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"LORD ABOVE! HOW DID YOU EVER FIND ME, JOEL?"

"NO INTENTIONS."

BY FLORENCE MARYAT.

Author of "Loos's Conflict," "Veronique," etc.

CHAPTER I.

It is towards the close of a long, bright day in June, that a young collegian enters, somewhat hastily, the courtyard of an inn on the outskirts of one of our university towns.

"Holloa there!" he calls sharply to a skulking ostler, who recognises him with a touch of the forelock; "bring my horse round, will you, and be quick about it!"

As the ostler disappears to obey his orders the young man leans lazily against the stable wall, and the traces of some secret care or annoyance are very visible upon his countenance. He ought to possess neither; for he is young, good-looking, affluent, and of high birth, being the second son of the Earl of Norham; but what charm is there to make even earls' sons invulnerable against the effects of the woes which they create for themselves? A few months back Eric Keir almost believed that the world was made for him and men in the same position as himself; to-day, he would give the world, were it his own, to be able to retrace his steps and undo that which is irremediable. And yet he has not completed his two-and-twentieth year!

As the ostler brings his horse—a fine bay animal of some value—up to his side, Eric Keir starts as though he had been dreaming, and seizing the reins abruptly, is about to spring into the saddle. His foot, however, has but reached the stirrup, when he is accosted from the other side.

"Why, Keir, old fellow! what an age it is since we met! Where have you been hiding yourself? I seem to have seen scarcely anything of you during the whole term." And the hand of Saville Moxon, a fellow student, though not at the same college, is thrust forward eagerly to take his own.

At which, Eric Keir descends to earth again with an appearance of being less pleased than embarrassed at his encounter with his friend, who is, moreover, intimately acquainted with all the members of his family.

"If you have not seen me, Moxon, it is your own fault," he replies, moodily; "for you know where to find me when I am at home."

"Ah! exactly so, my dear fellow,—when you are at home; but have you any distinct recollection of when you last practised that rather negative virtue? For my part, I can affirm that you have sported the oak on, at least, a dozen occasions during the last two months, when I have been desirous of palming my irreproachable company upon you. What do you do with yourself out of college hours?"

At this question, innocent though it appears, Keir visibly reddens, and then tries to cover his confusion by a rough answer.

"Much the same as you do, I suppose;—much the same as every man does who is condemned to be cooped up for three parts of the year in this musty old town: try to forget that there is such a place."

But Saville Moxon is not to be put out of temper so easily.

"By riding out of it, as you are going to do now," he says, with a light laugh, as he lays his hand upon the horse's mane. "Where are you bound to, Eric?"

"What business is that of yours?" is trembling upon the lips of Eric Keir; but he represses the inclination to utter it, and substitutes the answer, "Nowhere in particular."

"Then don't let me detain you. I want to speak to you, but I can walk by your side a little way;—or, stay; I dare say they have an animal in the stables they can let me have, and we'll take a gallop together—as we used to do in the old days, Keir."

But to this proposal Eric Keir appears anything but agreeable.

"By no means," he rejoins, hastily. "At least, I know they have nothing you would care to mount; and I am quite at your service, Moxon, if you wish to speak to me. Here, ostler! hold my horse."

"But why should I keep you from your ride?"

"Because I prefer it;—prefer, that is to say, speaking to a friend quietly to howling at him across the road. Let us turn out of this courtyard, where every wall has ears and every window a pair of eyes. And now what is your business with me?"

