

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE GARDEN-PARTY.

The morning of the garden-party arose bright and clear, and Slowbridge awakened in a great state of excitement. Miss Chickie, having worked until midnight that all her orders might be completed, was so overpowered by her labors as to have to take her tea and toast in bed.

At Oldclough varied sentiments prevailed. Lady Theobald's manner was chiefly distinguished by an implacable rigidity. She had chosen, as an appropriate festal costume, a funereal-black moire antique, enlivened by massive fringes and ornaments of jet; her jewelry being chains and manacles of the latter, which rattled as she moved, with a sound somewhat suggestive of bones.

Mr. Dugald Binnie, who had received an invitation, had as yet amiably forborne to say whether he would accept it, or not. He had been out when Mr. Burmestone called, and had not seen him.

When Lady Theobald descended to breakfast, she found him growling over his newspaper; and he glanced up at her with a polite scowl.

"Going to a funeral?" he demanded.

"I accompany my granddaughter to this--this entertainment," her ladyship responded. "It is scarcely a joyous occasion, to my mind."

"No need to dress yourself like that, if it isn't," ejaculated Mr. Binnie. "Why don't you stay at home, if you don't want to go? Man's all right, isn't he? Once knew a man by the name of Burmestone, myself. One of the few decent fellows I've met. If I were sure this was the same man, I'd go myself. When I find a fellow who's neither knave nor fool, I stick to him. Believe I'll send to find out. Where's Lucia?"

What his opinion of Lucia was, it was difficult to discover. He had an agreeable habit of staring at her over the top of his paper, and over his dinner. The only time he had made any comment upon her, was the first time he saw her in the dress she had copied from Octavia's. "Nice gown that," he blurted out: "didn't get it here, I'll wager."

"It's an old dress I remodelled," answered Lucia somewhat alarmed. "I made it myself."

"Doesn't look like it," he said gruffly.

Lucia had touched up another dress, and was very happy in the prospect of wearing it at the garden-party.

"Don't call on grandmamma until after Wednesday," she had said to Mr. Burmestone: "perhaps she wouldn't let me go. She will be very angry,

I am sure."

"And you are not afraid?"

"No," she answered: "I am not afraid at all. I shall not be afraid again."

In fact, she had perfectly confounded her ladyship by her demeanor. She bore her fiercest glance without quailing in the least, or making any effort to evade it: under her most scathing comments she was composed and unmoved. On the first occasion of my lady's referring to her plans for her future, she received a blow which fairly stunned her. The girl rose from her chair, and looked her straight in the face unflinchingly, and with a suggestion of hauteur not easy to confront.

"I beg you will not speak to me of that again," she said: "I will not listen." And turning about, she walked out of the room.

"This," her ladyship had said in sepulchral tones, when she recovered her breath, "this is one of the results of Miss Octavia Bassett." And nothing more had been said on the subject since.

No one in Slowbridge was in more brilliant spirits than Octavia herself on the morning of the fête. Before breakfast Miss Belinda was startled by the arrival of another telegram, which ran as follows:--

"Arrived to-day, per 'Russia.' Be with you tomorrow evening. Friend with me.

"MARTIN BASSETT."

On reading this communication, Miss Belinda burst into floods of delighted tears.

"Dear, dear Martin," she wept; "to think that we should meet again! Why didn't he let us know he was on the way? I should have been so anxious that I should not have slept at all."

"Well," remarked Octavia, "I suppose that would have been an advantage."

Suddenly she approached Miss Belinda, kissed her, and disappeared out of the room as if by magic, not returning for a quarter of an hour, looking rather soft and moist and brilliant about the eyes when she did return.

Octavia was a marked figure upon the grounds at that garden-party.

"Another dress, my dear," remarked Mrs. Burnham. "And what a charming color she has, I declare! She is usually paler. Perhaps we owe this to Lord Lansdowne."

"Her dress is becoming, at all events," privately remarked Miss Lydia Burnham, whose tastes had not been consulted about her own.

"It is she who is becoming," said her sister: "it is not the dress so much, though her clothes always have a look, some way. She's prettier than ever to-day, and is enjoying herself."

She was enjoying herself. Mr. Francis Barold observed it rather gloomily as he stood apart. She was enjoying herself so much, that she did not seem to notice that he had avoided her, instead of going up to claim her attention. Half a dozen men were standing about her, and making themselves agreeable; and she was apparently quite equal to the emergencies of the occasion. The young men from Broadoaks had at once attached themselves to her train.

