



"I wonder if the sap is stirring yet,
If wintry birds are dreaming of a mate,
If frozen snowdrops feel as yet the sun,
And crocus fires are kindling one by one?"

Sing, Robin, sing!
I still am sore in doubt concerning
spring."
—Rossetti.

A FAIR BARBARIAN.

BY FRANCIS HOLGSON BIRNIE.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

"I must admit," he replied, "that they don't. In the first place, you know, they haven't any; and, in the second, I am under the impression that Lady Beauchamp—their mamma, you know—wouldn't permit it if they had."

"Wouldn't permit it!" said Octavia. "I suppose they always do as she tells them?"

He smiled a little.

"They would be very courageous young women if they didn't," he remarked.

"What would she do if they tried it?" she inquired. "She couldn't beat them."

"They will never try it," he answered dryly. "And though I have never seen her beat them, or heard their lamentations under chastisement, I should not like to say that Lady Beauchamp could not do anything. She is a very determined person—for a gentlewoman."

Octavia laughed.

"You are joking," she said.

"Lady Beauchamp is a serious subject for jokes," he responded. "My cousins think so, at least."

"I wonder if she is as bad as Lady Theobald," Octavia reflected aloud. "She says I have no right to wear diamonds at all until I am married. But I don't mind Lady Theobald," she added, as a cheerful afterthought. "I am not fond enough of her to care about what she says."

"Are you fond of anyone?" Barold inquired, speaking with a languid air, but at the same time glancing at her with some slight interest from under his eyelids.

"Lucia says I am," she returned, with the calmness of a young person who wished to regard the matter from an unembarrassed point of view. "Lucia says I am affectionate."

"Ah!" deliberately. "Are you?" She turned and looked at him serenely.

"Should you think so?" she asked. This was making such a personal matter of the question, that he did not exactly enjoy it. It was certainly not "good form" to pull a man up in such cool style.

"Really," he replied, "I—ah—have had no opportunity of judging."

He had not the slightest intention of being amusing, but to his infinite disgust he discovered as soon as he spoke that she was amused. She laughed outright, and evidently only checked herself because he looked so furious. In consideration for his feelings she assumed an air of mild but preternatural seriousness.

"No," she remarked, "that is true: you haven't, of course."

He was silent. He did not enjoy being amused at all, and he made no pretence of appearing to submit to the indignity calmly.

She bent forward a little.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you are mad again—I mean, you are vexed. I am always vexing you."

There was a hint of appeal in her voice, which rather pleased him; but he had no intention of relenting at once.

"I confess I am at a loss to know why you laughed," he said.

"Are you," she asked, "really?" letting her eyes rest upon him anxiously for a moment. Then she actually gave vent to a little sigh. "We look at things so differently, that's it," she said. "I suppose it is," he responded, still chillingly.

In spite of this, she suddenly assumed a comparatively cheerful aspect. A happy thought occurred to her.

"Lucia would beg your pardon," she said. "I am learning good manners from Lucia. Suppose I beg your pardon."

"It is quite unnecessary," he replied.

"Lucia wouldn't think so," she said. "And why shouldn't I be as well-behaved as Lucia? I beg your pardon."

He felt rather absurd, and yet somewhat mollified. She had a way of looking at him, sometimes, when she had been unpleasant, which rather soothed him. In fact, he had found of late, a little to his private annoyance, that it was very easy for her either to soothe or disturb him.

And now, just as Octavia had settled down into one of the prettiest and least difficult of her moods, there came a knock at the front door, which, being answered by Mary Anne, was found to announce the curate of St. James.

Enter, consequently, the Rev. Arthur Poppleton,—blushing, a trifle timorous perhaps, but happy beyond measure to find himself in Miss Belinda's parlor again, with Miss Belinda's niece.

Perhaps the least possible shade of his joyousness died out when he caught sight of Mr. Francis Barold, and certainly Mr. Francis Barold was not at all delighted to see him.

"What does the fellow want?" that gentleman was saying inwardly. "What does he come simpering and turning pink here for? Why doesn't he go and see some of his old women, and read tracts to them? That's his business."

Octavia's manner toward her visitor formed a fresh grievance for Barold. She treated the curate very well indeed. She seemed glad to see him, she was wholly at her ease with him, she made no trying remarks to him, she never stopped to fix her eyes upon him in that inexplicable style, and she did not laugh when there seemed nothing to laugh at. She was so gay and good-humored that the Rev. Arthur Poppleton beamed and flourished under her treatment, and forgot to change color, and even ventured to talk a good deal, and make divers quite presentable little jokes.

"I should like to know," thought Barold, growing sulkier as the others grew merrier,— "I should like to know what she finds so interesting in him, and why she chooses to treat him better than she treats me; for she certainly does treat him better."

It was hardly fair, however, that he should complain; for, at times, he was treated extremely well, and his intimacy with Octavia progressed quite rapidly. Perhaps, if the truth were told, it was always himself who was the first means of checking it, by some suddenly prudent instinct which led him to feel that perhaps he was in rather a delicate position, and had better not indulge in too much of a good thing. He had not been an eligible and unimpeachable desirable parti for ten years without acquiring some of that discretion which is said to be the better part of valor. The matter-of-fact air with which Octavia accepted his attentions caused him to pull himself up sometimes. If he had been Brown,

or Jones, or even Robinson, she could not have appeared to regard them as more entirely natural. When—he had gone so far, once or twice—he had deigned to make a more than usually agreeable speech to her, it was received with none of that charming sensitive tremor to which he was accustomed. Octavia neither blushed nor dropped her eyes.

