

our hands. Had you any reason to suppose, now, that your late lamented er—er—uncle designed to alter his testamentary bequests in favor of—"

"Mr. Selwyn," exclaims the young man abruptly, "I have already told you that I can wait till to-morrow to learn my uncle's last wishes, and I consider your attempt to provoke my curiosity a most irregular proceeding. You were of necessity in Colonel Mordaunt's confidence, be good enough to respect it until the proper moment arrives for its disclosure."

"Oh! very good—very good! just as it should be, of course," replies the ruffled lawyer, "only public surprises are apt to be attended with inconvenience, and I thought, perhaps, that a little preparation—"

But here Mr. Selwyn indignantly breaks off leaving Oliver in a most uncomfortable state of mind, and dreading above all things the moment when the will shall be read and these mysterious innuendoes brought to light.

He is very anxious that Irene shall not be present at the reading, but she is resolute to appear in her proper place, as the mistress of Fen Court.

"If I consulted my own inclinations, Oliver, I should remain up-stairs; but that woman will be present, and I am determined she shall see that I can bear the fate which she has brought upon me without wincing. It would be such a triumph to her to think that the mere anticipation had made me too ill to appear."

"Why will you talk in this way, Irene? Why prognosticate misfortune which I cannot believe in?"

"Wait and see, Oliver," is all she answers.

It is a bright, cold day when they carry Colonel Mordaunt to his grave in the quiet churchyard of Priestley. Irene is anxious to attend the funeral, but her wish is overruled by Oliver, who foresees that if she does so, his aunt Isabella, and probably Mrs. Quekett, will follow her example, and make a scene during the ceremony. He could trust Irene, but he cannot trust the others; and, like most young men, he has a righteous horror of a scene. So he persuades the young widow to remain at home, and is himself chief mourner. It is not a grand funeral, but it is a very imposing one, followed by almost all the members of the hunt, with Sir John Coote at their head; and it gratifies Irene to see how much her husband was held in consideration by those who knew him most intimately. At last it is over. Oliver is back again; the visitors, with the exception of Sir John, have dispersed, and the family are left to themselves.

Three o'clock has been fixed for the reading of the will, and, as the hour strikes, Irene, dressed in her deep mourning, with Tommy clinging to her hand, comes downstairs for the first time since her bereavement, and, walking into the dining-room on Oliver Ralston's arm, takes the chair which he wheels forward for her, and seats herself in the centre of the circle. She bows to the company generally as she enters, but she looks at no one but the lawyer, though she is conscious, without seeing it, that Mrs. Quekett is sitting nearly opposite to her, with her elbow resting easily upon the table and a satisfied, malignant smile of coming triumph fixed upon her countenance. Mr. Selwyn hums and ha's as he unfolds the parchment.

Why do lawyers always "hum" and "ha" before they read a will? Are they nervous by nature (they ought not to be), or is the peculiarity alluded to supposed to add dignity to their position, or importance to their charge? It is a fact they always do so.

Mr. Selwyn, being no exception to the rule, clears his throat until he makes himself quite hoarse, and is obliged to ask for a glass of water. Then he gives two or three final coughs as a wind-up, and proceeds to make the following statement:—

"Life is very uncertain," commences Mr. Selwyn, as he smooths out the creases in the parchment, "in fact, there is nothing certain in life. We are used to great changes in our profession, and great surprises—very great surprises!—indeed, we are never surprised at anything we may hear or see—"

"Has this anything to do with the will?" says Irene, with an imploring glance at Oliver, who immediately addresses the lawyer:

"We are exceedingly obliged for your sentiments, Mr. Selwyn, but Mrs. Mordaunt would prefer your proceeding to business. You must remember this is the first time she has ventured downstairs."

"Ah! of course; I have to beg your pardon, madam—and yet, under the circumstances, perhaps—Well, well, then" (with a more cheerful air)—"to business. Not but what my remarks were made with a view in that direction. I have a document here, the contents of which I think are unknown to most present. It will, in fact, I fear" (with a glance at Irene over his spectacles) "prove to be one of those surprises to which I alluded on first taking my place among you—"

"It will not prove, perhaps, so great a surprise as you anticipate," says Irene in a clear cold voice that makes Mrs. Quekett start. "At any rate, we are assembled to hear it."

"As you will, madam—as you will," returns Mr. Selwyn, somewhat nettled. "I only wished to spare you an unpleasant shock."

"A shock for Mrs. Mordaunt! What can he mean?" exclaims Sir John Coote quickly.

