

The young men have gained the road by this time, which is sufficiently removed from the town to be very dusty, and shaded by leafy trees.

"Who would ever have thought of meeting you out here, Keir?" is Moxon's first remark. "And how long is it since you developed a taste for country lanes and hedges?"

"I don't admire quickset hedges more than I ever did; but when a man rides for exercise, one direction is as good as another."

"But what induced you to remove your horse from Turnhill's? Didn't they do justice to him?"

"Well—yes—in a hesitating manner. "I had no particular fault to find with them; but these stables are more convenient."

"Less so, I should have imagined. Why, you have nearly a mile more to walk to them."

"Perhaps I like walking; any way, that's my business. What's yours?"

At this curt rejoinder, Saville Moxon turns round and regards him steadily in the face.

"What is the matter, Keir?" he says, kindly. "Are you ill? And, now I come to look at you, you have certainly grown much thinner since I saw you last; and, if you were not such a lazy fellow, I should say you had been overworking yourself."

To which Keir responds, with a harsh laugh:—

"Yes, Moxon, that's it—too much study. It's an awfully bad thing for young fellows of our age—so trying to the constitution! Ha! ha! ha!"

"But you really don't look yourself, Keir, for all that. I am afraid you must have been living too fast. Don't do it, dear old fellow—for all our sakes."

The affectionate tone touches some chord in Eric Keir's heart, and he answers, almost humbly:—

"Indeed I have not been living fast, Moxon; on the contrary, I think I have been keeping better hours this term than usual. One comes so soon to the conviction that all that kind of thing is not only degrading, but wrong. Yet one may have troubles, nevertheless. How are all your people at home?"

"Very well indeed, thank you; and that brings me to the subject of my business with you. It is odd I should have met you this afternoon, considering how much separated we have been of late; for if I had not done so, I should have been obliged to write."

"What about?"

"I had a letter from your brother Muiraven this morning."

"Ah!—more than I had; it's seldom either of them honor me."

"Perhaps they despair of finding you—as I almost began, to do. Any way, Lord Muiraven's letter concerns you as much as myself. He wants us to join him in a walking tour."

"When?"

"During the vacation, of course."

"Where to?"

"Brittany, I believe."

"I can't go."

"Why not? It will be a jolly change for you. And my brother Alick is most anxious to be of the party. Fancy what fun we four should have!—it would seem like the old school days coming over again."

"When we were always together, and always in scrapes," Keir interrupts, eagerly. "I should like to go."

"What is there to prevent you?"

His face falls immediately.

"Oh! I don't know—nothing in particular—only, I don't fancy it will be such fun as you imagine; these tours turn out such awful failures sometimes; besides—"

"Besides—what?"

"It will be a great expense; and I'm rather out of pocket this term."

"That is no obstacle, for you are to go as Muiraven's guest. He says especially—let me see, where is the letter?—producing it from his pocket as he speaks. "Ah! here it is: 'Tell Eric, he is to be my guest, and so are you'—though, for the matter of that," continues Moxon, as he refolds the letter and puts it in the envelope, "my accepting his offer, and your accepting it, are two very different things."

"I can't go, nevertheless; and you may write and tell him so."

"You had better write yourself, Keir; you may be able to give your brother the reason, which you refuse to me."

After this, they pace up and down for a few minutes in silence: minutes which appear long to Eric Keir, for he pulls out his watch meanwhile to ascertain the hour.

"Keir! are you in debt?" says Moxon.

"Not a penny—or, at all events, not a penny that I shall be unable to pay upon demand. Has any one been informing you to the contrary?"

"No one—it was but a surmise. I hope, then,—I hope there is no truth in the rumor that has reached me, that you find more charms in a certain little village, not twenty miles from Oxford, than in anything the old town contains!"

Saville Moxon is hardly prepared for the effect which his words produce. For Eric Keir stops short upon the country path which they are traversing, and the veins rise upon his forehead, and his whole face darkens and changes beneath the passion which he cannot help exhibiting, although, he is too courteous to give vent to it without further cause.

"What village?" he demands quickly.

"Fretterley!"

Then the knowledge that he is in the wrong, and gossip in the right, and that something he is very anxious to keep secret is on the verge of

being discovered, gets the better of Eric Keir's discretion, and he flares out in an impetuous manner, very much in character with his quick, impulsive nature:—

"And what the d—! do your confounded friends mean by meddling in my affairs?"

