

CHAPTER XXII.

"YOU HAVE MADE IT LIVELIER."

When she had become Mr. Burmestone's champion, indeed! She could scarcely have told when, unless, perhaps, she had fixed the date at the first time she had heard his name introduced at a high tea, with every politely opprobrious epithet affixed. She had defended him in her own mind then, and felt sure that he deserved very little that was said against him, and very likely nothing at all. And, the first time she had seen and spoken to him, she had been convinced that she had not made a mistake, and that he had been treated with cruel injustice. How kind he was, how manly, how clever, and how well he bore himself under the popular adverse criticism! She only wondered that anybody could be so blind and stupid and wilful as to assail him.

And if this had been the case in those early days, imagine what she felt now, when--ah, well!--when her friendship had had time and opportunity to become a much deeper sentiment. Must it be confessed that she had seen Mr. Burmestone even oftener than Octavia and Miss Belinda knew of? Of course it had all been quite accidental; but it had happened that now and then, when she had been taking a quiet walk in the lanes about Oldclough, she had encountered a gentleman, who had dismounted, and led his horse by the bridle, as he sauntered by her side. She had always been very timid

at such times, and had felt rather like a criminal; but Mr. Burmestone had not been timid at all, and would, indeed, as soon have met Lady Theobald as not, for which courage his companion admired him more than ever. It was not very long before to be with this hero re-assured her, and made her feel stronger and more self-reliant. She was never afraid to open her soft little heart to him, and show him innocently all its goodness, and ignorance of worldliness. She warmed and brightened under his kindly influence, and was often surprised in secret at her own simple readiness of wit and speech.

"It is odd that I am such a different girl when--when I am with you," she said to him one day. "I even make little jokes. I never should think of making even the tiniest joke before grandmamma. Somehow, she never seems quite to understand jokes. She never laughs at them. You always laugh, and I am sure it is very kind of you to encourage me so; but you must not encourage me too much, or I might forget, and make a little joke at dinner, and I think, if I did, she would choke over her soup."

Perhaps, when she dressed her hair, and adorned herself with pale pink bows and like appurtenances, this artful young person had privately in mind other beholders than Mrs. Burnham, and other commendation than that to be bestowed by that most excellent matron.

"Do you mind my telling you that you have put on an enchanted garment?" said Mr. Burmestone, the first time they met when she wore one of the

old-new gowns. "I thought I knew before how"--

"I don't mind it at all," said Lucia, blushing brilliantly. "I rather like it. It rewards me for my industry. My hair is dressed in a new way. I hope you like that too. Grandmamma does not."

It had been Lady Theobald's habit to treat Lucia severely from a sense of duty. Her manner toward her had always rather the tone of implying that she was naturally at fault, and yet her ladyship could not have told wherein she wished the girl changed. In the good old school in which my lady had been trained, it was customary to regard young people as weak, foolish, and, if left to their own desires, frequently sinful. Lucia had not been left to her own desires. She had been taught to view herself as rather a bad case, and to feel that she was far from being what her relatives had a right to expect. To be thrown with a person who did not find her silly or dull or commonplace, was a new experience.

"If I had been clever," Lucia said once to Mr. Burmestone,--"if I had been clever, perhaps grandmamma would have been more satisfied with me. I have often wished I had been clever."

"If you had been a boy," replied Mr. Burmestone rather grimly, "and had squandered her money, and run into debt, and bullied her, you would have been her idol, and she would have pinched and starved herself to supply your highness's extravagance."

When the garden-party rumor began to take definite form, and there was no doubt as to Mr. Burmestone's intentions, a discussion arose at once, and went on in every genteel parlor. Would Lady Theobald allow Lucia to go? and, if she did not allow her, would not such a course appear very pointed indeed? It was universally decided that it would appear pointed, but that Lady Theobald would not mind that in the least, and perhaps would rather enjoy it than otherwise; and it was thought Lucia would not go. And it is very likely that Lucia would have remained at home, if it had not been for the influence of Mr. Francis Barold.

Making a call at Oldclough, he found his august relative in a very majestic mood, and she applied to him again for information.

"Perhaps," she said, "you may be able to tell me whether it is true that Belinda Bassett--Belinda Bassett," with emphasis, "has been invited by Mr. Burmestone to assist him to receive his guests."

"Yes, it is true," was the reply: "I think I advised it myself.

Burmestone is fond of her. They are great friends. Man needs a woman at such times."

"And he chose Belinda Bassett?"

"In the first place, he is on friendly terms with her, as I said before," replied Barold; "in the second, she's just what he wants--well-bred,

kind-hearted, not likely to make rows, et caetera." There was a slight pause before he finished, adding quietly, "He's not the man to submit to being refused--Burmistone."

Lady Theobald did not reply, or raise her eyes from her work: she knew he was looking at her with calm fixedness, through the glass he held in its place so cleverly; and she detested this more than any thing else, perhaps because she was invariably quelled by it, and found she had nothing to say.

He did not address her again immediately, but turned to Lucia, dropping the eyeglass, and resuming his normal condition.

"You will go, of course?" he said.

Lucia glanced across at my lady.

"I--do not know. Grandmamma"--

"Oh!" interposed Barold, "you must go. There is no reason for your refusing the invitation, unless you wish to imply something unpleasant--which is, of course, out of the question."

"But there may be reasons"--began her ladyship.

"Burmistone is my friend," put in Barold, in his coolest tone; "and I am

your relative, which would make my position in his house a delicate one, if he has offended you."

When Lucia saw Octavia again, she was able to tell her that they had received invitations to the fête, and that Lady Theobald had accepted them.

