

The lace-shrouded windows of the room are open, and the faint, rich odor from the boxes of stocks and mignonette that adorn its sills floats into the chamber, bringing with it a memory of hot-house plants, while band music from an adjoining square commences to make itself indistinctly heard.

"Yes, *nothing*," continues Mrs. St. John, rendered bolder by her daughter's passiveness and her own indignation. "I have just put the question to him—it was my duty to do so, seeing what marked attention he has paid you lately, and—I couldn't have believed it of Mr. Keir; I thought so much more highly of him—he told me to my face that he had never even thought of you as anything but a friend. A friend, indeed! Oh, my dearest girl! that any man should dare to speak of you in such terms of indifference—it will break my heart!" and Mrs. St. John attempts to cast herself into her daughter's arms again. But Irene puts her from her—repulses her—almost roughly.

"Mother! how *dared* you do it?"

The words are such as she has never presumed to use to her mother before; the tone even is not her own. Mrs. St. John looks up startled.

"Irene!"

"How dared you subject me to such an insult—expose me in so cruel a manner; make me despicable to myself?"

"My child, what do you mean?"

"Cannot a man be friendly and agreeable without being called upon to undergo so humiliating an examination? Is a girl never to speak to one of the other sex without being suspected of a desire to marry him? Is there to be no friendship, no cordiality, no confidence in this world, but the parties are immediately required to bind themselves down to a union which would be repugnant to both? It is this style of thing which makes me hate society and all its shams—which will go far now to make me hate myself!"

"Irene! my dear!" cries Mrs. St. John, trembling all over; "you do not consider that I am your guardian, and this precaution, which appears so unnecessary to you, became a duty for me to take. Would you have had me receive his visits here until he had entangled your affections more inextricably, perhaps, than he has done at present?"

"Who says he has done so—who *dares* to say it?"

The girl's pride is raging and warring within

her. She has been roused from her tender love-dream by a stern reality, she is quivering under the shock even as she speaks, but her first thought is to save her wounded honor.

"My Irene! I thought—I never dreamed but that you liked him—judging from the manner in which you received and spoke of him."

"Liked him! Is liking, love? You judged me too quickly, mother. You have not read down to the depths of my heart."

"You do not love him, then, my darling—this business will not make you miserable? O Irene—speak! you cannot think what suspense costs me."

The girl hesitates for a moment, turns to see the frail figure before her, the thin clasped hands, the anxious, sorrow-laden eyes waiting her verdict, and hesitates no longer.

"I would not marry Eric Keir, mother, to-morrow for all this world could give me."

"Oh! thank God! thank God!" cries Mrs. St. John, hysterically, as she sinks upon a sofa. In another moment Irene is kneeling by her side.

"Dearest mother! did I speak unkindly to you? Oh! forgive me! You know how proud I am, and it hurts me, just for the time being. But it is over now. Forget it, dear mother—we will both forget it, and every thing concerning it—and go on as before. Oh! what a wretch I am to have made you weep!"

"I did it for the best, Irene. I only did what I considered my duty—it is a very common thing: it takes place every day. But so long as his conduct does not affect your happiness, there is no harm done."

"There is no harm done," echoes the girl, with parched lips, and eyes that are determined not to cry.

"It will put a stop to his coming here, and I dare say you will miss him at first, Irene. Young people like to be together; but you must remember how detrimental such an intimacy would be to your future prospects; no one else would presume to come forward while a man like Eric Keir is hanging about the house; and I should never forgive myself if I permitted him to amuse himself at the expense of your settlement in life. He ought to know better than to wish such a thing."

"He knows better now," replied her daughter, soothingly.

"Yes—yes! if only he has not wounded you, O Irene!" with a sudden burst of passion most foreign to her disposition, "you are my only hope