

A FAIR BARBARIAN

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A FAIR BARBARIAN.

CHAPTER I.

MISS OCTAVIA BASSETT.

Slowbridge had been shaken to its foundations.

It may as well be explained, however, at the outset, that it would not take much of a sensation to give Slowbridge a great shock. In the first place, Slowbridge was not used to sensations, and was used to going on the even and respectable tenor of its way, regarding the outside world with private distrust, if not with open disfavor. The new mills had been a trial to Slowbridge,—a sore trial. On being told of the owners' plan of building them, old Lady Theobald, who was the corner-stone of the social edifice of Slowbridge, was said, by a spectator, to have turned deathly pale with rage; and, on the first day of their being opened in working order, she had taken to her bed, and remained shut up in her darkened room for a week, refusing to see anybody, and even going so far as to send a scathing message to the curate of St. James, who called in fear and trembling, because he was afraid to stay away.

"With mills and mill-hands," her ladyship announced to Mr. Laurence, the mill-owner, when chance first threw them together, "with mills and mill-hands come murder, massacre, and mob law." And she said it so loud, and with so stern an air of conviction, that the two Misses Briarton, who were of a timorous and fearful nature, dropped their buttered muffins (it was at one of the tea-parties which were Slowbridge's only dissipation), and shuddered hysterically, feeling that their fate was sealed, and that they might, any night, find three masculine mill-hands secreted under their beds, with bludgeons. But as no massacres took place, and the mill-hands were pretty regular in their habits, and even went so far as to send their children to Lady Theobald's free school, and accepted the tracts left weekly at their doors, whether they could read or not, Slowbridge gradually recovered from the shock of finding itself forced to exist in close proximity to mills, and was just settling itself to sleep—the sleep of the just—again, when, as I have said, it was shaken to its foundations.

It was Miss Belinda Bassett who received the first shock. Miss Belinda Bassett was a decorous little maiden lady, who lived in a decorous little house on High Street (which was considered a very genteel street in Slowbridge). She had lived in the same house all her life, her father had lived in it, and so also had her grandfather. She had gone out, to take tea, from its doors two or three times a week, ever since she had been twenty;

and she had had her little tea-parties in its front parlor as often as any other genteel Slowbridge entertainer. She had risen at seven, breakfasted at eight, dined at two, taken tea at five, and gone to bed at ten, with such regularity for fifty years, that to rise at eight, breakfast at nine, dine at three, and take tea at six, and go to bed at eleven, would, she was firmly convinced, be but "to fly in the face of Providence," as she put it, and sign her own death-warrant. Consequently, it is easy to imagine what a tremor and excitement seized her when, one afternoon, as she sat waiting for her tea, a coach from the Blue Lion dashed—or, at least, *almost* dashed—up to the front door, a young lady got out, and the next minute the handmaiden, Mary Anne, threw open the door of the parlor, announcing, without the least preface,—

"Your niece, mum, from 'Meriker."

Miss Belinda got up, feeling that her knees really trembled beneath her.

In Slowbridge, America was not approved of—in fact, was almost entirely ignored, as a country where, to quote Lady Theobald, "the laws were loose, and the prevailing sentiments revolutionary." It was not considered good taste to know Americans,—which was not unfortunate, as there were none to know; and Miss Belinda Bassett had always felt a delicacy in mentioning her only brother, who had emigrated to the United States in his youth, having first disgraced himself by the utterance of the blasphemous remark that "he wanted to get to a place where a fellow could stretch himself, and not be bullied by a lot of old tabbies." From the day of his departure, when he had left Miss Belinda bathed in tears of anguish, she had heard nothing of him; and here upon the threshold stood Mary Anne, with delighted eagerness in her countenance, repeating,—

"Your niece, mum, from 'Meriker!"

And, with the words, her niece entered.

Miss Belinda put her hand to her heart.

The young lady thus announced was the prettiest, and at the same time the most extraordinary-looking, young lady she had ever seen in her life. Slowbridge contained nothing approaching this niece. Her dress was so very stylish that it was quite startling in its effect; her forehead was covered down to her large, pretty eyes themselves, with curls of yellow-brown hair; and her slender throat was swathed round and round with a grand scarf of black lace.

She made a step forward, and then stopped, looking at Miss Belinda. Her eyes suddenly, to Miss Belinda's amazement, filled with tears.

"Didn't you," she said,— "oh, dear! *Didn't* you get the letter?"

"The—the letter!" faltered Miss Belinda. "What letter, my—my dear?"