"I say, Barold," they had said to him, "why didn't you tell us about this? Jolly good fellow you are, to come mooning here for a couple of months, and keep it all to yourself."

And then had come Lord Lansdowne, who, in crossing the lawn to shake hands with his host, had been observed to keep his eye fixed upon one particular point.

"Burmistone," he said, after having spoken his first words, "who is that tall girl in white?"

And in ten minutes Lady Theobald, Mrs. Burnham, Mr. Barold, and divers others too numerous to mention, saw him standing at Octavia's side,

evidently with no intention of leaving it.

Not long after this Francis Barold found his way to Miss Belinda, who was very busy and rather nervous.

"Your niece is evidently enjoying herself," he remarked.

"Octavia is most happy to-day," answered Miss Belinda. "Her father will reach Slowbridge this evening. She has been looking forward to his coming with great anxiety."

"Ah!" commented Barold.

"Very few people understand Octavia," said Miss Belinda. "I'm not sure that I follow all her moods myself. She is more affectionate than people fancy. She--she has very pretty ways. I am very fond of her. She is not as frivolous as she appears to those who don't know her well."

Barold stood gnawing his mustache, and made no reply. He was not very comfortable. He felt himself ill-used by Fate, and rather wished he had returned to London from Broadoaks, instead of loitering in Slowbridge. He had amused himself at first, but in time he had been surprised to find his amusement lose something of its zest. He glowered across the lawn at the group under a certain beech-tree; and, as he did so, Octavia turned her face a little and saw him. She stood waving her fan slowly, and smiling at him in a calm way, which reminded him very much of the time he

had first caught sight of her at Lady Theobald's high tea.

He condescended to saunter over the grass to where she stood. Once there, he proceeded to make himself as disagreeable as possible, in a silent and lofty way. He felt it only due to himself that he should. He did not approve at all of the manner in which Lansdowne kept by her.

"It's deucedly bad form on his part," he said mentally. "What does he mean by it?"

Octavia, on the contrary, did not ask what he meant by it. She chose to seem rather well entertained, and did not notice that she was being frowned down. There was no reason why she should not find Lord Lansdowne entertaining: he was an agreeable young fellow, with an inexhaustible fund of good spirits, and no nonsense about him.

He was fond of all pleasant novelty, and Octavia was a pleasant novelty. He had been thinking of paying a visit to America; and he asked innumerable questions concerning that country, all of which Octavia answered.

"I know half a dozen fellows who have been there," he said. "And they all enjoyed it tremendously."

"If you go to Nevada, you must visit the mines at Bloody Gulch," she

said.

"Where?" he ejaculated. "I say, what a name! Don't deride my youth and ignorance, Miss Bassett."

"You can call it L'Argentville, if you would rather," she replied.

"I would rather try the other, thank you," he laughed. "It has a more hilarious sound. Will they despise me at Bloody Gulch, Miss Bassett? I never killed a man in my life."

Barold turned, and walked away, angry, and more melancholy than he could have believed.

"It is time I went back to London," he chose to put it. "The place begins to be deucedly dull."

"Mr. Francis Barold seems rather out of spirits," said Mrs. Burnham to Lady Theobald. "Lord Lansdowne interferes with his pleasure."

"I had not observed it," answered her ladyship. "And it is scarcely likely that Mr. Francis Barold would permit his pleasure to be interfered with, even by the son of the Marquis of Lauderdale."

But she glared at Barold as he passed, and beckoned to him.

"Where is Lucia?" she demanded.--

"I saw her with Burmestone half an hour ago," he answered coldly. "Have you any message for my mother? I shall return to London to-morrow, leaving here early."

She turned quite pale. She had not counted upon this at all, and it was extremely inopportune.

"What has happened?" she asked rigidly.

He looked slightly surprised.

"Nothing whatever," he replied. "I have remained here longer than I intended."

She began to move the manacles on her right wrist. He made not the smallest profession of reluctance to go. She said, at last, "If you will find Lucia, you will oblige me." She was almost uncivil to Miss Pilcher, who chanced to join her after he was gone. She had not the slightest intention of allowing her plans to be frustrated, and was only roused to fresh obstinacy by encountering indifference on one side and rebellion on the other. She had not brought Lucia up under her own eye for nothing. She had been disturbed of late, but by no means considered herself baffled. With the assistance of Mr. Dugald Binnie, she could certainly subdue Lucia, though Mr. Dugald Binnie had been of no great help so far.

She would do her duty unflinchingly. In fact, she chose to persuade herself, that, if Lucia was brought to a proper frame of mind, there could be no real trouble with Francis Barold.