The housekeeper smiles furtively, and smooths the crape upon her dress-sleeve.

"Sir John, I must entreat you to be quiet and let Mr. Selwyn proceed," says Irene.

"Whatever may be in store for me, be assured that I am quite able to bear it."

Sir John exchanges glances of astonishment with Oliver.

"You are to go on," says the latter roughly to the lawyer. On which the reading of the will is commenced and finished without further interruption.

It is very brief and very explicit. It commences with a bequest of five thousand pounds to his sister Isabella Mordaunt, and goes on to leave all the remainder of his property, funded and personal—his house and lands, and plate and furniture—to his illegitimate son Oliver, generally known as Oliver Ralston, on condition of his taking the name of Mordaunt. Of Irene, from beginning to end, not a syllable is mentioned.

How do they receive it?

As the words, one after another, drop markedly from the lawyer's lips, the housekeeper may be observed to turn uneasily upon her seat—she is evidently disappointed; the cousins look miserable; Sir John Coote grows crimson in the face, and half rises from his chair. To Irene's pale cheeks there mounts a flush of pride, and she draws her adopted child, almost defiantly, closer to her side; and Isabella, as her name is mentioned, weeps loud and openly. But Oliver Ralston demands a paragraph to himself.

As the truth breaks in upon his mind, that Irene has been defrauded of her rights, his teeth set and his hand clenches itself furtively upon the arm of his chair. But as the fatal termination of the will reveals who he is, and the reason why he inherits to her detriment, he looks up quickly, the blood forsakes his face, and he rises tremblingly to his feet.

"It's a lie!" he says, striking his hand upon the table.

"Oliver—Oliver, for God's sake, forbear! Think what you are saying!" cries Irene as she catches hold of his arm.

"Let me go, Irene! I repeat it," he says furiously, "I am not his son. It's some infernal lie hatched up by that old harridan for my destruction. Yes," he continues, addressing Mrs. Quekett, who has risen, as though to answer him, "I don't care what you say, nor what you think. You have made the misery of this house for years past. You have held the secrets of my uncle and my uncle's father over their heads until they hardly dared to act without your assistance. But your reign is over. Your last victim is in his grave; and you shall not continue your work of infamy in my behalf."

"But, my dear sir, what has this good lady to do with my late client's bequests?" interrupts the lawyer soothingly.

"Command yourself, Ralston," urges Sir John.

"Command myself! Stand quietly by to see this poor girl robbed of her rights, and my own life branded with a stigma, for which no wealth can atone! I am not his son. I tell you I am his nephew, the child of his sister Mary—"

"His sister's child died before she did, young man. You are the child of my daughter, Mary Quekett; and if the shame of hearing it kills you, it's no more than it did to my poor girl."

It is the housekeeper that speaks to him.

"I won't believe it," he mutters, as he staggers backwards. But he does believe it, for all his bravado.

"You can do as you please about that," continues Mrs. Quekett; "but I can take my Bible oath that it's the truth. And for what should the Colonel go to leave you all his property, if it wasn't? He was mistaken enough in those that he thought worthy, and thought he might have found better than yourself, may be, to step into his shoes—"

"Silence, woman!" exclaims Oliver, in a voice of thunder. "If this most iniquitous will is allowed to stand, I am master in this house now—and I order you to leave the room."

"You order me to leave the room! I am who is your nearest of kin—your own mother's mother," she says, breathless, in her surprise.

"Don't mention the fact—don't remind me of it, lest I should do an injury. If you were twenty times my mother's mother, I should have no compassion for you. Leave the room, I say, and rid us of a presence we detest."

"But my dear sir—" interposes the lawyer, unwisely.

"Who are you to dictate to me?" exclaims Oliver, turning round on him; "you have come to the end of your infernal parchment, I suppose, and your business here is completed. If you have read it aright, this house is mine, and I shall issue what orders in it I think fit. I command that woman to leave this room, and at once, or I shall put her out of it."

"Oh! you needn't be afraid that I shall stay to be laid violent hands on by you, young man, though you are my grandson," replies Mrs. Quekett, tossing her head. "I have my own income, thank heaven, and no need to be beholden to you or any one. I think the old gentleman might have done better than choose you for his successor; but as it is, he did it for my sake more than your own, and as a recompense for what I've suffered at his hands, though there's few recompenses would make up for it. He led away my poor daughter before she came to her sixteenth year, and had to pay pretty sharp for it ever since, for I don't believe he's had a quiet home since he passed you off on the world as his sister's son; and the many minds he's been in about it since he married that young woman—"

"Will you leave the room?" cries Oliver again; and this time Mrs. Quekett thinks it more politic to acquiesce.