"Pa's," was the answer. "Oh! I see you didn't."

And she sank into the nearest chair, putting her hands up to her face, and beginning to cry outright.

"I—am Octavia B-bassett," she said. "We were coming to surp-prise you, and travel in Europe; but the mines went wrong, and p-pa was obliged to go back to Nevada."

"The mines?" gasped Miss Belinda.

"S-silver-mines," wept Octavia. "And we had scarcely landed when Piper cabled, and pa had to turn back. It was something about shares, and he may have lost his last dollar."

Miss Belinda sank into a chair herself.

"Mary Anne," she said faintly, "bring me a glass of water."

Her tone was such that Octavia removed her handkerchief from her eyes, and sat up to examine her.

"Are you frightened?" she asked, in some alarm.

Miss Belinda took a sip of the water brought by her handmaiden, replaced the glass upon the salver, and shook her head deprecatingly.

"Not exactly frightened, my dear," she said, "but so amazed that I find it difficult to—to collect myself."

Octavia put up her handkerchief again to wipe away a sudden new gush of tears.

"If shares intended to go down," she said, "I don't see why they couldn't go down before we started, instead of waiting until we got over here, and then spoiling every thing."

"Providence, my dear"—began Miss Belinda.

But she was interrupted by the re-entrance of Mary Anne.

"The man from the Lion, mum, wants to know what's to be done with the trunks. There's six of 'em, an' they're all that 'eavy as he says he wouldn't lift one alone for ten shilling."

"Six!" exclaimed Miss Belinda. "Whose are they?"

"Mine," replied Octavia. "Wait a minute. I'll go out to him."

Miss Belinda was astounded afresh by the alacrity with which her niece seemed to forget her troubles, and rise to the occasion. The girl ran to the front door as if she was quite used to directing her own affairs, and began to issue her orders.

"You will have to get another man," she said. "You might have known that. Go and get one somewhere."

And when the man went off, grumbling a little, and evidently rather at a loss before such peremptory coolness, she turned to Miss Belinda.

"Where must he put them?" she asked.

It did not seem to have occurred to her once that her identity might be doubted, and some slight obstacles arise before her.

"I am afraid," faltered Miss Belinda, "that five of them will have to be put in the attic."

And in fifteen minutes five of them *were* put into the attic, and the sixth—the biggest of all—stood in the trim little spare chamber, and pretty Miss Octavia had sunk into a puffy little chintz-covered easy-chair, while her newly found relative stood before her, making the most laudable efforts to recover her equilibrium, and not to feel as if her head were spinning round and round.

CHAPTER II.

"AN INVESTMENT, ANYWAY."

The natural result of these efforts was, that Miss Belinda was moved to shed a few tears.

"I hope you will excuse my being too startled to say I was glad to see you," she said. "I have not seen my brother for thirty years, and I was very fond of him."

"He said you were," answered Octavia; "and he was very fond of you too. He didn't write to you, because he made up his mind not to let you hear from him until he was a rich man; and then he thought he would wait until he could come home, and surprise you. He was awfully disappointed when he had to go back without seeing you."

"Poor, dear Martin!" wept Miss Belinda gently. "Such a journey!"

Octavia opened her charming eyes in surprise.

"Oh, he'll come back again!" she said. "And he doesn't mind the journey. The journey is nothing, you know."

"Nothing!" echoed Miss Belinda. "A voyage across the Atlantic nothing? When one thinks of the danger, my dear"—

Octavia's eyes opened a shade wider.

"We have made the trip to the States, across the Isthmus, twelve times, and that takes a month," she remarked. "So we don't think ten days much."

"Twelve times!" said Miss Belinda, quite appalled. "Dear, dear, dear!"

And for some moments she could do nothing but look at her young relative in doubtful wonder, shaking her head with actual sadness.

But she finally recovered herself, with a little start.

"What am I thinking of," she exclaimed remorsefully, "to let you sit here in this way? Pray excuse me, my dear. You see I am so upset."

She left her chair in a great hurry, and proceeded to embrace her young guest tenderly, though with a little timorousness. The young lady submitted to the caress with much composure.

"Did I upset you?" she inquired calmly.

The fact was, that she could not see why the simple advent of a relative from Nevada should seem to have the effect of an earthquake, and result in tremor, confusion, and tears. It was true, she herself had shed a tear or so, but then her troubles had been accumulating for several days; and she had not felt confused yet.

When Miss Belinda went down-stairs to superintend Mary Anne in the tea-making, and left her guest alone, that young person glanced about her with a rather dubious expression.

