

"Nay, I am rendering Miss Aleyn full justice now. Do you think, Nina, a six months sojourn among your native hills would impart to me your charming accent? Pray, enlighten me."

"It would be more charitable of Miss Aleyn to enlighten you a little on the duties of common politeness," interrupted Clinton, who, unable longer to restrain his deep indignation, suddenly confronted Florence, his dark eyes measuring her with angry contempt.

"When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war," whispered lord Manvers in high delight to his fair neighbour.

Florence, taken by surprise, for a moment quelled; but ere her enemies had time to rejoice over her discomfiture, she disdainfully rejoined:

"Perhaps, with Mr. Clinton's assistance, Miss Aleyn might succeed in doing so, but is it not necessary to learn a science ourselves before we undertake to teach it to others?"

"I do not know, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, for it strikes me you once professed to give me some lessons in benevolence and good breeding, which, if your own rule stands good, you would not have been able to do."

"Nay, Florence, 'tis useless to contend further with Miss Aleyn's champion," said Miss Westover, sarcastically. "In defending the cause of the lady of his choice, a gallant knight is sometimes tempted to forget the consideration he owes to the rest of the sex."

"I stand corrected, Miss Westover," returned Clinton, with a provoking bow of mock respect.

"In gratitude for the coveted title you have conferred on me, one which I deem it an honor to bear even in jest, I can overlook the somewhat sharp reprimand conveyed in your last words," and involuntarily he turned to Nina to read in her eyes the gratitude his truly generous speech deserved; but she had disappeared.

Miss Westover took advantage of the momentary cessation of hostilities to rise from her seat, and thus terminate an engagement in which Florence and herself were most certainly getting more than they gave. Anxious, eager to see Nina—to endeavour by his respect and sympathy to efface from her mind the cruel mockery of which she had so lately been the object, Clinton left the room to seek her, when the attention of the company who were one and all sincerely rejoiced at the discomfiture of the "wits," was diverted into other channels. Near the door he perceived lord St. Albans in careless conversation with the young duke of Hastings. On seeing Clinton the earl briefly apologized to his companion, and advanced towards him:

"Where are you going, Percival?"

"To seek Nina; but what is the matter?" he asked as he remarked the pale stern look of the speaker.

"I have heard all," was the brief but comprehensive reply. "Oh! Clinton, from my soul I envy you your happiness in having placed your affections on one like Nina Aleyn." The look of intense, unutterable suffering, which, despite his utmost efforts, suddenly convulsed his features, touched Clinton to the heart; but feeling the impotence of words at such a moment to impart consolation, he only pressed the hand of his friend, with a warmth and sincerity, however, which fully expressed his deep sympathy. In a moment St. Albans had recovered his outward composure, and after a few careless words in a louder key, he returned to his former companion, and Clinton entered on his search for Nina; but his pace was slower, for his thoughts were various and confused. The whole scene passed before him with vivid distinctness—the bitter mockery of Florence and her friend, and the calm unmoved composure of Nina, during a trial as bitter as any to which a young and shrinking girl could be subjected. The more he reflected on it, the more her singular calmness astonished him, and involuntarily he paused as he exclaimed half aloud:

"Can it be that Nina has no feeling—that this unnatural composure is but the type of a stultified, passionless insensibility? But this meeting will decide all—I will learn, now or never, if she is what my early fears sometimes represented her, or if indeed she is in all things worthy of my love." Involuntarily he quickened his pace, but his speed availed him little—the object of his search was not to be found.

"She must have gone to her own room," he murmured, as in deep disappointment he turned to retrace his steps, but in passing the door of a small sitting room, seldom occupied, a sound as of a stifled sob fell on his ear. Filled with renewed hope, he gently pushed aside the door and entered. There was neither lamp nor taper in the apartment; but the bright rays of the summer moon filled the whole chamber with its silvery light, and clearly revealed the figure of Nina, who was seated at the open window, her head bowed on her arms, and sobbing with low, though passionate energy. Filled with a strange delight at these tokens of girlish weakness, Clinton noiselessly approached, and for a moment surveyed her with feelings of mingled deep emotion. 'Twas a momentous question that agitated him then, and its result will soon be seen. Lightly he laid his hand on her arm, and with an exclamation of terror she looked up. On seeing it was him, her startled look fled; but suddenly conscious of