

"Is Captain Clevedon offended? I am so sorry! Take me to him, mother, and I will make the *amende honorable*."

"I don't think you will have the opportunity. I believe he has gone home, where, indeed, it is high time we went also. Come, Irene!"

"I am ready, mother! Mr. Keir offers you his arm. No!"—as Eric Keir extends the other for her benefit—"take care of mamma, and I will follow; thank you!"

So they pass through the ballroom and descend the staircase, Mrs. St. John in dignified silence, and the young people with some amount of repudiation. Yet, as he puts Irene into the carriage, Eric Keir summons up sufficient courage to say—

"Shall I find you at home to-morrow afternoon, Miss St. John?"

She is about to answer timidly that she is not sure, when she is again interrupted by her mother.

"Yes, we shall be at home, and glad to see you, Mr. Keir;" at which unexpected rejoinder, Mr. Keir expresses his grateful thanks, and Irene, clasping Mrs. St. John's hand between both her own, lies back upon the cushions, and indulges in a rose-colored dream of coming happiness.

At an early hour on the following afternoon, Eric Keir's horse stands at the door of Mrs. St. John's house in Brook Street. He enters hurriedly, with a bright look of expectation on his countenance, and, without ceremony, turns into a sitting-room on the ground-floor.

The servant who admitted him had scarcely time to close the hall-door again, before the visitor had vanished from his view, and left him standing there, with the message that was evidently fluttering on his lips, still undelivered. It is Irene's sitting-room, and Eric Keir is disappointed in his hope of finding her in it—alone.

"What will you say to me for so abrupt an entrance?" he exclaims, as she rises to welcome him. "Does it come within the privileges of a friend to introduce himself, or must I wait, like any other man, until your flunky formally announces me? O Irene! I have scarcely slept a wink all night."

"What a lamentable confession!" she answers, gayly. "If this is the effects of too much dancing, I must begin to assert my prerogative as chief counselor, and order you to be more discreet in future."

"Of too much dancing!" indignantly; "you

know, without my telling you, if my restlessness was due to that. O Irene! I feel so happy!"

"And last night you felt so miserable."

A cloud passes over the brightness of his face.

"I did. I felt wretched in looking back upon my past life: the remembrance of the trouble it has caused me, and the follies to which it has been witness, unnerves me. And my happiness to-day (if it can be called such), my light-heartedness, rather, proceeds only from the knowledge that you promised to help me to forget it."

She has reseated herself by this time, and he takes a chair beside her.

"As far as it lies in my power," she answers; "but is it always necessary to *forget* in order to be happy?"

"In my case it is so: there is nothing left for me but forgetfulness—and your affection."

"Was it a *very* great trouble, then?" she says, softly.

"So great, that it has destroyed all the pleasure of my youth, and threatens to do the same by the comfort of my age."

"And a woman was the cause of it, I suppose."

"Is not a woman at the bottom of all our troubles? Women are the ulterior causes of all pain and pleasure in this world—at least, for us. You have not lived nineteen years in it without discovering that, Irene?"

"No!"

"And so I look to a woman to cure me of the wound that a woman's hand inflicted; to restore to me, as far as possible, through the treasure of her friendship and her sympathy, the happiness which, except for my own mad folly, I might have aspired to—"

"If you please, sir, Mrs. St. John is in the library, and will be glad to speak to you as soon as you can make it convenient to see her."

"Say I will come at once."

On the entrance of the servant they have sprung apart as guiltily as though they had been lovers, instead of only friends, and, as he disappears again, they look at one another consciously and laugh.

"What a mysterious message!" exclaims Irene; "is this leap-year? Can mamma have any designs on you?"

"In the shape of commissions—what ladies have not? I am a perfect martyr to the cause. Whether owing to the respectability of my connections, or myself, I cannot say; but the number of notes I am asked to deliver, and Berlin wools to match, is perfectly incredible. But is