It did not add to Barold's satisfaction to find her as cheerful and ready to be amused by a mild little curate, who blushed and stammered, and was neither brilliant, graceful nor distinguished. Could not Octavia see the wide difference between the two?

Regarding the matter in this light, and watching Octavia as she encouraged her visitor, and laughed at his jokes, and never once tripped him up by asking him a startling question, did not, as already has been said, improve Mr. Francis Barold's temper; and by the time his visit was over, he had lapsed into his coldest and most haughty manner. As soon as Miss Belinda entered, and engaged Mr. Poppleton for a moment, he rose, and crossed the little room to Octavia's side.

"I must bid you good-afternoon," he said.

Octavia did not rise.

"Sit down a minute, while aunt Belinda is talking about red-fannel night-caps and lumbago," she said. "I wanted to ask you something. By the way, what is lumbago?"

"Is that what you wished to ask me?" he inquired stily.

"No. I just thought of that. Have you ever had it? and what is it like? All the old people in Slowbridge have it, and they tell you all about it when you go to see them. Aunt Belinda says so. What I wanted to ask you was different."

"Possibly Miss Bassett might be able to tell you," he remarked.

"About the lumbago? Well, perhaps she might. I'll ask her. Do you think it bad taste in me to wear diamonds?"

She said this with the most delightful seriousness, fixing her eyes upon him with her very prettiest look of candid appeal, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should apply to him for information. He felt himself faltering again. How white that bit of forehead was! How soft that blonde, waving fringe of hair! What a lovely shape her eyes were, and how large and clear as she raised them!

"Why do you ask me?" he inquired.

"Because I think you are an unprejudiced person. Lady Theobald is not. I have confidence in you. Tell me."

There was a slight pause.

"Really," he said, after it, "I can scarcely believe that my opinion can be of any value in your eyes. I am—can only tell you that it is hardly customary in—an—in England for young people to wear a profusion of ornament."

"I wonder if I wear a profusion."

"You don't need any," he condescended. "You are too young, and—all that sort of thing."

She glanced down at her slim, unringed hands for a moment, her expression quite thoughtful.

"Lucia and I almost quarrelled the other day," she said—"at least, I almost quarrelled. It isn't so nice to be told of things, after all. I must say I don't like it as much as I thought I should."

He kept his seat longer than he had intended; and when he rose to go, the Rev. Arthur Poppleton was shaking hands with Miss Belinda, and so it fell out that they left the house together.

(To be continued.)

Travelling Notes.

(By Mollie's Cousin Eleanor.)

To give Molly a rest this week, I am going to write for her a few of my Italian impressions. Having spent three weeks here in Florence, we are beginning to find our way about, and, so far, have escaped being run over by the wild Italian bicyclists and still wilder drivers. They seem to have no regard for human life, and I believe it is a fact if you are so unfortunate as to be run over you are subjected to a fine. We have had a glorious time here amid our wonderful historic surroundings, and we have been greatly favored by fine weather. Four wet days out of three weeks is not a bad record. The remaining have been beautifully sunny, and if the winds from the snowy Apennines have blown cold, besides the sheltering Arno a warm spot could always be found. The first week we spent very quietly, glad to bask in the glorious sunshine after the cold of Venice. Pleasant outings to the many charming surroundings occupied our afternoons. Once we took the electric car to Fiesole—a stiff climb, and very circuitous it was, but we were surprised at the speed with which we travelled. All the way up, most lovely views of the town, with the winding Arno, and behind the background of blue hills, greeted us, while around us in wild exuberance flourished olive groves and hedges of beautiful roses. At the summit of the hill on which Fiesole is situated is an old Dominican monastery. Here it was Fra Angelico, the wonderful angel painter, spent many of his early years, breathing in, among such sublime heights, the spirit of beauty and solemnity. Some histories this old town could tell, for it still has the remnants of a Roman amphitheatre, and hardly a famous Florentine but has been connected with it, be he priest, poet or statesman. On another occasion, we visited the Certosa Monastery, some three or four miles from Florence. It, again, had an elevated position, commanding extensive, lovely views on all sides. If the monks shut themselves off from vanities of the world, they did not exclude themselves from nature. The Certosa Monastery is now a kind of public museum, though it still retains seventeen monks, who are to remain there so long as they live. It was one of these white-robed priests who showed us over—a big, fine-looking man he was, too. We passed through the beautiful Greek chapel, with its fine paintings by Beuvennti and Cigoli, and in its crypt and side chapel saw some magnificent tombs in marble, carved by Donatello. One of these was erected to a knight, and he was depicted in marble, with all the details of his armour most magnificently chiselled. The sacristy walls and doors were wonderfully carved in a mixture of olive and walnut wood. If we went easily the first week, we have made up for our leisure during the last ten days. Galleries, palaces and churches have followed one on the heels of the other. Florence, if it possesses a great many beggars, poor and otherwise, is very rich in art treasures, and what great men it has produced, and how badly it has