

to know what I ought to do; so, like a coward, I turned round and hurried back to the house, feeling as frightened as if the earth had opened under me. Once in the drawing-room, I sat down to think, and gradually reassured myself a little. Possibly what I had seen meant nothing. Flirtations were carried very far sometimes. And if it were not a flirtation, it was, perhaps, only an expression of friendly sympathy—of innocent admiration.

But no, I could not console myself with that reflection. Lisa and Paul were much more likely to flirt than to express friendly sympathy and innocent admiration for each other. Paul was a man of the world, well known in his circle as a man who could flirt admirably, with discretion and good taste; and Lisa was quite a match for him. They were probably amusing themselves, and no harm would come of the proceeding. It was not a form of the harmlessness. At the same time, I reflected, it was my duty to guard Lisa (as if Lisa wanted any guarding!), and I must take care either to be present at their meetings or to prevent their meeting altogether. Dear me! this was worse than Lady Ellinor's affair, about which I had so much trouble; for I was more directly responsible for Lisa than I had ever been for Lady Ellinor.

I began to play my new part by ordering tea to be brought into the drawing-room; and thither came the culprits when summoned, though I cannot say that they looked like culprits. Paul was quite unconcerned, and Lisa perfectly composed. She had rather more pink colour than usual, but she explained this by saying she had been without a parasol.

I made up my mind when Paul was gone that evening that I must speak to Lisa. I should have found it much easier to speak to Paul. But Lisa is my sister's child; and I felt that I must do my duty.

"Lisa," I began, "it is evident that Mr. Heriot admires you very much."

"Do you think so, auntie?" she said, indifferently.

"You must remember, darling, that his wife is living, and that—"

I could not go on. From the way in which she raised her calm eyes and fixed them on me, I felt sure that she regarded my remark as sheer impertinence. After a moment's pause she said, tranquilly:

"I do not think it likely that either I or Mr. Heriot would forget that fact, Aunt Lucy."

And for the moment I could say nothing more.

It was much easier, as I said, to tackle Paul. There was never any need to beat about the bush with him. I boldly accused him of trying to flirt with Lisa, of hindering her establishment in life. I hinted to him that she was even now hesitating as to whether or not she would accept a most eligible offer, and that he had no business to hang about her and keep other men off, as he would most assuredly do. Especially, I added, as he was not himself free—

"It's no good your putting on all that show of worldly-mindedness," said Paul at last, with a rather uneasy laugh. "But you don't mean it, Aunt Lucy." He often called me "Aunt Lucy," although he was no relation of mine. "I know that I'm a dog in the manger and all that sort of thing, but I assure you Miss Daintrey is quite well able to take care of herself; and if I choose to worship, all that the divinity has to do is to sit still and smile. And she can do that very nicely, you know."

"But you are making her too conspicuous," I said. "Of course, you are doing no harm—you are only having a little amusement, and you are not much in earnest about anything."

Paul jumped up, and his dark eyes flashed. "Oh, but by jove I am in earnest now," he exclaimed. Then he caught himself up and laughed. "I am thoroughly in earnest in admiring Miss Daintrey," he said, in quite a different tone; "I never saw any one so graceful—and she has such a charming voice, hasn't she? The moment I saw her I knew that I had met my fate at last—isn't that the correct expression?"

"Paul, I wish you would not talk so foolishly," I said: but I had time for no more remonstrances, for Lisa entered at that moment. Either by instinct, however, or by common consent, the two were much more reserved with each other than hitherto. Paul treated her very ceremoniously, and Lisa was exceedingly silent. I began to think that my poor words had for once been treated with respect.

A morning or two later—it was towards the close of July, I remember, and the day was much cooler than usual—I noticed that Lisa's letters seemed to cause her an unusual amount of emotion. Her colour came and went as she read them; and she ate no breakfast, but played with her teaspoon and looked out at the window instead of drinking her coffee. I read my morning paper and feigned not to see her agitation. "Some of her love affairs, I suppose," I thought crossly to myself, "dear me, I wish Lisa would get married, and then we could have a little peace."

"Aunt Lucy," my niece said to me, rather later, in somewhat uncertain tones. "Papa wants to know if I will join him at Brighton for a few days and then go on to Scotland."

"You must do as you like, of course, dear," I said. "You generally stay with me longer than this. I shall be very sorry to lose you."

Lisa came to my side and kissed me; she was not often so demonstrative. "I do not want to go," she said, "but perhaps it is better."

"Well, perhaps so," I answered gently. If she was thinking of Paul Heriot I quite agreed with her.

"My other letter," she went on, "is from Mr. Mercier."

"Oh—he wants an answer, I presume?"

"Yes," she said, in a very low tone. "And I—I don't know what to say."

"My dear child, if the man is as good and suitable as you say, I think you cannot fail to be happy with him."

"I think he is good," she said. "And I like him; but—I sometimes ask myself if that is all—all life has to give me!" And then she turned away, somewhat suddenly; but from the way in which her hand stole to her eyes as she left the room, it struck me, with a startled sense of novelty, that Lisa was crying! Lisa crying! Such a thing had scarcely been seen, or dreamt of since she was twelve years old. I did not follow her; I knew the girl too well to suppose that she wanted her tears to be seen; she was not given to accepting sympathy very readily; but when I saw her at luncheon time she was her own calm and equable self.

"Is Paul coming to-day?" I asked casually, in the course of our mid-day meal.

