

"Safer than the effervescence of great love, I should think."

"The 12th," mused Anne. She always if possible declined a discussion with her sister. "That is three weeks from to-morrow; you have no time to lose. How can I help you?"

"Not at all, thank you, in the way you mean. I went to Mrs. Martin's to-day, and other arrangements are all made. But there is one thing you can do for me, and though the subject is anything but pleasant, I had better tell you now."

"Dear me, what is coming?" said Mrs. Lawrence; "I don't like disagreeable things. Must you tell me this, Charlotte?"

"Yes, because I do not know who else to ask to assist me; otherwise I would not annoy you. Do you remember a girl who did some work for me last year, when I was to have been married in October?"

"No; who was she?"

"Mrs. Martin recommended her to me. Her name was Alice Ford?"

"I recollect now. A very pretty girl with brown eyes."

"Yes, she is very pretty. Little as I like her, I must allow that."

"What has she done to incur your displeasure?"

"How should you like her for a sister-in-law? What do you think of Allan's having fallen in love with her, and declaring he will marry her?"

Mrs. Lawrence opened her own brown eyes in amazement. "You must be joking, my dear Charlotte; the idea is too absurd."

"Absurd or not it is true. I suspected it some time ago, at least that he had a fancy for her pretty face; but I had no proof. Yesterday, however, he was walking about with her half the afternoon. I talked to him very seriously in the evening, and he confessed that he had promised to marry the girl, and meant to keep his word."

"And do you suppose he will really do such a ridiculous thing as marry a dress-maker's apprentice?"

"Not only that. She has been working the whole winter in Barton's paper-mill. Now if there is one set of people—oh! I have not patience to think of it. I do not

now think he will do it; I showed him the folly, the madness of it, and he promised me he would not; but in an equivocal manner. I know there is no dependence to be placed on Allan; he may marry her in the hope that Papa will forgive him. They could scarcely be married here, and I want you to watch that this girl does not leave Stormington while I am abroad. I should be glad if you would take her into your service."

"But what can I do? I know nothing about the people, and as for Allan, I would no more interfere with him——"

"Very little can be done," said Miss Challoner, who, it will be seen, chose to give her sister her own version of the preceding night's conversation. She was tolerably sure that Allan would not now marry Elsie, but she could not give Mrs. Lawrence her reasons for the assurance, and was therefore obliged to deviate somewhat from the facts. "There would be no need to do anything, if we could depend on Allan. I learned from Mrs. Martin, to whom I was speaking about the girl, that she is a cousin of your under-nurse, so, you see, through your own servant, you may know something of Alice Ford. Have her here to work for you; say I recommended her. I should like to know what has passed between her and Allan, and you might find out."

"What sort of girl is she?"

"As nice a girl as a factory girl can be, I believe; Mrs. Martin speaks highly of her; but that is nothing. Whatever she may be she is not a fit wife for Allan. Of course she would be very glad to draw him into a marriage; if Allan were disinherited, and had only his own £200 a year, it would be a splendid match for her."

"We must prevent Allan's doing anything so excessively foolish."

This was strong language from the gentle Anne, and Miss Challoner felt glad to think she had an ally. "Then you will do all for me that you can, Anne? Thank you. You have only to let me know while I am abroad; as long as the girl is here we are safe. Her mother is as proud as a fallen angel, and Allan would scarcely dare to marry her here, under our very eyes."

"How long has this gone on? When did Allan take this fancy?"