,' that sort of thing is rather absurd. The man isn't a cad, you know."

"Pray don't say 'you know,' Francis," said her ladyship. "I know very

little but what I have chanced to see, and I must confess I have not been prepossessed in Mr. Burmistone's favor. Why did he not choose to inform us"--

"That he was Lord Lansdowne's second cousin, and knew the Marquis of Lauderdale, grandmamma?" broke in Lucia, with very pretty spirit. "Would that have prepossessed you in his favor? Would you have forgiven him for building the mills, on Lord Lansdowne's account? I--I wish I was related to a marquis," which was very bold indeed.

"May I ask," said her ladyship, in her most monumental manner, "when you became Mr. Burmistone's champion?"