"Who said they were friends of mine?" retorts Moxon; and the laugh with which he says it is as oil cast on the flame of Eric Keir's wrath.

"I will allow of no interference with anything I choose to do or say. I am not a child, to be followed, and gaped at, and cackled about by a parcel of old women in breeches; and you may tell your informant so, from me, as soon as you please."

"Keir, this is folly, and you know it. Fretterley and its doings are too near at hand to escape all observation; and the fact of your visiting there, and the Vicar of the parish having three very pretty daughters, is quite sufficient to set the gossips talking; but not to provoke such an ebullition of anger from yourself."

"I don't care a fig about the Vicar, or his daughters either! But I do care to hear that I can't ride a mile in one direction or another without all Oxford talking of it. I hate that style of feminine cackle which some of the fellows of the college have taken up; and I say again, that they are a set of confounded meddlers, and if I catch any one of them prying into my concerns, I won't leave him a whole bone in his body!"

"You are childish!" exclaims Moxon. "As I repeated the report, Keir, I suppose I am one of the 'confounded meddlers' you allude to, and it may not be safe for me to remain longer in your company. And so, good day to you, and a better spirit when we meet again." And turning abruptly from him, he commences to walk in the direction of the town. But slowly, and somewhat sadly: for he has known Eric Keir from boyhood, and, imperious as he is with strangers, it is not often he exhibits the worst side of his character to his friends.

For a moment—whilst pride and justice are struggling for the mastery within him—Eric looks at the retreating figure and then, with sudden impulse, he strides hastily after Moxon, and tenders him his hand.

"Forgive me, Saville! I was wrong—I hardly knew what I was saying."

"I was sure you would confess it, sooner or later, Eric; your faults are all upon the surface."

And then they shake hands heartily, and feel themselves again.

"But about this Fretterley business," says Eric, after a slight hesitation: "stop the gossip as much as lies in your power, there's a good fellow! For I swear to you I have no more intention of making love to the Vicar's daughters, than I have to the Vicar himself."

"I never supposed you had. But when young and fashionable men persist in frequenting one locality, the lookers-on will draw their inferences. We are not all ear's sons, remember, Eric; and you dwell in the light of an unenviable notoriety."

"Unenviable indeed, if even one's footsteps are to be dogged! And fancy what my father would say, if such a rumor reached his ears!"

"He would think nothing of it, Keir. He knows that you love him too well to dream of making a *mésalliance*."

"Who talks of a *mésalliance*?" interposes the other, hurriedly.

"Myself alone. The Vicar's daughters, though exceedingly handsome and, no doubt, very amiable girls, are not in the position of life from which Lord Norham expects you to choose a wife. He thinks a great deal of you, Eric."

"More's the pity; he had much better build his hopes on Muiraven, or Cecil."

"Oh! Cecil will never marry. Young as he is, he is marked out for a bachelor. And as for Muiraven, he will, in all probability, have to sacrifice his private instincts to public interests. Besides,—in a lowered voice—"you should never forget that, were anything to happen to Muiraven, the hopes of the family would be set upon you."

"Don't talk such nonsense, Moxon. Muiraven's life is worth ten of mine, thank God! and Cecil and I mean to preserve our liberty intact, and leave marriage for the young and the gay: yourself, *par exemple*."

"Call a poor devil who has nothing but his own brains to look to for a subsistence, young and gay? My dear boy, you'll be a grandfather before I have succeeded in inducing any woman to accept my name and nothing a year."

"Ugh!"—with a shudder—"what an awful prospect! I'd as soon hang myself."

"Well, it needn't worry you just yet," says Moxon, with a laugh. "But I must not keep you any longer from your ride. Shall you be in your rooms to-morrow evening, Keir?"

"Probably—that is, I will make a point of being there, if you will come and take supper with me. And bring over Summers and Charlton with you. And look here, Moxon,—stop this confounded rumor about me, at all hazards, for heaven's sake!"

"If there is no truth in it, why should you object to its circulation?" inquires Moxon, bluntly.

"There is no truth in it. I hardly know the man by sight, or his daughters; but you are aware of my father's peculiarities, and how the least idea of such a thing would worry him."

"We should have Lord Norham down here in no time, to find out the truth for himself. So it's lucky for you, old fellow,"—observing Keir's knitted brows—"that there's nothing for him to find out."

