

Accordingly after supper, she asked Julia to go with her for a moment to her room. Julia had become perfectly charmed with the fascinating manners of Mrs. Carrington, so she cheerfully assented, and the two proceeded together to her richly furnished apartments. When there, Mrs. Carrington said, "Miss Middleton, do you not think your sister too young to accept the attentions of any gentleman, or at least of a stranger?"

Julia well knew that the fact of Dr. Lacey's being a stranger was of no consequence in Mrs. Carrington's estimation, but she quickly answered, "Yes, I do; but what can be done now?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Carrington, "your sister is very gentle, and if we go to her and state the case as it is, I am confident she will yield."

So they went to Fanny's room, where they found her sitting by the window, thinking how much pleasure she should enjoy that night.

Julia commenced operations by saying, "Fanny, what made you promise Dr. Lacey that you would go with him to-night?"

"Why," said Fanny, "was there any thing wrong in it?"

Here Mrs. Carrington's soft voice chimed in, "Nothing very wrong, dear Fanny; but it is hardly proper for a young school girl to appear in public, attended by a gentleman who is not her brother or cousin."

Poor Fanny! Her heart sank, for she was afraid she would have to give up going after all; but a thought struck her, and she said, "Well then, it is not proper for Julia to go with Mr. Wilmot, and she promised to do so."

"That is very different," said Mrs. Carrington, "Julia is engaged to Mr. Wilmot, and unless you are engaged to Dr. Lacey," continued she, sarcastically, "it will not be proper at all for you to go with him."

"But I promised I would," said Fanny.

"That you can easily remedy," answered Mrs. Carrington. "Just write him a note, and I will send it to him."

Thus beset, poor Fanny sat down and wrote as Mrs. Carrington dictated, the following note:—

DR. LACEY:

"Sir—Upon further reflection, I think it proper to decline your polite invitation for to-night.

Yours very respectfully,

FANNY MIDDLETON."

"That will do," said Mrs. Carrington; and ringing the bell, she dispatched a servant with the note to Dr. Lacey.

"You are a good girl to submit so readily," said Mrs. Carrington, laying her white hand on Fanny's head. But Fanny's eyes were full of tears, and she did not answer, and Mrs. Carrington, sure of Dr. Lacey's attendance that evening, left the room exulting in the result of her plan. In a short time she descended to the parlor, where she found Mr. Wilmot and Julia, but no Dr. Lacey, neither did he make his appearance at all, and after waiting impatiently for a time, she was at last obliged to accept the arm of the poor pedagogue, which was rather unwillingly offered, for Mr. Wilmot greatly preferred having Julia sit to himself. She had become as dear to him as his own life, and in his opinion, her character was like her face—perfect. "Deluded man! 'Twas well that he died before he came to a knowledge of her sinfulness."

But to return to Fanny. After she was left alone by her sister, she threw herself upon the sofa, and burst into tears; but at length wiping them away, she arose and went down to the parlor, determined to have a nice time practising her music lesson. It was rather hard, and with untiring patience she played it over and over, until she was suddenly startled by a voice behind her, saying, "Really, Miss Fanny, you are persevering." Looking up, she saw Dr. Lacey, who had entered unperceived.

"Why, Dr. Lacey," said she, "how you frightened me! Why are you not at the Reading?"

"Because," answered he, "when my lady breaks her engagement, I think I too can remain at home. But why did you change your mind, Miss Fanny? I thought you were anxious to go."

Fanny blushed painfully, and the tears came to her eyes, but she replied, "I was anxious to go, but they thought I had better not."

"And who is 'they,'" asked the Doctor; "and why did they think you had better not go?"

Fanny answered, "Mrs. Carrington and Julia said I was too young to go with —"

"With such a bad man as I am," said Dr. Lacey, laughing.

"Oh no," said Fanny, "they do not think you bad; they said with any gentleman."

"Too young, are you?" said Dr. Lacey. "How old are you, Fanny?"

"I was sixteen last May," she replied.

"Sixteen; just as old as Anna was when she died, and just as old as my mother was when she was married; so it seems you are not too young to die, or to be married either, if you are too young to go out with me," said Dr. Lacey.

Fanny did not reply; and he continued, "Whom would you have gone with, if you had not spent your money this morning for those old Aunts?"

Fanny started; and giving him a searching look, was about to reply, when he anticipated her by saying, "Yes, Fanny, I overheard your conversation this morning, and I cannot sufficiently admire your generous self-denial. I have heard Fanny Kemble two or three times, so I did not care to hear her again; but I decided to go, for the pleasure of having you hear her; but as you did not choose to go, I have remained here with you, and wish to have you tell me something about your parents and your home, and also wish you to ask me to go there some time."

Fanny answered hesitatingly, "I am afraid you would not like to go there, Dr. Lacey."

"Why not?" said he. "Do you not like your home?"

"Oh yes, very much," she replied; "but father is a little odd, and you might feel inclined to laugh at him; but he is very kind, and if you could forget his roughness, you would like him."

"I know I shall like him, just because he is your father," said Dr. Lacey.

He then turned the conversation upon other subjects, and Fanny found him so agreeable, that she never thought of the hour, until Mr. Wilmot, Mrs. Carrington and Julia, suddenly entered the parlor.

"Upon my word," said Mrs. Carrington, "you have both stolen a march upon us. No wonder neither of you wished to go out."