"It is a queer, nice little place," she said. "But I don't wonder that pa emigrated, if they always get into such a flurry about little things. I might have been a ghost."

Then she proceeded to unlock the big trunk, and attire herself.

Down-stairs, Miss Belinda was wavering between the kitchen and the parlor, in a kindly flutter.

"Toast some muffins, Mary Anne, and bring in the cold roast fowl," she said. "And I will put out some strawberry-jam, and some of the preserved ginger. Dear me! Just to think how fond of preserved ginger poor Martin was, and how little of it he was allowed to eat! There really seems a special Providence in my having such a nice stock of it in the house when his daughter comes home."

In the course of half an hour every thing was in readiness; and then Mary Anne, who had been sent up-stairs to announce the fact, came down in a most remarkable state of delighted agitation, suppressed ecstasy and amazement exclaiming aloud in every feature.

"She's dressed, mum," she announced, "an' 'll be down immediate," and retired to a shadowy corner of the kitchen passage, that she might lie in wait unobserved.

Miss Belinda, sitting behind the tea-service, heard a soft, flowing, silken rustle sweeping down the staircase, and across the hall, and then her niece entered.

"Don't you think I've dressed pretty quick?" she said, and swept across the little parlor, and sat down in her place, with the calmest and most unconscious air in the world.

There was in Slowbridge but one dressmaking establishment. The head of the establishment—Miss Letitia Chickie—designed the costumes of every woman in Slowbridge, from Lady Theobald down. There were legends that she received her patterns from London, and modified them to suit the Slowbridge taste. Possibly this was true; but in that case her labors as modifier must have been severe indeed, since they were so far modified as to be altogether unrecognizable when they left Miss Chickie's establishment, and were borne home in triumph to the houses of her patrons. The taste of Slowbridge was quiet,—upon this Slowbridge prided itself especially,—and, at the same time, tended toward economy. When gores came into fashion, Slowbridge clung firmly, and with some pride, to substantial breadths, which did not cut good silk into useless strips which could not be utilized in after-time; and it was only when, after a visit to London, Lady Theobald walked into St. James's one Sunday with two gores on each side, that Miss Chickie regretfully put scissors into her first breadth. Each matronly member of good society possessed a substantial silk gown of some sober color, which gown, having done duty at two years' tea-parties, descended to the grade of "second-best," and so descended, year by year, until it disappeared into the dim distance of the past. The young ladies had their white muslins and natural flowers; which latter decorations invariably collapsed in the course of the evening, and were worn during the latter half of any festive occasion in a flabby and hopeless condition. Miss Chickie made the muslins, festooning and adorning them after designs emanating from her fertile imagination. If they were a little short in the body, and not very generously proportioned in the matter of train, there was no rival establishment to sneer, and Miss Chickie had it all her own way; and, at least, it could never be said that Slowbridge was vulgar or overdressed.

Judge, then, of Miss Belinda Bassett's condition of mind when her fair relative took her seat before her.

What the material of her niece's dress was, Miss Belinda could not have told. It was a silken and soft fabric of a pale blue color; it clung to the slender, lissome young figure like a glove; a fan-like train of great length almost covered the hearth-rug; there were plaitings and frillings all over it, and yards of delicate satin ribbon cut into loops in the most recklessly extravagant manner.

Miss Belinda saw all this at the first glance, as Mary Anne had seen it, and, like Mary Anne, lost her breath; but, on her second glance, she saw something more. On the pretty, slight hands were three wonderful, sparkling rings, composed of diamonds set in clusters: there were great solitaires in the neat little ears, and the thickly-plaited lace at the throat was fastened by a diamond clasp.

"My dear," said Miss Belinda, clutching helplessly at the teapot, "are you—surely it is a—a little dangerous to wear such—such priceless ornaments on ordinary occasions."

Octavia stared at her for a moment uncomprehendingly.

"Your jewels, I mean, my love," fluttered Miss Belinda. "Surely you don't wear them often. I declare, it quite frightens me to think of having such things in the house."

"Does it?" said Octavia. "That's queer."

And she looked puzzled for a moment again.

Then she glanced down at her rings.

"I nearly always wear these," she remarked. "Father gave them to me. He gave me one each birthday for three years. He says diamonds are an investment, anyway, and I might as well have them. These," touching the ear-rings and clasp, "were given to my mother when she was on the stage. A lot of people clubbed together, and bought them for her. She was a great favorite."

Miss Belinda made another clutch at the handle of the teapot.