"I think not; he had planned a sketching expedition with his friend for to-day, and I am going to tennis at the rectory this afternoon."

"Oh yes, I remember. Then I shall have time to pay one or two calls," I said, "and perhaps I shall be late in getting home, so don't hasten back from your tennis."

I saw her set off for the rectory before I started, and I went to pay my duty calls with a comfortable sense that there could be no flirtation with Paul Heriot that afternoon.

I came back earlier than I had expected—before six o'clock—and as I was so early, and there was nothing much to do, I thought that I would take up a new magazine that I found on the hall table and read it in the conservatory, where I had a wicker chair and table ready for use when the weather was a little too cold for the open air. I went into the greenhouse from a garden door, and shut it, as I imagined, rather noisily, then ensconced myself in my cushioned chair and prepared to read my magazine.

I had made so much noise in my entry that I could never have imagined how anyone in my little drawing-room should fail to notice it; but, I found, as a matter of fact, that it had not attracted the least attention from two people who were not more than six feet from me. They must have been very much absorbed in one another and in their conversation; and I was just about to call out laughingly, "Lisa! Paul! what are you doing there?" when a few words fell upon my ear which kept me silent.

"Don't do it, Lisa," Paul was saying in the deep low tones of a man who is much moved. He had never called her Lisa in my presence. "Why should you sacrifice yourself and all that is best in you for a worldly scruple? You will never be happy in a loveless marriage, you may be quite sure of that."

I wished I had not come into the greenhouse. They had not heard me enter, and they must have been talking for some time, for Lisa had evidently told him about her letter from Mr. Mercier. If I moved again, the rustle of my long silk skirts, the creak of the chair, the rattle of the door, seemed to me sure to attract their attention; and how awkward it would be if they thought that I had heard their conversation! I hesitated, and my hesitation was my doom.

The next sentence or two made me feel it absolutely impossible to move. I was nailed to the spot with horror and dismay; and this must be my excuse for the eavesdropping of which I was then guilty.

"Why don't you end this miserable farce at once, and acknowledge that you love me?" said Paul Heriot. "You say you pity me—you may well do that; but have you no other feeling too? Oh, for once in your life, Lisa, be honest and true, and tell me whether you don't care a little—even a very little—for a man who would lay down his life for you!"

Bending my head between a screen of flowers I could see the two figures. They were standing. Paul had taken both her hands, and she was not resisting; she was looking down, and he was gazing into her face.

"It is so useless to say that sort of thing," said she, softly.

"Not useless when it gives a man life and hope and blessedness! You don't know how barren and dreary my life has been. But I don't mean to talk of myself; I have talked of myself before. You know all about me. But for yourself—yourself, Lisa: Can you let me go?"

She made an impatient little movement as if to draw her hands away. "I must let you go, I suppose," she said. "There is no help for it—and you ought not to talk to me in that way, it is not right."

The defence was more feeble than I had expected from Lisa's lips, but it was a defence, after all, and for that I felt thankful.

"Right? What is right? What is wrong? Is it right that I should be tied for life to a raving maniac without the power of making a home for myself or knowing the sweetness of a woman's love?" cried Paul, passionately. "That may be man's view of right; it is surely not right in the eyes of God. Lisa, you have instincts of your own—heaven born—given you by nature; listen to them and hear what they say to you! Will you leave me to this hellish loneliness of mine? Darling, think of what our life might be—together! if only you would break through these accursed conventionalities of yours and give yourself bravely and faithfully to me! You would never repent it; I assure you that you should not. It would be the business of my life to make you happy—I have said so to you before; I swear it now."

I almost started to my feet in my indignation. But second thoughts restrained me; I could surely trust Lisa to send him away. I listened; the silence was broken only by a woman's sob. Again I leaned forward; Lisa was weeping, and her head was on Paul's shoulder, and his arm round her waist; his lips were pressing kisses upon her forehead and her hair.

But in a minute or two she drew herself away from him.

"It is wrong," she said, "and I must not listen to you any more. Take away your arm, Paul. Yes—I love you—I do love you—as I never loved before—oh, I said that I wanted to feel deeply, and I would give my life now if I could never feel again!—but—I mean to marry Richard Mercier, and you must go away from me—for ever."

"If you love me, Lisa, you will give yourself to me, not to this other man."

"But I could not—I could not," she said, shivering. "How could I give up all my friends—my home—everything—even for you? You would be tired of me before long—men always get tired—and I should be heartbroken. Oh, no, I could not do it—I am not strong enough! And it would not be right."

"Then, darling," said Paul, very tenderly, "if you cannot do it now, at any rate wait for me. Don't marry another man; don't give yourself to him. It would be sacrilege—worse than sacrilege—when you love me. Dearest, only give him up, and look upon me as your friend—your best, truest, most devoted friend."

"Give him up?" said Lisa, wonderingly. Then she drew herself away from him and sat down. "I don't think I can," she said. Then, in a more broken voice, "Oh, Paul, I don't know how to tell you; I thought it was my duty—I wrote and accepted him this morning."

There was a little silence. I thought that Paul would rave and rage, but I was mistaken. He stood passive for a minute or two; then he drew nearer to her, and knelt down before her.

"Look at me, Lisa," he said. "Yes, look at me straight in the face. Do you know what you are doing? You are not only breaking a man's heart—you have often done that before, I believe—but you are throwing your