

She drew in a steadying breath. He had given her a cue that made plain speaking a shade less difficult.

"My darling boy," she said quietly, "I've never played at pretences with you and I can't do it now. You admit this has been sharp work. And, honestly, I wish you had waited. I should have thought better of your judgment and the quality of—your love."

He frowned sharply. "I didn't come here for a preachment. The last thing one would expect from you. I suppose it means you've taken one of your prejudices against her."

"Dear, I don't *know* her yet. No more do you."

"Well, anyway, I love her. Strikes me that's the straightest road to knowledge. And as she loves me——"

"Did she tell you so, Mark—quite unmistakably?"

"Well, of course," he retorted with rising temper; and was suddenly confronted by the realisation that Bel had done nothing of the kind. The discovery made him angrier than ever; but there was no untruthfulness in him. "I don't know about unmistakably. You don't expect a girl to make passionate declarations. Isn't the fact of her accepting me proof enough for any one?"

"Is it?" Lady Forsyth had herself in hand now, and she could not forgo her one chance of candour even while she perceived the futility of reasoning with a man in his exalted state. "Don't you realise that, in your case, there are . . . other factors. Your position, your title——"

"My—? Great Scott!" he stood speechless. The thing had simply not occurred to him. Title and position were, for him, as much a matter of course as the hair on his head. Then, as surprise subsided, anger flared up again. "Upon my soul, Mother, I don't know what's come to you. One would hardly think it was from you I'd learnt to credit people with the best motives. Are you trying to insinuate that