

"Can't possibly give him what he hasn't got," replied the other, laughing; "and he would be the first to tell you so. Keir's an excellent fellow with men, and a general favourite; but he is certainly heartless where women are concerned, or callous. I hardly know which to call it. He has been terribly spoilt, you see, both at home and abroad; he will view life and its responsibilities with clearer eyes ten years hence."

There is a general crush round the doorway, and the conversation of the young men has been overheard by many, but to one listener only has it proved of engrossing interest. That one is Mrs. St. John, the widowed mother of the girl so freely spoken of.

Wedged in upon the landing, and forced to listen to the discussion against her will, she has drunk in with burning cheeks the truth so likely to affect her daughter's happiness; and, as soon as she finds it practicable, she creeps to a corner of the ball-room whence she can watch the conduct of Irene and Mr. Keir, and feverishly determine what course of action she is bound, in her capacity of guardian, to pursue respecting them.

Meanwhile the gallop has ended, and Eric Keir leads his partner into an adjoining conservatory, which has been kept dim and cool and provided with couches for the rest and refreshment of the dancers.

There, whilst Irene St. John, flushed and excited, throws herself upon a sofa, he leans against the back of a chair opposite and steadfastly regards her.

"I am afraid I have quite tired you, Miss St. John; that last gallop was a very long one."

Eric Keir is greatly altered since the days when he paid those secret visits to Fretterley. Travel and time, and something more powerful than either, have traced lines across his forehead and made his face sharper than it should be at four-and-twenty. But he is very handsome—handsome with the hereditary beauty of the family; the large sleepy, violet eyes and dark hair, and well-cut, noble features which the Norhams have possessed for centuries—of which the present Lord Norham is so proud; and the more so because they seem, in this instance, to have skipped over the heir to bestow themselves upon his younger brother.

And this handsome head is not set, as is too often the case, on an indifferent figure, but is carried upright and stately, as such a noble head should be. At least, so thinks Irene St. John, if no other.

"I am not so tired of dancing, as of attempting to dance," she says, in answer to his remark. "How cool and refreshing this little nook seems, after the crush and heat of the ball-room. Rest and quiet are worth all the glare and tumult of society, if one could but believe it."

"That is just what I was going to observe: you have taken the sentence out of my mouth," says Eric Keir. "The pleasure of a few words exchanged with you alone, outweighs all the attractions of an evening's dancing."

"I did not expect to hear you say so," murmurs Miss St. John, with downcast eyes.

"Why not? Is the sentiment too high to come from a worldling's lips?"

"It is most likely to proceed from the lips of those who have encountered something to disgust them with the world. I hoped that your life had been all brightness, Mr. Keir."

"It is too good of you even to have hoped. But why should I be exempt from that of which, by your own argument, you must have had experience?"

"Ah! women are more liable to suffering, or they feel it more acutely—don't you think so? My poor father! it seems so short a time since he was here. Did I follow my own inclinations, I should not be mixing in the world, even now; and I often wish I had been firmer in standing out against the wishes of others."

"Don't say that," is the low-voiced rejoinder; "had you refused to enter society, we might not have met! and I was just beginning to be presumptuous enough to hope that our friendship possessed some interest for you."

"And so it does, Mr. Keir; pray don't think otherwise," with a hot, bright blush; "a few words of common sense are the only things which make such a scene tolerable to me."

"Or to myself," he answers, as he takes a seat beside her; "the quickness with which we think and feel together, Miss St. John; the sympathy, in fact, which appears to animate us, is a source of unceasing gratification to me."

She does not answer him; but the strains of the 'Blue Danube' waltz come floating in from the adjacent ball-room, and mingle with his words.

"I suppose the world considers me a happy man," he continues, presently. "I daresay that even my own people think the same, and will continue to do so to the end—what then? it makes no difference to me."

How quickly a woman's sympathy catches light when it is appealed to on behalf of a man's suffering. She seems to think it so much harder that the rougher sex should encounter trouble than her patient self! Irene's eyes are full of tender, silent questioning.

"And you are not, then, happy?" they inquire.

"Can you ask the question?" his reply.

"You must have guessed my secret," his tongue says; "you are not an ordinary woman; you look below the surface."

"I confess that I have sometimes thought—"

"Of course you have," he interrupts her, eagerly. "I have had trouble enough, God knows, and it will end only with my life."

"Oh, Mr. Keir! you are too young to say that!"

"I am too old to think otherwise," he rejoins, moodily; "your trouble was not of your own seeking, Miss St. John—mine is; that makes all the difference."