"Yes—of course; but I hate everything in the shape of town-talk, true or otherwise."

"There shall be no more, if I can prevent it, Keir. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, till to-morrow evening; and don't be later than ten."

He remains on the spot where Saville Moxon left him for a moment, and then turns, musingly, towards the courtyard of the inn again.

"What on earth can have put Fretterley into their heads," he ponders, "when I have been so scrupulously careful, that even the ostler at the village inn doesn't know me by my right name? It's an awful nuisance, and will entail a move at the very time when I can least afford it. My usual luck!" And, with a shrug of the shoulders, Eric Keir re-enters the stable yard. The man is still waiting there with his horse, and, when the gentleman is mounted, he touches his cap and asks when he may be expected to return."

"Impossible to say," is the unsatisfactory rejoinder; and in another minute Keir has driven his spurs into the animal's side and is galloping to make up for lost time, along the roads which lead—to Fretterley.

As he rides hurriedly and carelessly along, his thoughts are conflicting and uneasy. His impulsive and unthinking nature has led him into the commission of an act which is more than rash—which is unpardonable, and of which he already bitterly repents; and he sees the effect of this youthful folly closing about him and hedging him in, and the trouble it will probably entail, stretching out over a long vista of coming years, to end perhaps only with his life.

He knows that his father (a most loving and affectionate father, of whom he has no fear beyond that begotten by the dread of wounding his affection) cherishes high hopes for him and expects great things—greater things than Eric thinks he has the power of performing. For Lord Muiraven, though a young man of sterling merit—"the dearest fellow in the world," as his brothers will inform you—is not clever; he knows it himself, and all his friends know it, and that Eric has had the advantage over him, not only in personal appearance, but in brains. And though it would be too much to affirm that Lord Norham has ever wished his sons could change places, there is no doubt that, whilst he looks on Muiraven as the one who shall carry on his titles to a future generation, his pride is fixed on Eric; and the ease with which the young fellow has disposed of his university examinations, and the passport into society his agreeable manners have gained for him, are topics of un-falling interest to the Earl.

And it is this knowledge, added to the remembrance of a motherless childhood sheltered by paternal care from every sorrow, that makes his own conduct smite so bitterly on the heart of Eric Keir. How could he have done it? Oh! what a fool—what an ungrateful, unpardonable fool he has made of himself! And there is no way out of the evil: he has destroyed that which will not bear patching—his self-respect! As the conviction presses home to him, tears, which do him no dishonor, rise to his eyes, are forced back again, as though to weep had been a sin. How much the creatures suffer who cannot, or who dare not, cry! God gave ready tears to women, in consideration of their weakness—it is only strong hearts and stronger minds that can bear torture with dry eyes.

But there is little trace of weakness left on the face of Eric Keir, as, after an hour's hard riding, he draws rein before the village inn of Fretterley. The young collegian seems well known there; for before he has had time to summon the ostler, the landlord himself appears at the front door, to ease him of his rein, and is shouting for some one to come and "old Mr. 'Amilton's 'orse" while he draws 'Mr. 'Amilton's beer."

"Mr. 'Amilton" appears to respond but languidly to the exertions made on his behalf; for he drinks the beer which is handed him mechanically, and, without further comment, turns on his heel, much to the disappointment of the landlord, who has learned to look regularly for the offer of one of those choice cigars of which the young gentleman is usually so lavish.

"Something up there, I bet," he remarks to the partner of his bosom; "getting tired of her, I shouldn't wonder: they all does it, sooner or later. Men will be men."

"Men will be men! men will be brutes, you mean!" she retorts in her shrill treble; and from the sound of her voice, the landlord thinks it as well not to pursue the subject any further.

Not afraid of her—oh dear no! What husband ever was afraid of anything so insignificant as the weaker vessel?—only—Well, landlord, have it thine own way; it does us no harm!

Meanwhile Eric Keir has walked beyond the village, perhaps a quarter of a mile, to where a small farm cottage, surrounded by a garden of shrubs, stands back from the highway. He pushes open the painted wicket with his foot, more impetuously than he need have done, and advances to the hall door. Before he can knock or ring, it is thrown open to him, and a woman flings herself upon his neck.

She is a girl still, though several years older than himself; but a woman is in the glow of youth at five-and-twenty; and this woman has not only youth but beauty.

"I wish you would remember, Myra, that I am standing at the front door, and reserve these demonstrations of affection for a more private place. I have told you of it so often."

