

CHAPTER XXIII.

"MAY I GO?"

The very day after this, Octavia opened the fourth trunk. She had had it brought down from the garret, when there came a summons on the door, and

Lucia Gaston appeared.

Lucia was very pale; and her large, soft eyes wore a decidedly frightened look. She seemed to have walked fast, and was out of breath. Evidently something had happened.

"Octavia," she said, "Mr. Dugald Binnie is at Oldclough."

"Who is he?"

"He is my grand-uncle," explained Lucia tremulously. "He has a great deal of money. Grandmamma"--She stopped short, and colored, and drew her slight figure up. "I do not quite understand grandmamma, Octavia," she said. "Last night she came to my room to talk to me; and this morning she came again, and--oh!" she broke out indignantly, "how could she speak to me in such a manner!"

"What did she say?" inquired Octavia.

"She said a great many things," with great spirit. "It took her a long time to say them, and I do not wonder at it. It would have taken me a hundred years, if I had been in her place. I--I was wrong to say I did not understand her: I did--before she had finished."

"What did you understand?"

"She was afraid to tell me in plain words.--I never saw her afraid before, but she was afraid. She has been arranging my future for me, and it does not occur to her that I dare object. That is because she knows I am a coward, and despises me for it--and it is what I deserve. If I make the marriage she chooses, she thinks Mr. Binnie will leave me his money. I am to run after a man who does not care for me, and make myself attractive, in the hope that he will condescend to marry me because Mr. Binnie may leave me his money. Do you wonder that it took even Lady Theobald a long time to say that?"

"Well," remarked Octavia, "you won't do it, I suppose. I wouldn't worry. She wants you to marry Mr. Barold, I suppose."

Lucia started.

"How did you guess?" she exclaimed.

"Oh! I always knew it. I didn't guess." And she smiled ever so faintly.

"That is one of the reasons why she loathes me so," she added.

Lucia thought deeply for a moment: she recognized, all at once, several things she had been mystified by before.

"Oh, it is! It is!" she said. "And she has thought of it all the time, when I never suspected her."

Octavia smiled a little again. Lucia sat thinking, her hands clasped tightly.

"I am glad I came here," she said, at length. "I am angry now, and I see things more clearly. If she had only thought of it because Mr. Binnie came, I could have forgiven her more easily; but she has been making coarse plans all the time, and treating me with contempt. Octavia," she added, turning upon her, with flushing cheeks and sparkling eyes, "I think that, for the first time in my life, I am in a passion,--a real passion. I think I shall never be afraid of her any more." Her delicate nostrils were dilated, she held her head up, her breath came fast. There was a hint of exultation in her tone. "Yes," she said, "I am in a passion. And I am not afraid of her at all. I will go home and tell her what I think."

And it is quite probable that she would have done so, but for a trifling incident which occurred before she reached her ladyship.

She walked very fast, after she left the house. She wanted to reach Oldclough before one whit of her anger cooled down; though, somehow, she felt quite sure, that, even when her anger died out, her courage would not take flight with it. Mr. Dugald Binnie had not proved to be a very fascinating person. He was an acrid, dictatorial old man: he contradicted Lady Theobald flatly every five minutes, and bullied his man-servant. But it was not against him that Lucia's indignation was aroused. She felt that Lady Theobald was quite capable of suggesting to him that Francis Barold would be a good match for her; and, if she had done so, it was scarcely his fault if he had accepted the idea. She understood now why she had been allowed to visit Octavia, and why divers other things had happened. She had been sent to walk with Francis Barold; he had been almost reproached when he had not called; perhaps her ladyship had been good enough to suggest to him that it was his duty to further her plans. She was as capable of that as of any thing else which would assist her to gain her point. The girl's cheeks grew hotter and hotter, her eyes brighter, at every step, because every step brought some new thought: her hands trembled, and her heart beat.

"I shall never be afraid of her again," she said, as she turned the corner into the road. "Never! never!"

And at that very moment a gentleman stepped out of the wood at her right, and stopped before her.

She started back, with a cry.

"Mr. Burmestone!" she said: "Mr. Burmestone!"

She wondered if he had heard her last words: she fancied he had. He took hold of her shaking little hand, and looked down at her excited face.

"I am glad I waited for you," he said, in the quietest possible tone.

"Something is the matter."

She knew there would be no use in trying to conceal the truth, and she was not in the mood to make the effort. She scarcely knew herself.

She gave quite a fierce little laugh.

"I am angry!" she said. "You have never seen me angry before. I am on my way to my--to Lady Theobald."

He held her hand as calmly as before. He understood a great deal more than she could have imagined.

"What are you going to say to her?" he asked. She laughed again.

"I am going to ask her what she means. I am going to tell her she has made a mistake. I am going to prove to her that I am not such a coward, after all. I am going to tell her that I dare disobey her,--that is what I am going to say to her," she concluded decisively.

He held her hand rather closer.

"Let us take a stroll in the copse, and talk it over," he said. "It is deliciously cool there."

"I don't want to be cool," she said. But he drew her gently with him; and a few steps took them into the shade of the young oaks and pines, and there he paused.

"She has made you very angry?" he said.

And then, almost before she knew what she was doing, she was pouring forth the whole of her story, even more of it than she had told Octavia. She had not at all intended to do it; but she did it, nevertheless.

"I am to marry Mr. Francis Barold, if he will take me," she said, with a bitter little smile,--"Mr. Francis Barold, who is so much in love with me, as you know. His mother approves of the match, and sent him here to make love to me, which he has done, as you have seen. I have no money of my own; but, if I make a marriage which pleases him, Dugald Binnie will probably leave me his--which it is thought will be an inducement to my cousin, who needs one. If I marry him, or rather he marries me, Lady Theobald thinks Mr. Binnie will be pleased. It does not even matter whether Francis is pleased or not, and of course I am out of the question; but it is hoped that it will please Mr. Binnie. The two ladies

have talked it over, and decided the matter. I dare say they have offered me to Francis, who has very likely refused me, though perhaps he may be persuaded to relent in time,--if I am very humble, and he is shown the advantage of having Mr. Binnie's money added to his own,--but I have no doubt I shall have to be very humble indeed. That is what I learned from Lady Theobald last night, and it is what I am going to talk to her about. Is it enough to make one angry, do you think? Is it enough?"

He did not tell her whether he thought it enough, or not. He looked at her with steady eyes.

"Lucia," he said, "I wish you would let me go and talk with Lady Theobald."

"You?" she said with a little start.

"Yes," he answered. "Let me go to her. Let me tell her, that, instead of marrying Francis Barold, you will marry me. If you will say yes to that, I think I can promise that you need never be afraid of her any more." The fierce color died out of her cheeks, and the tears rushed to her eyes. She raised her face with a pathetic look.

"Oh!" she whispered, "you must be very sorry for me. I think you have been sorry for me from the first."

"I am desperately in love with you," he answered, in his quietest way. "I

have been desperately in love with you from the first. May I go?"

She looked at him for a moment, incredulously. Then she faltered,--

"Yes."

She still looked up at him; and then, in spite of her happiness, or perhaps because of it, she suddenly began to cry softly, and forgot she had been angry at all, as he took her into his strong, kind arms.