"Well, as there's nothing more to stay for, I don't see why I shouldn't; but it's not the

last you'll hear of me, young man, by a good bit." And so saying, white with envy and malice, she sails away.

"Irene, I cannot bear it," exclaims Oliver, as he sinks into a chair and covers his face with his hands. "If it had been anything but that—"

"My poor boy, I feel it so much for your sake. Sir John, is there anything more to do? any reason why we should not be left alone?"

"None whatever, my dear. Mr. Selwyn, Mrs. Mordaunt wishes the room cleared. Be good enough to retire with these gentlemen to the next."

So the company, much disappointed at the issue of events, disappear, and Sir John Coote goes with them, and no one is left with the heir of Fen Court but Irene and Isabella and the little child.

Oliver remains where he has thrown himself—miserable, abashed, and silent.

"Oliver," says Irene presently in her sweet, sad voice, "be comforted. He did you a great injury, but he has tried to atone for it. Remember how kind and loving he always proved himself towards you, and forgive him for the want of courage that prevented his letting you know your real relationship from the first."

"Forgive him! when he has robbed you of everything. When he has disgraced you in the eyes of the world by passing over your name in his will as though you were not worthy to be mentioned, instead of being the most careful, attentive, affectionate wife a man could have. He was not worthy of you. I never thought so little of him as I do now."

"Oh, hush, Oliver! Pray hush! You cannot know how you are wounding me. I do not pretend to be indifferent to the turn affairs have taken. It is a great disappointment and misfortune, and shame to me, but I feel that he is suffering for it now so much more than I am, that I forget my misery in the contemplation of his. And I cannot permit you to blame him before me. When Philip made that will he thought that he was doing right, and I am very thankful that, as I was not to have it, he should have left his property to you instead of to some public institution."

"I am not thankful at all. I hate the very idea of supplanting you, I never will do it, Irene. I refuse to take advantage of my—my—uncle's imbecility, or to accept a trust which is rightfully yours, and which you have done nothing to forfeit. What! Do you think I will reign here whilst you are starving out in the cold? I will cut my throat first."

"I shall not starve, Oliver; I have my own little income. Philip knew that I was provided for."

"Pshaw!—a hundred a year. How can you live on that, who have been accustomed to every luxury? It is impossible."

"It is quite possible; and I mean to do it."

"My dear Mrs. Mordaunt," here interrupts Isabella, for the first time—"but what—have I understood rightly—why does Oliver speak of your leaving the Court?"

"Did you not listen to your brother's will?" replies Irene quietly. "He has left everything to—his son—"

"His son! Oh, dear! And you know it, then. And I always told Philip it would be so much better to tell at once. But why to his son? I don't think I can have listened properly—these things upset me so. You are not going away, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt?"

"I must go away, Isabella. Dear Philip (you must not blame him, for he thought that he was committing an act of justice) has made Oliver his heir, therefore Fen Court is no longer mine. But I am not ambitious, and I shall do very well, and will not have any of my friends concern themselves on my account."

"If you will not remain at Fen Court, neither will I," interposes Oliver.

"But where will you go?" demands Isabella excitedly; "and you have so little money."

"Dear Isabella, don't worry yourself about that. I have plenty of places to go to, and kind friends to look after me, and I shall be very happy by-and-by," says Irene with a sob, as she remembers how little truth there is in what she says.

"But we shall not see you," replies Miss Mordaunt, as she rises and advances to the side of her sister-in-law; "and—and—oh! Irene!" she goes on, becoming natural in her emotion, "don't go away, don't leave us again. You are the only creature I have loved for years."

"My dear Isabella!" says the young widow, as she tears rise to her eyes at this unexpected proof of affection, "why did you not let me know it before. It would have made me so happy."

"Oh! I couldn't—I didn't like—and then, you know, you had Philip. But now—and to think he could have wronged you so! Oh! my dear girl, do take my money—it's very little, but I don't want it. I have the legacy my father left me, and Oliver will let me stay on here. It would make me so much more comfortable to think you had it, and I couldn't touch halfpenny of it, whilst things remain as they are."

"Bravo! Aunt Isabella!" exclaims Oliver. "I didn't think you were half such a brick. Live here? of course you shall! You must both live here, or I shall have the place shut up."

"What have I done that you should be so kind to me?" says Irene, as she bursts into tears of gratitude and surprise. But she has no intention of accepting either of their offers, nevertheless.