"Your mother!" she exclaimed faintly. "On the—did you say, on the"—

"Stage," answered Octavia. "San Francisco. Father married her there. She was awfully pretty. I don't remember her. She died when I was born. She was only nineteen."

The utter calmness, and freedom from embarrassment, with which these announcements were made, almost shook Miss Belinda's faith in her own identity. Strange to say, until this moment she had scarcely given a thought to her brother's wife; and to find herself sitting in her own genteel little parlor, behind her own tea-service, with her hand upon her own teapot, hearing that this wife had been a young person who had been "a great favorite" upon the stage, in a region peopled, as she had been led to suppose, by gold-diggers and escaped convicts, was almost too much for

her to support herself under. But she did support herself bravely, when she had time to rally.

"Help yourself to some fowl, my dear," she said hospitably, even though very faintly indeed, "and take a muffin."

Octavia did so, her over-splendid hands flashing in the light as she moved them.

"American girls always have more things than English girls," she observed, with admirable coolness. "They dress more. I have been told so by girls who have been in Europe. And I have more things than most American girls. Father had more money than most people; that was one reason; and he spoiled me, I suppose. He had no one else to give things to, and he said I should have every thing I took a fancy to. He often laughed at me for buying things, but he never said I shouldn't buy them."

"He was always generous," sighed Miss Belinda. "Poor, dear Martin!"

Octavia scarcely entered into the spirit of this mournful sympathy. She was fond of her father, but her recollections of him were not pathetic or sentimental.

"He took me with him wherever he went," she proceeded. "And we had a teacher from the States, who travelled with us sometimes. He never sent me away from him. I wouldn't have gone if he had wanted to send me—and he didn't want to," she added, with a satisfied little laugh.

CHAPTER III.

L'ARGENTVILLE.

Miss Belinda sat, looking at her niece, with a sense of being at once stunned and fascinated. To see a creature so young, so pretty, so luxuriously splendid, and at the same time so simply and completely at ease with herself and her surroundings, was a revelation quite beyond her comprehension. The best-bred and nicest girls Slowbridge could produce were apt to look a trifle conscious and timid when they found themselves attired in the white muslin and floral decorations; but this slender creature sat in her gorgeous attire, her train flowing over the modest carpet, her rings flashing, her ear-pendants twinkling, apparently entirely oblivious of, or indifferent to, the fact that all her belongings were sufficiently out of place to be startling beyond measure.

Her chief characteristic, however, seemed to be her excessive frankness. She did not hesitate at all to make the most remarkable statements concerning her own and her father's past career. She made them, too, as if there was nothing unusual about them. Twice, in her childhood, a luckless speculation had left her father penniless; and once he had taken her to a Californian gold-diggers' camp, where she had been the only female member of the somewhat reckless community.

"But they were pretty good-natured, and made a pet of me," she said; "and we did not stay very long. Father had a stroke of luck, and we went away. I was sorry when we had to go, and so were the men. They made me a present of a set of jewelry made out of the gold they had got themselves. There is a breastpin like a breastplate, and a necklace like a dog-collar: the bracelets tire my arms, and the ear-rings pull my ears; but I wear them sometimes—gold girdle and all."

"Did I," inquired Miss Belinda timidly, "did I understand you to say, my dear, that your father's business was in some way connected with silver-mining?"

"It *is* silver-mining," was the response. "He owns some mines, you know"—

"Owns?" said Miss Belinda, much fluttered; "owns some silver-mines? He must be a very rich man,—a very rich man. I declare, it quite takes my breath away."

"Oh! he is rich," said Octavia; "awfully rich sometimes. And then again he isn't. Shares go up, you know; and then they go down, and you don't seem to have any thing. But father generally comes out right, because he is lucky, and knows how to manage."

"But—but how uncertain!" gasped Miss Belinda: "I should be perfectly miserable. Poor, dear Mar"—

"Oh, no, you wouldn't!" said Octavia: "you'd get used to it, and wouldn't mind much, particularly if you were lucky as father is. There is every thing in being lucky, and knowing how to manage. When we first went to Bloody Gulch"—

"My dear!" cried Miss Belinda, aghast. "I—I beg of you"—

Octavia stopped short: she gazed at Miss Belinda in bewilderment, as she had done several times before.

"Is any thing the matter?" she inquired placidly.

"My dear love," explained Miss Belinda innocently, determined at least to do her duty, "it is not customary in—in Slowbridge,—in fact, I think I may say in England,—to use such—such exceedingly—I don't want to wound your feelings, my dear,—but such exceedingly strong expressions! I refer, my dear, to the one which began with a B. It is really considered profane, as well as dreadful beyond measure."

