

"Guy, I want to speak to you," she said, whilst they were standing amongst a group of gaily-dressed guests, upon the hall steps, watching the bride and bridegroom depart. "Don't go directly, will you?"

"All right," in the brotherly tone that he always adopted to her, and which was not half as loverlike as she had known Jack's voice to be. But, rightly enough, Guy judged that to alarm her by any pressing forward of his own hopes and wishes would be but to hinder their fulfilment. "Come out into the garden. I declare there's enough rice scattered here to make ten puddings! I wish I'd had it for my poor people!"

"It would certainly have done more good, Mr. Ryder," laughed his hostess, who had overheard. "But see—I'll send you in quite a big bagful to-morrow, then you will think more leniently of our waste."

"You are very good," he answered, with a smile that lighted up his face, the smile that had more to do with his popularity than he perhaps guessed. "I am taking Miss Brookes to inspect the roses."

"Then please don't. Why, my dear Stella, ours are rubbish—mere rubbish to the Kingston Villa display."

To which protest Stella only replied by a nod over her shoulder, and a merry laugh. She knew that Mrs. Stanley's gardens were well worth seeing. Added to which, she cared not at all, at the present moment, whether they were so or not. All that she wanted was a quiet word with Jack's old chum. But not yet were she and her escort to escape.

Down the centre of the path leading from the rose beds another pair were advancing, a pair who served certainly as a most perfect contrast each to the other. For the lady, short, stout, and speaking in a loud and dictatorial voice, was old, and dressed, besides, in a manner that emphasised not only her age, but the redness of her complexion, and all the indescribable vulgarities of her appearance; whilst the man, who was stooping to listen to her, displaying a flattering air of deep attention, was tall and well dressed, with a pale face and clearly-cut features, which accorded well with his somewhat languid and careless movements.

"Mrs. Brookes and her friend," laughed Guy, though, as a matter of fact, he felt in anything but a laughing humour. Thus to be hindered at every step when

he was longing to ascertain what Stella had to say was too provoking.

"If only we had gone the other way," sighed the step-daughter undutifully. "But now——" she had not time to finish the sentence.

"Ah, Stella! and where have you been idling, I should like to be informed? 'Ere 'ave Mr. Clive and I bin 'unting for you 'everywhere!"

From which lavish displacement of aspirates Miss Brookes understood at once that wrath was brewing. The lady was not at all times equally original.

"Only in the drawing-room and the hall, mother," she answered, so quietly that Guy was conscious of a strong desire that she would be less meek. "Do you want me?"

"Not I, indeed!" with a toss of her iron-grey head that sent her flower-bedecked bonnet a good inch out of the perpendicular. "But Mr. Clive has been saying 'ow much 'e should like to show you the La France roses. Weren't you?" turning a much more elaborate smile upon the gentleman than that usually accorded to anybody else. But Guy replied, whilst the other was still fidgeting with his eyeglass,—

"Ah! We are on our way now. But Mrs. Stanley assures us that her roses do not at all equal yours, Mrs. Brookes."

"She hasn't a Debarr," purred the lady, pacified for an instant by the compliment. Then adroitly readdressing herself to the charge, "But it's lucky we met you. Mr. Clive, don't let me trouble you to come further. Guy Ryder will kindly take me 'up to the 'ouse, whilst you and Stella——"

Guy interrupted very quietly, even with a smile, but very decidedly too.

"Excuse me, but I fear I must deny myself the pleasure. I am already engaged, am I not, Stella? You are not going to throw me over, I hope?" For already, though her expression had grown very blank, he saw that she was upon the point of moving towards the expectant Caryl.

"Not unless——" she began. Then stopped, scarcely knowing how she intended to end.

"Unless nothing. I shall not release you, so there! I'll bring her back in a little while, Mrs. Brookes."

With which he passed on, Miss Brookes beside him, leaving Caryl with a rather incomprehensible smile hovering about his lips, and Mrs. Brookes almost speechless with indignation.