

"You had better write yourself, Keir; you may be able to give your brother the reason, which you refuse to me."

After this, they pace up and down for a few minutes in silence; minutes which appear long to Eric Keir, for he pulls out his watch meanwhile to ascertain the hour.

"Keir, are you in debt?" says Moxon.

"Not a penny—or, at all events, not a penny that I shall be unable to pay up on demand. Has any one been informing you to the contrary?"

"No one—it was but a surmise. I hope, then—I hope there is no truth in the rumor that has reached me, that you find more charms in a certain little village, not twenty miles from Oxford, than in any thing the old town contains!"

Saville Moxon is hardly prepared for the effect which his words produce. For Eric Keir stops short upon the country-path which they are traversing, and the veins rise upon his forehead, and his whole face darkens and changes beneath the passion which he cannot help exhibiting, although he is too courteous to give vent to it without further cause.

"What village?" he demands, quickly.

"Fretterley!"

Then the knowledge that he is in the wrong, and gossip in the right, and that something he is very anxious to keep secret is on the verge of being discovered, gets the better of Eric Keir's discretion, and he flares out in an impetuous manner, very much in character with his quick, impulsive nature:

"And what the d—l do your confounded friends mean by meddling in my affairs?"

"Who said they were friends of mine?" retorts Moxon; and the laugh with which he says it is as oil cast on the flame of Eric Keir's wrath.

"I will allow of no interference with any thing I choose to do or say. I am not a child, to be followed, and gaped at, and cackled about, by a parcel of old women in breeches; and you may tell your informant so, from me, as soon as you please."

"Keir, this is folly, and you know it. Fretterley and its doings are too near at hand to escape all observation; and the fact of your visiting there; and the vicar of the parish having three very pretty daughters, is quite sufficient to set the gossips talking; but not to provoke such an ebullition of anger from yourself."

"I don't care a fig about the vicar, or his daughters either! But I do care to hear that I can't ride a mile in one direction or another with-

out all Oxford talking of it. I hate that style of feminine cackle which some of the fellows of the college have taken up; and I say again, that they are a set of confounded meddlers; and, if I catch any one of them prying into my concerns, I won't leave him a whole bone in his body!"

"You are childish!" exclaims Moxon. "As I repeated the report, Keir, I suppose I am one of the 'confounded meddlers' you allude to, and it may not be safe for me to remain longer in your company. And so, good day to you, and a better spirit when we meet again." And, turning abruptly from him, he commences to walk in the direction of the town. But slowly, and somewhat sadly; for he has known Eric Keir from boyhood, and, imperious as he is with strangers, it is not often he exhibits the worst side of his character to his friends.

For a moment—while pride and justice are struggling for the mastery within him—Eric looks at the retreating figure, and then, with sudden impulse, he strides hastily after Moxon, and tenders him his hand.

"Forgive me, Saville! I was wrong—I hardly knew what I was saying."

"I was sure you would confess it, sooner or later, Eric; your faults are all upon the surface."

And then they shake hands heartily, and feel themselves again.

"But about this Fretterley business," says Eric, after a slight hesitation—"stop the gossip as much as lies in your power, there's a good fellow! For I swear to you I have no more intention of making love to the vicar's daughters, than I have to the vicar himself."

"I never supposed you had. But when young and fashionable men persist in frequenting one locality, the lookers-on will draw their inferences. We are not all earls' sons, remember, Eric; and you dwell in the light of an unenviable notoriety."

"Unenviable indeed, if even one's footsteps are to be dogged! And fancy what my father would say, if such a rumor reached his ears!"

"He would think nothing of it, Keir. He knows that you love him too well to dream of making a *mésalliance*."

"Who talks of a *mésalliance*?" interposes the other, hurriedly.

"Myself alone. The vicar's daughters, though exceedingly handsome, and, no doubt, very amiable girls, are not in the position of life from which Lord Norham expects you to choose a wife. He thinks a great deal of you, Eric."

"More's the pity; he had much better build his hopes on Muiraven or Cecil."