

"Yes, even that of my being an artful flirt, *alias* a ball-room belle—so be it; but, permit me to hint that art and hypocrisy are not entirely confined to ball-room belles. They are also, and not unfrequently, the characteristics of a certain class of demure, saint-like young ladies, who, though they would not wear a ringlet, no, nor a jewel, so great in their abhorrence of worldly vanity, scruple not to deceive their nearest and dearest friends—to laugh at the holiest ties."

"Silence, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, do not dare to impugn Miss Aleyn's candour and truth, for 'tis at her, of course, your bitter taunts are levelled. Pardon me, if I say, her known worth and uprightness place her beyond the reach of even your disparaging remarks. In Miss Aleyn's simple word, I would place more reliance than in the most solemn asseverations of others."

"You would," said Florence derisively. "Ask her, then, whose miniature she wears so carefully chained round her neck, pressed to her heart both night and day. If she denies it, tell her Florence Fitz-Hardinge had it in her hands, eye, and examined it at her leisure. True, the portrait is that of a young and handsome gentleman, but she has only to give you her word that all is right, and you will of course enquire no more. Here is a splendid opportunity for you to display the implicit faith and confidence you have just so eloquently expressed." The effect of this cruel speech on her listener, was perfectly startling. He sprang to his feet, his cheek pale as death, his eyes actually blazing with passion, and in a low hissing voice, strangely different to his late impetuous accents, exclaimed:

"I dare not tell you, Miss Fitz Hardinge, that you have lied, but you have uttered words which must be retracted or explained at once. You stir not from this spot till you finish what you have begun." His companion, alarmed at the fearful change in his demeanour, foreseeing already some of the consequences of her heartless recklessness, was silent, fearing farther speech would only make matters worse. "Do you hear me, Florence, will you refuse to explain or allay the hellish doubts you have so willingly evoked?"

"For Heaven's sake! Mr. Clinton, do not let us have a scene," she exclaimed, shrinking back from his fierce, menacing look. "This is no time or place for explanations."

"You are right, Miss Fitz-Hardinge, though you should have remembered that ere you gave cause for them; I shall leave you, though, as my presence blanches your cheek so strangely. Elsewhere, I may obtain the information I seek from you, in vain," and compressing his blood-

less lips he turned disdainfully from her, and strode into the next apartment. Florence, trembling with agitation, had to mask her emotion under a careless smile, and quiet with frivolous talk, the curiosity and doubts of the few who had noticed her singularly energetic dialogue with Clinton. Meanwhile, the latter with a brow dark as night, strode from room to room in quest of Nina, but his search was unavailing, and he was on the point of abandoning it, when a light in the conservatory attracted his attention. As a last resource he entered and he was successful, for at the upper end, bending over some rare blossom which he himself had given her, stood Nina, whom a violent headache had driven from the heat and noise of the saloons to the conservatory's cool precincts. Intent on her occupation she heard not her lover approach, and not even when he stood beside her, was she conscious of his presence. For a moment as his glance wandered over her small child-like figure, the little hands that tended so caressingly the flower, his own gift; a thousand memories of her past gentleness and devotion, of her constancy and truth rushed upon him. The dark shadow, passed from his brow, from his heart, and he was almost on the point of throwing himself at her feet to confess his doubts and solicit her forgiveness, when she moved, and the light of the lamp flashed brightly on the small chain to which Florence had intimated the miniature was attached. A viper coiled around her neck could not have changed more suddenly the whole expression of his being. Again his form regained its stern erectness, his brow its angry gloom.

"Nina!" he suddenly ejaculated; "I have something to say to you!"

Startled by his sudden unexpected address, she sprang round with a faint cry, and gazed tremblingly upon him.

"Do you hear me?" he continued, with increasing sternness; "I have some questions to ask you—are you prepared to answer them?"

Still he obtained no answer from his listener—Nina was too terrified for that. She who had learned to tremble at an impatient look upon her lover's face, was it wonderful that thought and speech forsook her, as she met the fierce dark gaze bent upon her. Her colour varying from deathly paleness to deepest crimson, her heart beating with wild rapidity, she stood leaning for support against the window sill. Her agitation, her manifest terror, so remarkable in one usually calm and self-possessed, seemed to him unfeeling proofs of her gait—and his brow still darker, his tones still sterner, he continued:

"Answer me, Nina Aleyn! refute the tale that