"It makes it harder to forget, perhaps," she answers, "but not impossible. And you have so much to make life pleasant to you—so many friends—"

"Friends! what do I care for them, excepting one. Oh, Miss St. John! if you will not think me too bold in saying so, it is only since I met you that I have felt as if I really had a friend. The few months we have known each other seem like years in retrospect, though they have flown like days in making your acquaintance."

"We have seen so much of one another in the time," she murmurs, softly.

"Yes! and learnt more. Sometimes I can scarcely believe but that I have known you all my life. To feel you really were my friend would be to experience the greatest pleasure that this world still holds for me."

"Why should you not feel so?"

The sweet strains of the 'Blue Danube' are being repeated again and again, but above the loudest of them she hears the fluttering of her own heart as she puts the question.

"May I?" laying his hand upon the one which lies upon her lap: "is it possible that you can take sufficient interest in such an insignificant person as myself as to promise to befriend him? Do you know all that is implicated in that promise—the long account of follies and shortcomings you will have to listen to, the many occasions on which you will be asked for counsel or advice, the numerous times that you will feel utterly tired of or impatient with me?"

"I am not afraid of that, Mr. Keir."

"Why do you call me, Mr. Keir? Can we be real friends while we address each other so formally? Surely you are a jove all such prudery, or I am much mistaken in your character."

"I am not a prude, or I think so; yet the name by which I call you can make no difference in my friendship."

"But cannot you guess that I am longing to have the right to speak to you familiarly? Irene—it fits you perfectly. I never knew an Irene in my life before, yet I could not fancy you by any other name, for I learned to love its sound long before I had the hardihood to hope that its possessor would admit me to her intimacy. I shall be very jealous of our friendship, Irene."

"But why should you be jealous?" she demands, in a low voice. Her speaking eyes are cast upon the ground. He can only see the long dark lashes that lie upon her cheeks, and the golden glory of her head, whilst the sweet soft notes of the music still steal in to fill up the broken pauses of the conversation.

"Because it is a sacred bond between us which no third person must intrude upon; and if it is a secret, so much the better; it will be so sweet to feel that we have anything in common. But if you admit another to your friendship, Irene—if I hear any man daring to call you by your Christian name; if I see that you have other confidants whom you trust as much or more than myself, I—I—" waxing fierce over the supposition—"I don't know what I should do!"

His violence amuses her.

"You need not be afraid—indeed, you need not; not one of my acquaintances would presume to act in the manner you describe."

"Then I am the first, Irene?"

"Quite the first."

"So much the happier for me! But I wonder—I wonder—"

"What?"

"Whether you can be content with such a friendship as I offer you; whether it will be sufficient for your happiness."

"How exigent you must consider me!"

"Not so; it is I that deserve the name. Yet if—if, when we have grown necessary to each other—or, rather, when you have grown necessary to me—you should see some one whom you prefer—some one more attractive—more desirable than myself, and desert me in consequence, marry him, in fact, what shall I do?"

She is about indignantly to disclaim the possibility of such a thing, when she is interrupted by the entrance of her mother.

"Irene! what are you thinking of? Captain Clevedon has been looking for you the last half-hour. You know you were engaged to him for this waltz."

The voice of Mrs. St. John usually so sweet and low especially when she is speaking to her daughter, has become too highly pitched in her anxiety, and sounds discordant. As she hears it, Irene, blushing all over, rises quickly from her seat.

"Have I been here long, mother? I have been talking, and did not think of it."

"Then you should think of it," retorts Mrs. St. John; "or Mr. Keir—with a dart of indignation in his direction—"should think of it for you. It is not customary with you to offend your partners, Irene."

"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 intends the other for her benefit—"take care of mamma, and I will follow; thank you!"

So they passed through the ball-room and descended the staircase, Mrs. St. John in dignified

silence, and the young people with some amount of trepidation. 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, 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 has vanished from his view, and left him standing there, with the message that was evidently fluttering on his lips, still undelivered. But it is Irene's sitting-room, and Eric Keir is not disappointed in his hope of finding her in it—and 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 funkey formally announces me? O, Irene! I have scarcely slept a wink all night."

"What a lamentable confession!" she answers, gaily. "If this is the effects of too much dancing, I must begin to assert my prerogative as chief counsellor, 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 re-seated herself, by this time, and he takes a chair beside her.

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

"In many cases 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."

"So 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 consolously, 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 this dear interview ended? Shall I not find you here on my return?"

"Perhaps you may; but perhaps, my mother will be with you. So you had better consider it at an end, lest you should be disappointed."

"If it is at an end, you must bid me farewell."

"Farewell," she echoes, smilingly, as she extends her hand.

"Is that the best way you know how to do it?" he demands, as he retains her hand between his own. "What a thorough Englishwoman you are, Irene; you would not relinquish one of the cold forms of society even where your feelings are most interested. Custom first, and friendships afterwards. Ah! you do not regard our compact in the sacred light that I do."

