

names soon get connected; and so I consider it my duty to ascertain"—here Mrs. St. John coughs twice, and swallows some fearful obstacle in her throat—"to ask you, in short, *what are your intentions respecting her?*"

The murder is out, and poor Mrs. St. John sinks back in her chair, pale and exhausted, as though her own fate depended on his answer.

"Intentions! my intentions!" cries Eric Keir, starting from his seat.

The tone of surprise and incredulity in which he utters the words seems to put new courage into his listener; it arouses her maternal fears, and with her fears her indignation, and she answers, quickly:

"You cannot pretend to misunderstand my meaning, Mr. Keir; young as you are, you are too much a man of the world for that, and must know that if you are so constantly seen in the company of a young lady, people will begin to inquire if you are engaged to be married to her—or not."

"I—I—know that I have trespassed very much upon your hospitality," he commences, stammering, "and taken the greatest pleasure in coming here, but I have never addressed Miss St. John except in the character of a friend, and supposed that you entirely understood the footing on which I visited her."

"And you mean to tell me," exclaims the poor mother, who is shaking from head to foot with nervous excitement—"you intend me to understand, Mr. Keir, that all your attentions have meant nothing, and that my daughter is no more to you than any other girl?"

The whole truth flashes on him now; he sees the fraud of which he has been guilty, both to his own heart and to hers; he knows that he loves Irene St. John as his soul; and yet he is forced to stammer on:

"I never said that, Mrs. St. John. I hold your daughter too highly—much too highly, in my admiration and—and—esteem, and value her friendship too much, to be guilty of so false a sentiment. But, as to marriage: deeply as I may—as I *do* regret the necessity for saying so, I must tell you that it is not in my power, at present, to marry any one!"

"Not in your power! what do you mean?"

"I mean that, being but a younger son, I am not, unfortunately, in a position to take such a responsibility upon myself so early. If you knew my circumstances, Mrs. St. John, you would be the first person to refuse your daughter's hand to me."

"What! as the younger son of the Earl of Norham? Mr. Keir, you are having recourse to a miserable subterfuge; you have been trifling with my child—you would not have dared to make so paltry an excuse to Irene's father."

"O Mrs. St. John! you do me wrong. I should have spoken just the same (I could have spoken in no other way) even to your husband. Yet had I pleaded a disinclination for marriage, you would have been no better pleased."

"I have been foolish," exclaims Mrs. St. John, trying hard to keep back the tears which she would consider it beneath her dignity to shed; "I have been blind to allow your intimacy to go on so long—but I could not believe you would act so unworthy a part. My poor Irene!"

"Good God! Mrs. St. John"—with terrible emphasis—"you do not mean to tell me that Irene shares your suspicions—that she has learned to regard me with any feeling warmer than the friendship we have pledged each other?"

"What right have you to ask, sir? What right have you to call her by her Christian name? I have not been accustomed to hear my daughter spoken of so familiarly by the gentlemen of her acquaintance."

"O Mrs. St. John! don't be hard upon me. Believe me when I say that in seeking the friendship of Miss St. John I had no intention beyond that of deriving great pleasure and profit from our intercourse. I never dreamed that my actions would be misconstrued either by the world or yourself. I have never breathed a word to her concerning love or marriage—I *could* not have done it, knowing how impossible it is for me to redeem such a pledge, at present."

"I hear your words, Mr. Keir, but I do not understand them. I only feel that you have been acting a very thoughtless, if not a dishonorable part, and that it becomes my duty to see an immediate stop put to it. And, therefore, from the moment you quit this room, you must consider that our intimacy is at an end."

At this intimation Eric Keir becomes visibly agitated.

"At an end! Do you mean to say that I am to see her no more—that my visits here are to cease once and forever?"

"Of course they are! Would you go on deceiving my poor girl, only to break her heart at the last?" cries Mrs. St. John, thrown off her guard by the vehemence of his manner. "You little guess my love for her, Mr. Keir, if you think I would permit the happiness of her life to be wrecked in this manner."