He disengages her arms from his throat as he speaks, and her countenance lowers and changes. It is easy to see that she is quick to take offense, and that the repulse has wounded her.

So they pass into the sitting-room in silence, and whilst Eric Keir, monarch of all he surveys, throws himself into an easy chair, she stands by the table, somewhat sulkily, waiting for him to make the next advances.

"Is old Margaret at home, Myra?"

"I believe so."

"Tell her to bring me some claret. I seem to have swallowed all the dust between this and Oxford."

She does his bidding, bringing the wine with her own hands, and when she has served him, she sits down by the window.

"Come here, child," he says presently, in a patronizing yet authoritative voice that accords strangely with his boyish exterior. "What's the matter with you to-day? why won't you speak to me?"

"Because you don't care to hear me speak," she answers in a low tone, full of emotion, as she kneels beside his chair. She has large, lustrous, dark eyes, and soft brown hair that flows and curls about her neck, and a pair of passionate red lips that are on a dangerous level with his own. What man could resist them? But Eric Keir's moustached mouth bends down to press her upturned forehead only. It is evident that she has lost her power to charm him. Yet his reply is not only patient, but kind.

"What has put that nonsense into your head? Don't make more worries than you need, Myra: we have enough already, heaven knows!"

"But why haven't you been to see me for so many days, then? You don't know how long the time seems without you! Are you getting tired of me, Eric?"

"Tired!"—with a smile that is sadder than a sigh. "It is early days for you and me to talk of getting tired of each other, Myra. Haven't we made all kinds of vows to pass our lives together?"

"Then why have you been such a time away?"

"I have had business to detain me; it was impossible to come before."

"What sort of business?"

"Engagements—at college and amongst my friends."

"Friends whom you love more than me!" she retorts quickly, her jealous disposition immediately on the *qui vive*.

"It is not fair for you to say so, Myra. I can give you no greater proof of my attachment than I have already given."

"Ah! but I want more, Eric. I want to be with you always: to leave you neither day nor night: to have the right to share in your pleasures and your pains."

He frowns visibly.

"More pains than pleasures, as you would find, Myra. But it is impossible; I have told you so already; the circumstances of the case forbid it."

"How can I tell, when you are absent, if you are always thinking of me?—if some other woman does not take my place in your heart?"

"You must trust me, Myra. I am a gentleman, and I tell you that is not the case—that it never will be."

"Ah! but you cannot tell!" And here she falls to weeping, and buries her face upon the arm of his chair.

"My poor girl!" says Keir, compassionately. He does not love her—that is to say, he does not love as he thought he did three months ago, when he believed that he was doing a generous and chivalrous thing in raising her from her low estate to the position she now occupies, and swearing unalterable fidelity at her feet—but he feels the deepest pity, both for her and for himself—and he would wipe out the past with his blood, if it were possible.

"My poor girl—my poor Myra!" stroking the luxuriant hair which is flung across his knee—"we have much to forgive each other! Did ever man and woman drag each other more irreparably down than we have done?"

"You have ceased to love me—I know you have!" she continues, through her tears.

"Why should you torture me with such an accusation," he says, impatiently, as he shakes himself free of the clinging arms, and, rising, walks to the window, "when I have already assured you that it is not true? What have I done to make you imagine I am changed?"

"You do not come to see me—you do not care me—you do not even look at me as you used to do."

"Good heavens! for how long do you expect me to go on 'looking'—whatever that operation may consist of?"

"Oh, Eric! you cannot deceive me: you know you are sorry that we ever met."

Sorry—ay, God knows that he is sorry; but he will not tell her so. Yet neither will he fly to her embrace, as three months back he would have done, to assure her that she does his love a cruel wrong by the suspicion. He only stands quietly by the open window, and taking a cigar from his case, lights it and commences smoking; whilst she continues to sob, in an angry, injured manner by the arm-chair where he left her.

"Myra! I have but a short time to stay here to-day; why shouldn't we pass it pleasantly together? Upon my word, if you go on like this every time we meet, you will make the place too hot to hold me. Come—dry your eyes, like a good girl, and tell me what you have been doing since I saw you last."

She dashes away her tears, and rises from her kneeling posture; but there is still a tone of sullenness or pride in the voice with which she answers him.

"What should I have been doing, but waiting for your arrival? I should have gone to