He has drawn her closer to him as he speaks, and their faces are nearly on a level.

"Oh, Eric! how little you know me!"

The liquid eyes upraised to his, the parted lips, the trembling hand, which he still holds, appeal to him until he loses sight of self and the bitter consequences of indulgence, and remem-

bers only that they are man and woman, and they stand alone.

"Darling!" he whispers, as he bends down and kisses her.

By the crimson flush that mounts to her forehead, and the abrupt manner in which she disengages herself from him and turns away, so that he cannot see her face, he fears that he has seriously offended her.

"Forgive me! I know that it was wrong, but I could not help it. Irene! say that you are not angry."

"Oh, pray go to mamma! she will think it so strange—she has been waiting for you all this time."

"I cannot go until you have said that you forgive me."

"I do forgive you then; but—but—it must never be again."

"Is that your heart speaking to mine, Irene? Well, I will not press you for an answer now; but grant me one favor—one token that you are not really angry with me. Be here when I return."

And with these words he leaves her. He finds Mrs. St. John restlessly pacing up and down the library, and appearing even more nervous than usual.

She is a frail, timid looking woman, the very opposite of her high-spirited daughter, and as she turns at his approach, her very lips are trembling.

"How do you do, Mrs. St. John? I believe you wish to speak to me. A commission, of course. Well! I am quite at your service, from barley-sugar up to bank-notes. What a lovely morning we have had! I hope you are not much fatigued after last night's dissipation."

His frank and unrestrained address makes the task which she has set herself more difficult; but she takes a chair and waves him to another, while she is vainly trying to find words in which to open the conversation naturally.

"I am quite well, thank you, Mr. Keir. Pray be seated. Yes, I asked to speak to you: it is rather a delicate business, and had I not great faith in you, it would be a very painful one; but—are you sure that you are comfortable?"

"Quite so, thank you, Mrs. St. John," he answers, puzzled to imagine what possible connection his present comfort can have with the subject she is about to introduce.

"I am glad of it. It is so much more satisfactory to enter on a discussion when both parties are perfectly at their ease. I asked to see you, Mr. Keir, because—I suppose you know that I am the sole guardian of my daughter?"

"I believe I have heard Miss St. John mention the fact."

"Yes, her poor father wished it, and though I am very unfit for such a position, I knew he must be the best judge, and so—but of course it leaves me without counsellors. Irene has no near relation but myself, and I have no male friends in England to whom I can apply for advice in any matters of difficulty."

"If I can be of any use," he interrupts, eagerly, "or could procure you the information you require, Mrs. St. John, you must know that it would give me the greatest pleasure to do so."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Keir—yes, you can help me—I am coming to that presently. But being, as I said before, the sole guardian of Irene's interests, you must perceive that it is my duty to be very careful of her—that I cannot be too careful."

"Who could doubt it?" he answers, warmly.

"And you are very often in her company; you have been here a great deal, lately, Mr. Keir, you are at our house almost every day."

"I beg your pardon."

"I say that you are very intimate with Irene—rather too intimate, I think; though, of course, we have always been pleased to see you—but the world will talk, and young people's names soon get connected—and so I consider it my duty to ascertain—"

here Mrs. St. John coughs twice, and swallows some fearful obstacle in her throat—"to ask you, in short, what are your intentions respecting her?"

The murder is out, and poor Mrs. St. John sinks back in her chair, pale and exhausted, as though her own fate depended on his answer.

"Intentions! my intentions!" cries Eric Keir, starting from his seat.

The tone of surprise and incredulity in which he utters the words seems to put new courage into his listener; it arouses her maternal fears, and with her fears her indignation, and she answers, quickly:

"You cannot pretend to misunderstand my meaning, Mr. Keir, young as you are, you are too much a man of the world for that, and must know that if you are so constantly seen in the company of a young lady, people will begin to inquire if you are engaged to be married to her, or not."

"I—I—know that I have trespassed very much upon your hospitality," he commences, stammering, "and taken the greatest pleasure in coming here, but I have never addressed Miss St. John except in the character of a friend, and I supposed that you entirely understood the footing on which I visited her."

"And you mean to tell me," exclaims the poor mother, who is shaking from head to foot with nervous excitement—"you intend me to understand, Mr. Keir, that all your attentions have meant nothing, and that my daughter is no more to you than any other girl?"

"The whole truth flashes on him now; he sees the fraud of which he has been guilty, both to his own heart and to hers; he knows that he loves Irene St. John as his soul—and yet he is forced to stammer on—"

"I never said that, Mrs. St. John. I hold your