"The one which began with a B," repeated Octavia, still staring at her. "That is the name of a place; but I didn't name it, you know. It was called that, in the first place, because a party of men were surprised and murdered there, while they were asleep in their camp at night. It isn't a very nice name, of course, but I'm not responsible for it; and besides, now the place is growing, they are going to call it Athens or Magnolia Vale. They tried L'Argentville for a while; but people would call it Lodginville, and nobody liked it."

"I trust you never lived there," said Miss Belinda. "I beg your pardon for being so horrified, but I really could not refrain from starting when you spoke; and I cannot help hoping you never lived there."

"I live there now, when I am at home," Octavia replied. "The mines are there; and father has built a house, and had the furniture brought on from New York."

Miss Belinda tried not to shudder, but almost failed.

"Won't you take another muffin, my love?" she said, with a sigh. "Do take another muffin."

"No, thank you," answered Octavia; and it must be confessed that she looked a little bored, as she leaned back in her chair, and glanced down at the train of her dress. It seemed to her that her simplest statement or remark created a sensation.

Having at last risen from the tea-table, she wandered to the window, and stood there, looking out at Miss Belinda's flower-garden. It was quite a pretty flower-garden, and a good-sized one considering the dimensions of the house. There were an oval grass-plot, divers gravel paths, heart and diamond shaped beds aglow with brilliant annuals, a great many rose-bushes, several laburnums and lilacs, and a trim hedge of holly surrounding it.

"I think I should like to go out and walk around there," remarked Octavia, smothering a little yawn behind her hand. "Suppose we go—if you don't care."

"Certainly, my dear," assented Miss Belinda. "But perhaps," with a delicately dubious glance at her attire, "you would like to make some little alteration in your dress—to put something a little—dark over it."

Octavia glanced down also.

"Oh, no!" she replied: "it will do well enough. I will throw a scarf over my head, though; not because I need it," unblushingly, "but because I have a lace one that is very becoming."

She went up to her room for the article in question, and in three minutes was down again. When she first caught sight of her, Miss Belinda found herself obliged to clear her throat quite suddenly. What Slowbridge would think of seeing such a toilet in her front garden, upon an ordinary occasion, she could not imagine. The scarf truly was becoming. It was a long affair of rich white lace, and was thrown over the girl's head, wound around her throat, and the ends tossed over her shoulders, with the most picturesque air of carelessness in the world.

"You look quite like a bride, my dear Octavia," said Miss Belinda. "We are scarcely used to such things in Slowbridge."

But Octavia only laughed a little.

"I am going to get some pink roses, and fasten the ends with them, when we get into the garden," she said.

She stopped for this purpose at the first rose-bush they reached. She gathered half a dozen slender-stemmed, heavy-headed buds, and, having fastened the lace with some, was carelessly placing the rest at her waist, when Miss Belinda started violently.

CHAPTER IV.

LADY THEOBALD.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed nervously, "there is Lady Theobald."

Lady Theobald, having been making calls of state, was returning home rather later than usual, when, in driving up High Street, her eye fell upon Miss Bassett's garden. She put up her eyeglasses, and gazed through them severely; then she issued a mandate to her coachman.

"Dobson," she said, "drive more slowly."

She could not believe the evidence of her own eyeglasses. In Miss Bassett's garden she saw a tall girl, "dressed," as she put it, "like an actress," her delicate dress trailing upon the grass, a white lace scarf about her head and shoulders, roses in that scarf, roses at her waist.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed: "is Belinda Bassett giving a party, without so much as mentioning it to *me*?"

Then she issued another mandate.

"Dobson," she said, "drive faster, and drive me to Miss Bassett's."

Miss Belinda came out to the gate to meet her, quaking inwardly. Octavia simply turned slightly where she stood, and looked at her ladyship, without any pretence of concealing her curiosity.

Lady Theobald bent forward in her landau.

"Belinda," she said, "how do you do? I did not know you intended to introduce garden-parties into Slowbridge."

"Dear Lady Theobald"—began Miss Belinda.

"Who is that young person?" demanded her ladyship.

"She is poor dear Martin's daughter," answered Miss Belinda. "She arrived to-day—from Nevada, where—where it appears Martin has been very fortunate, and owns a great many silver-mines"—

"A 'great many' silver-mines!" cried Lady Theobald. "Are you mad, Belinda Bassett? I am ashamed of you. At your time of life too!"

Miss Belinda almost shed tears.

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