

in Rochefort. She comes to understand that the companionship she needs is something more than is to be found in a strange crowd: it must be an active conversational presence—something that shall barter bright thoughts for her dull ones, and force her to exert her intellectual powers. A real wholesome want seldom arises in this world without the possibility of gratifying it. In a few days Irene finds the companion ready to hand.

She returns one afternoon to the hotel, after having permitted her feverish imagination to hold converse for hours with the fantastic horrors of Wiertz, and disturbs her mother in the midst of a conversation with a stranger—a gentleman of about fifty, or perhaps a few years older—whom Irene has never seen before.

She stands at the door for a moment irresolute, uncertain whether to enter or retreat; but Mrs. St. John catches sight of her.

"Irene, my darling!" she exclaims. "I am so glad you are come home! Only think: this gentleman is your nearest relation on your dear father's side—his cousin, Colonel Mordaunt; isn't it wonderful that we should have met each other here?"

CHAPTER III.

COLONEL MORDAUNT is the best specimen of a fine old English gentleman that Irene has ever come across. She sees that at the first glance. Of middle height, with a well-knit figure, florid complexion, good features, and hair with the lustre of gray satin on it, he presents all the outward qualifications that go to make up the picture of a man of birth and breeding, and she takes a fancy to her new relative at once. Mrs. St. John, too, who is in an unusual state of flush and flutter, seems to have been quite overcome by the unexpected encounter.

"Is it not strange," she keeps on repeating, "that we should have met here—in Brussels—after so many years?—Irene, my dear! you will welcome Colonel Mordaunt, I am sure, if only for your poor father's sake."

The girl comes forward with her hand extended, and the stranger, with old-fashioned politeness, and dead-and-gone chivalry, raises it respectfully to his lips.

"Poor Tom!" he murmurs as he does so; "poor Tom! I can trace a slight likeness to him as he was, even in your blooming face, my fair young cousin."

"She was always thought to have a look of him," sighs the mother, "but I scarcely imagined it was so apparent.—O Irene! you cannot think what a comfort it is for me to have stumbled on your cousin in this way—so weak and good-for-nothing as I am. You will never need to stay at home now for want of an escort—Colonel Mordaunt says he will be charmed to take you anywhere."

"With your own kind permission," interposes Colonel Mordaunt.

"You are very good," replies Irene. "Are you, then, staying in Brussels?"

"I am here for a few days, on my way back to England. I have been spending the summer at the Baths."

"Not remedially, I trust?" says Mrs. St. John, with a sudden, anxious glance of interest at the robust-looking man who stands before her.

"Well, I cannot quite say no: though precautionary would be the better word. You remember our family tendency to gout, Mrs. St. John? Poor Tom used to have a twinge of it occasionally, and it was the complaint that carried off my grandfather. I have had one or two warnings during the last four years, and so I took advantage of the hot weather to put myself to rights for the season."

"The season!" echoes Mrs. St. John, to whom there is no season but one.

"The hunting-season!" It sounds very dreadful, does it not? but I fear there is no other season that conveys any interest to my ears. I am master of the hounds down in my part of Leicestershire, and spend my days between the stables and the kennel. It is a fine sport, Mrs. St. John, and a man must have something to do."

"Then, I suppose you are very anxious to get home again," remarks Irene.

"I *was* anxious to do so, I confess, but I have no intention of stirring now, so long as I can be of any use to you or to your mother."

"How kind!" murmurs Mrs. St. John; and her daughter adds, "I am afraid you will find shopping and sight-seeing very tame work for which to exchange the pleasures of the field, Colonel Mordaunt."

"Without their motive, perhaps—yes. With their motive, they can admit of no rivalry in my eyes!"

"What an extremely polite old gentleman!" exclaims Irene, as soon as the colonel has disappeared. However did you find him out, mother?"