

CHAPTER XXV.

"SOMEBODY ELSE."

But Barold did not make any very ardent search for Lucia. He stopped to watch a game of lawn-tennis, in which Octavia and Lord Lansdowne had joined, and finally forgot Lady Theobald's errand altogether.

For some time Octavia did not see him. She was playing with great spirit, and Lord Lansdowne was following her delightedly.

Finally a chance of the game bringing her to him, she turned suddenly, and found Barold's eyes fixed upon her.

"How long have you been there?" she asked.

"Some time," he answered. "When you are at liberty, I wish to speak to you."

"Do you?" she said.

She seemed a little unprepared for the repressed energy of his manner, which, he strove to cover by a greater amount of coldness than usual.

"Well," she said, after thinking a moment, "the game will soon be ended."

I am going through the conservatories with Lord Lansdowne in course of time; but I dare say he can wait."

She went back, and finished her game, apparently enjoying it as much as ever. When it was over, Barold made his way to her.

He had resented her remaining oblivious of his presence when he stood near her, and he had resented her enjoyment of her surroundings; and now, as he led her away, leaving Lord Lansdowne rather disconsolate, he resented the fact that she did not seem nervous, or at all impressed by his silence.

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked. "Let us go and sit down in one of the arbors. I believe I am a little tired--not that I mind it, though. I've been having a lovely time."

Then she began to talk about Lord Lansdowne.

"I like him ever so much," she said. "Do you think he will really go to America? I wish he would; but if he does, I hope it won't be for a year or so--I mean, until we go back from Europe. Still, it's rather uncertain when we shall go back. Did I tell you I had persuaded aunt Belinda to travel with us? She's horribly frightened, but I mean to make her go. She'll get over being frightened after a little while."

Suddenly she turned, and looked at him.

"Why don't you say something?" she demanded. "What's the matter?"

"It is not necessary for me to say any thing."

She laughed.

"Do you mean because I am saying every thing myself? Well, I suppose I am. I am--awfully happy to-day, and can't help talking. It seems to make the time go."

Her face had lighted up curiously. There was a delighted excitement in her eyes, puzzling him.

"Are you so fond of your father as all that?"

She laughed again,--a clear, exultant laugh.

"Yes," she answered, "of course I am as fond of him as all that. It's quite natural, isn't it?"

"I haven't observed the same degree of enthusiasm in all the young ladies of my acquaintance," he returned dryly.

He thought such rapture disproportionate to the cause, and regarded it grudgingly.

They turned into an arbor; and Octavia sat down, and leaned forward on the rustic table. Then she turned her face up to look at the vines covering the roof.

"It looks rather spidery, doesn't it?" she remarked. "I hope it isn't; don't you?"

The light fell bewitchingly on her round little chin and white throat; and a bar of sunlight struck on her upturned eyes, and the blonde rings on her forehead.

"There is nothing I hate more than spiders," she said, with a little shiver, "unless," seriously, "it's caterpillars--and caterpillars I loathe."

Then she lowered her gaze, and gave her hat--a large white Rubens, all soft, curling feathers and satin bows--a charming tip over her eyes.

"The brim is broad," she said. "If any thing drops, I hope it will drop on it, instead of on me. Now, what did you want to say?" He had not sat down, but stood leaning against the rustic wood-work. He looked pale, and was evidently trying to be cooler than usual.

"I brought you here to ask you a question."

"Well," she remarked, "I hope it's an important one. You look serious enough."

"It is important,--rather," he responded, with a tone of sarcasm. "You will probably go away soon?"

"That isn't exactly a question," she commented, "and it's not as important to you as to me."

He paused a moment, annoyed because he found it difficult to go on; annoyed because she waited with such undisturbed serenity. But at length he managed to begin again.

"I do not think you are expecting the question I am going to ask," he said. "I--do not think I expected to ask it myself,--until to-day. I do not know why--why I should ask it so awkwardly, and feel--at such a disadvantage. I brought you here to ask you--to marry me."

He had scarcely spoken four words before all her airy manner had taken flight, and she had settled herself down to listen. He had noticed this, and had felt it quite natural. When he stopped, she was looking straight into his face. Her eyes were singularly large and bright and clear.

"You did not expect to ask me to marry you?" she said. "Why didn't you?"

It was not at all what he had expected. He did not understand her manner

at all.

"I--must confess," he said stiffly, "that I felt at first that there were--obstacles in the way of my doing so."

"What were the obstacles?"

He flushed, and drew himself up.

"I have been unfortunate in my mode of expressing myself," he said. "I told you I was conscious of my own awkwardness."

"Yes," she said quietly: "you have been unfortunate. That is a good way of putting it."

Then she let her eyes rest on the table a few seconds, and thought a little.

"After all," she said, "I have the consolation of knowing that you must have been very much in love with me. If you had not been very much in love with me, you would never have asked me to marry you. You would have considered the obstacles."

"I am very much in love with you," he said vehemently, his feelings getting the better of his pride for once. "However badly I may have expressed myself, I am very much in love with you. I have been wretched

for days."

"Was it because you felt obliged to ask me to marry you?" she inquired.

The delicate touch of spirit in her tone and words fired him to fresh admiration, strange to say. It suggested to him possibilities he had not suspected hitherto. He drew nearer to her.

"Don't be too severe on me," he said--quite humbly, considering all things.

And he stretched out his hand, as if to take hers.

But she drew it back, smiling ever so faintly.

"Do you think I don't know what the obstacles are?" she said. "I will tell you."

"My affection was strong enough to sweep them away," he said, "or I should not be here."

She smiled slightly again.

"I know all about them, as well as you do," she said. "I rather laughed at them at first, but I don't now. I suppose I'm 'impressed by their seriousness,' as aunt Belinda says. I suppose they are pretty

serious--to you."

"Nothing would be so serious to me as that you should let them interfere with my happiness," he answered, thrown back upon himself, and bewildered by her logical manner. "Let us forget them. I was a fool to speak as I did. Won't you answer my question?"

She paused a second, and then answered,--

"You didn't expect to ask me to marry you," she said. "And I didn't expect you to"--

"But now"--he broke in impatiently.

"Now--I wish you hadn't done it."

"You wish"--

"You don't want me," she said. "You want somebody meeker,--somebody who would respect you very much, and obey you. I'm not used to obeying people."

"Do you mean also that you would not respect me?" he inquired bitterly.

"Oh," she replied, "you haven't respected me much!"



"Excuse me"--he began, in his loftiest manner.

"You didn't respect me enough to think me worth marrying," she said. "I was not the kind of girl you would have chosen of your own will."

"You are treating me unfairly!" he cried.

"You were going to give me a great deal, I suppose--looking at it in your way," she went on; "but, if I wasn't exactly what you wanted, I had something to give too. I'm young enough to have a good many years to live; and I should have to live them with you, if I married you. That's something, you know."

He rose from his seat pale with wrath and wounded feeling.

"Does this mean that you refuse me?" he demanded, "that your answer is 'no'?"

She rose, too--not exultant, not confused, neither pale nor flushed. He had never seen her prettier, more charming, or more natural.

"It would have been 'no,' even if there hadn't been any obstacle," she answered.

"Then," he said, "I need say no more. I see that I have--humiliated

myself in vain; and it is rather bitter, I must confess."

"It wasn't my fault," she remarked.

He stepped back, with a haughty wave of the hand, signifying that she should pass out of the arbor before him.

She did so; but just as she reached the entrance, she turned, and stood for a second, framed in by the swinging vines and their blossoms.

"There's another reason why it should be 'no,'" she said. "I suppose I may as well tell you of it. I'm engaged to somebody else."