"She has not spoken a word to me about it, but she has accepted them," said Lucia. "I don't quite understand her lately, Octavia. She must be very fond of Francis Barold. He never gives way to her in the least, and she always seems to submit to him. I know she would not have let me go, if he had not insisted on it, in that taking-it-for-granted way of his."

Naturally Mr. Burmestone's fête caused great excitement. Miss Chickie was never so busy in her life, and there were rumors that her feelings had been outraged by the discovery that Mrs. Burnham had sent to Harriford for costumes for her daughters.

"Slowbridge is changing, mem," said Miss Chickie. with brilliant sarcasm. "Our ladies is led in their fashions by a Nevada young person. We're improving most rapid--more rapid than I'd ever have dared to hope. Do you prefer a frill, or a flounce, mem?"

Octavia was in great good spirits at the prospect of the gayeties in question. She had been in remarkably good spirits for some weeks. She had received letters from Nevada, containing good news she said. Shares had

gone up again; and her father had almost settled his affairs, and it would not be long before he would come to England. She looked so exhilarated over the matter, that Lucia felt a little aggrieved. "Will you be so glad to leave us, Octavia?" she asked. "We shall not be so glad to let you go. We have grown very fond of you."

"I shall be sorry to leave you, and aunt Belinda is going with us. You don't expect me to be very fond of Slowbridge, do you, and to be sorry I can't take Mrs. Burnham--and the rest?"

Barold was present when she made this speech, and it rather rankled.

"Am I one of 'the rest'?" he inquired, the first time he found himself alone with her. He was sufficiently piqued to forget his usual hauteur and discretion.

"Would you like to be?" she said.

"Oh! Very much--very much--naturally," he replied severely.

They were standing near a rose-bush in the garden; and she plucked a rose, and regarded it with deep interest.

"Well," she said, next, "I must say I think I shouldn't have had such a good time if you hadn't been here. You have made it livelier."

"Tha-anks," he remarked. "You are most kind."

"Oh!" she answered, "it's true. If it wasn't, I shouldn't say it. You and Mr. Burmestone and Mr. Poppleton have certainly made it livelier."

He went home in such a bad humor that his host, who was rather happier than usual, commented upon his grave aspect at dinner.

"You look as if you had heard ill news, old fellow," he said. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing!" he was answered sardonically; "nothing whatever--unless that I have been rather snubbed by a young lady from Nevada."

"Ah!" with great seriousness: "that's rather cool, isn't it?"

"It's her little way," said Barold. "It seems to be one of the customs of Nevada."

In fact, he was very savage indeed. He felt that he had condescended a good deal lately. He seldom bestowed his time on women; and when he did so, at rare intervals, he chose those who would do the most honor to his taste at the least cost of trouble. And he was obliged to confess to himself that he had broken his rule in this case. Upon analyzing his motives and necessities, he found, that, after all, he must have extended his visit simply because he chose to see more of this young woman from

Nevada, and that really, upon the whole, he had borne a good deal from her. Sometimes he had been much pleased with her, and very well entertained; but often enough--in fact, rather too often--she had made him exceedingly uncomfortable. Her manners were not what he was accustomed to: she did not consider that all men were not to be regarded from the same point of view. Perhaps he did not put into definite words the noble and patriotic sentiment that an Englishman was not to be regarded from the same point of view as an American, and that, though all this sort of thing might do with fellows in New York, it was scarcely what an Englishman would stand. Perhaps, as I say, he had not put this sentiment into words; but it is quite certain that it had been uppermost in his mind upon more occasions than one. As he thought their acquaintance over, this evening, he was rather severe upon Octavia. He even was roused so far as to condescend to talk her over with Burmistone.

"If she had been well brought up," he said, "she would have been a different creature."

"Very different, I have no doubt," said Burmistone thoughtfully. "When you say well brought up, by the way, do you mean brought up like your cousin, Miss Gaston?"

"There is a medium," said Barold loftily. "I regret to say Lady Theobald has not hit upon it."

"Well, as you say," commented Mr. Burmistone, "I suppose there is a

medium."

"A charming wife she would make, for a man with a position to maintain," remarked Barold, with a short and somewhat savage laugh.

"Octavia Bassett?" queried Burmistone. "That's true. But I am afraid she wouldn't enjoy it--if you are supposing the man to be an Englishman, brought up in the regulation groove."

"Ah!" exclaimed Barold impatiently: "I was not looking at it from her point of view, but from his."

Mr. Burmistone slipped his hands in his pockets, and jingled his keys slightly, as he did once before in an earlier part of this narrative.

"Ah! from his," he repeated. "Not from hers. His point of view would differ from hers--naturally."

Barold flashed a little, and took his cigar from his mouth to knock off the ashes.

"A man is not necessarily a snob," he said, "because he is cool enough not to lose his head where a woman is concerned. You can't marry a woman who will make mistakes, and attract universal attention by her conduct."

"Has it struck you that Octavia Bassett would?" inquired Burmistone.

"She would do as she chose," said Barold petulantly. "She would do things which were unusual; but I was not referring to her in particular. Why should I?"

"Ah!" said Burmestone. "I only thought of her because it did not strike me that one would ever feel she had exactly blundered. She is not easily embarrassed. There is a sang-froid about her which carries things off."

"Ah!" deigned Barold: "she has sang-froid enough and to spare."

He was silent for some time afterward, and sat smoking later than usual. When he was about to leave the room for the night, he made an announcement for which his host was not altogether prepared.

"When the fête is over, my dear fellow," he said, "I must go back to London, and I shall be deucedly sorry to do it."

"Look here!" said Burmestone, "that's a new idea, isn't it?"

"No, an old one; but I have been putting the thing off from day to day. By Jove! I did not think it likely that I should put it off, the day I landed here."

And he laughed rather uneasily.