

Mr. Carlton was unable to repress an enquiring glance, but he felt at the same time as if the girl were being insulted in having even her name mentioned by the man beside him.

"I really hardly know how to tell you what I have heard. I hate a scandalmonger," said Sir William.

"Do you intend me to understand that scandal is at work with Miss Brereton's name?"

"Well, scandal I can hardly call it. It is merely the talk of the country."

Mr Carlton could not prevent the flush which rose to his face, nor the deadly paleness which followed, and the tormentor saw the signs though he appeared to walk on calmly beside his horse, which at this instant was seized with a sudden fit of restiveness, and required the whole of his master's attention, in order to keep him from jumping first to one, and then to the other side of the road. When the restless fit was over, Sir William continued quietly enough: "Yes, as I was observing, it is merely country talk, and therefore not to be depended upon, I dare say."

"But what is this talk after all?" asked Mr. Carlton somewhat impatiently.

"Oh, only—but you know, I really hardly like to spread the report any further," was the still doubtful reply.

"Just as you please. But you have said enough to make me think it is something very bad that people say of a girl you profess to respect."

"How so? What do you mean?"

"Why? Did you not acknowledge her to be modest and gentle?"

"Oh, yes—certainly—certainly. Well, I don't so much mind telling you. On your honour though you won't mention my name?"

"Of course not—of course not. You can trust me not to add to a report, which already seems widely enough spread!"

"Well, people do say, (but I dare say, as I remarked before, it is mere talk), people do say that she is clandestinely engaged to somebody—no body knows whom—and with him she holds secret meetings. This is the reason of the long lonely rides she takes at the same hour every day. Nothing but the mere fact has transpired as yet. His name is a secret to every one—even to the groom who is supposed to be in her confidence."

During this speech, Mr. Carlton's face had assumed a smile of irrepressible sarcasm. When it was over, he said, "It is a lie from beginning to end. A foul calumny!"

Sir William shrugged his shoulders, and observed quietly, "I don't believe it myself. As I said, it is talk in the country, that's all."

"How can you repeat such a disgraceful report?"