

Mrs. St. John, the widowed mother of the girl so freely spoken of.

Wedge in upon the landing, and forced to listen to the discussion against her will, she has drunk in with burning cheeks the truths so likely to affect her daughter's happiness; and, as soon as she finds it practicable, she creeps to a corner of the ballroom 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 galop 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, while 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 galop 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 statelily, 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 ballroom! Rest and quiet are worth all the glare and tumult of society, if one could 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 with 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 ballroom, and mingle with his words.

"I suppose the world considers me a happy man," he continues, presently. "I dare say 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, Gód knows, and it will end only with my life."