"You do not understand my feelings on this subject," she says to Oliver, a few hours later, when they are again discussing the advisability of her departure. "I have been suspected of the

grossest crime of which a woman can be guilty: that of marrying an honest man under false pretences; and my husband's feelings concerning it have been made public property; for you can have no doubt that the curiosity which the provisions of his will excited has been already satisfied by Mrs. Quekett's version of the story."

"Can nothing be done to rectify the slander?"

"Nothing. Pray do not attempt it," she says, shrinking from the idea of such an explanation being necessary. "I am conscious of my own integrity. Let me live the scandal down—only it cannot be at Fen Court."

"Why not? Had my uncle lived a few hours longer, this will would have been altered."

"Perhaps so; but I must abide by it as it stands—and I have too much pride, Oliver, to let the world think I would accept a position he didn't think me worthy to maintain. It was a fatal mistake on his part, but it is God's will, and I must suffer for it. I am quite determined to quit the Court."

"Then I shall quit it too. It will not live here in your stead. It would make me wretched."

"Oliver! you cannot mean it. You would never be so foolish. What will become of all this fine property without a master?"

"I don't care a hang what becomes of it. If you will stay and look after it with me, I will remain."

"That would be impossible, Oliver, in any case. You forget what you are talking about."

"Then stay here by yourself."

"Still more impossible. Pray do not torture me by any more entreaties. In plain words, Oliver, this child is supposed to be mine. He is not mine, but I have no intention of parting with him, at all events at present. Therefore we must go away and hide our humiliated heads somewhere together."

"I wish you had never seen the brat."

"I don't."

"What! not after all he has brought upon you?"

"It is not his fault."

"Poor little devil. I ought to feel for him. Oh, Irene! the bitterest part of it all is the knowledge that I have any of that woman's blood running in my veins. When I think of it I could—I could—" clenching his fist.

"Hush! yes, it is a bitter pill to swallow. But think of the misery it must have been to him. To have her threats of exposure constantly held over his head. Poor Philip! Had we been more confidential, how much unhappiness we might have saved each other. What do you intend to do about Mrs. Quekett?"

"Turn her out of the house!"

"Oh, Oliver! however hard it may be, you should remember now that she is—your grandmother!"

But the words are hardly out of her mouth before Irene is frightened at the effect of them.

"My grandmother!" he exclaims, rising suddenly to his feet. "It is that fact alone, Irene, that decides me. Had she not been my grandmother, I might have made allowances for her infamous conduct. But that she—who brought my mother into the world and professed to love her—should have systematically tortured his life and done all she could to set him against me, whom he had so fearfully wronged, completely steels my heart against her. Were she an ordinary servant, grasping, authoritative, and contentious, I might have made allowances for her age and length of service, and fidelity; but now I can make none. I am only anxious to rid myself of a presence I have always hated and now most thoroughly despise. Mrs. Quekett goes to-morrow."

"Have you told her so?"

"I have! We have just enjoyed a most stormy interview; but the old woman knows my mind, and that I am resolute. To-morrow sees her leave Fen Court, never to return, except in my bitterest memory."

"Try to forgive, Oliver."

"Don't ask me that yet, Irene. At present I can neither forgive nor forget. The man who strangles his bastard in the birth is a kinder father than he who permits him to grow up to maturity in ignorance of his misfortune."

The next few days pass quietly enough. The housekeeper is gone, and the Court is deserted. Irene has received a letter from her aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, and announces her intention of taking Tommy to Sydenham with her on a short visit.

"And afterwards you will return here, dear Irene," says Oliver; "I can decide on nothing till I know your plans."

"I will write to you on the subject," is all her answer, and they are obliged to let her go, and trust to persuading her to take up her final abode with them more effectually by letter than by word of mouth.

But when she has been at Sydenham for about a week, Irene writes to tell Oliver that he must at once abandon all hope that she will ever return to Fen Court. She has fixed on her future residence, she affirms, but intends for the present to keep its locality a secret, even from her own relations, in order that he may have no excuse for attempting to seek her out. It is a long letter, full of explanation, but written so calmly and resolutely that Oliver feels there is nothing to be done but acquiesce in her decision. She begs him, however, so earnestly, for her sake and the sake of her dear dead husband, not to abandon the property confided to his charge, that he feels bound to follow her wishes and remain where he is. He makes several attempts, nevertheless, to trace her whereabouts, by letters to Mrs. Cavendish and Mr. Walmley, the solicitor, but the lady appears as distressed at her niece leaving her in ignorance