

Mrs. Quekett and a couple of medical men whom Irene has never seen before. They are all bending forward, but as the crowd divides to let her pass they turn and start.

"Not here—not here—my dear lady" exclaims one of the strangers, as he attempts to intercept her view. "Now, let me entreat you—"

But she pushes past him, and walks up to the table.

There lies her husband, dressed as when she parted with him on that morning, but dead—unmistakably dead!

She guessed it from the first—she knew what was awaiting her when she left the drawing-room: she had no hope when she entered this room; yet now that all suspense is over, that she cannot fail to see her suspicions were correct something will flicker up again before it is laid to rest for ever, and cause her trembling lips to form the words.

"Are—are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt, I regret to say. But, indeed, you ought not to be here. Let me conduct you back to your own room."

She shakes him off impatiently (it is Sir John Coote who has been speaking to her), and turns again to the doctor.

"How did it happen?"

"I am told—I believe—" he stammers, "Sir John was good enough to inform me it was on the occasion of the Colonel taking the brook down at Chapel's meadows—but all those sad details, my dear madam, would be better kept from you until—"

"Take him up to my room," she says next, in a tone which sounds more like weariness than anything else.

"Carry the—I think we had best leave it where it is, Mrs. Mordaunt," remonstrates Sir John.

"My servants are here. I do not wish to trouble any one else," she answers quietly.

"But, of course, if you wish it—"

"I do wish it. I wish him to be carried upstairs and laid upon our—our—bed," she says, with a slight catching in her voice.

Then half a dozen pairs of arms are placed tenderly beneath the dead body, and it is taken upstairs and laid where she desired it to be.

When the task is completed, the bearers stand about the bed, not knowing what to do or to say next.

"Please leave me," says Irene, after a pause.

"I must be alone."

"But is there nothing I can do for you, my dear child?" asks Sir John Coote, losing sight for a moment of deference in pity.

"Yes; please come back to-morrow and tell me all about it. And perhaps this gentleman," indicating one of the doctor, "will stay here to-night, in case—in case—"

"My dear lady, there is no hope here."

"I know—I know. It is because there is no hope that I must be alone. Good-night."

She waves them to the door as she speaks, and they file out one after another, and leave her with her dead.

All this time Mrs. Quekett has not ventured to speak to her mistress, or intrude herself upon her notice in any way. She is awed by the sudden calamity that has fallen on them, and perhaps—who knows?—a trifle conscience-smitten for the mischief which she brought about, and will never now have the opportunity of repairing. Ah! could we but foresee events as they will happen, how far more carefully should we pick our way along the rocky path of life. I am not one who considers the curtain drawn between us and futurity as a special proof of providential care. I would count it rather as one of the losses brought upon us by the fall of Adam, which rendered most of the faculties with which the Almighty gifted his first creatures too gross and carnal to exert their original prerogatives. There was a second Adam, of whom the first was a prefiguration, who brought a perfect body into the world, the capabilities of which we have no reason to believe we should not also have enjoyed had ours, like His, remained as sinless as they were created. Many people, from sheer cowardice, shrink from hearing what is in store for them, and excuse themselves upon the plea that they have no right to know what the Creator has mercifully hid. They might just as well argue they had no right to use of microscope to aid their sin-bound eyes to discover that which the first man would probably have seen without any artificial help. But our deeds for the most part will not bear the light, and therein lies our dread of an unknown future. We fear to trace the advance of the Nemesis we feel the Past deserves.

Mrs. Quekett does not address Irene—their eyes even do not meet in the presence of the dead man whose life has been so much mixed up with both of theirs, and yet the housekeeper intuitively feels that her mistress knows or guesses the part she has taken in her late misery, and is too politic to invite notice which in the first bitterness of Irene's trouble might be most unpleasantly accorded. Besides, Mrs. Quekett believes that the game is in her own hands, and that she can afford to wait. So Irene remains unmolested by the housekeeper's sympathy or advice, and a loud burst of hysterics as soon as Isabella is put in possession of the truth is the only disturbance that reaches her privacy during the hour that she remains by herself, trying to realise the fact that she is once more left alone. As the friends who bore his body up the stairs walk gently down again, as though the sound of their footsteps could arouse the unconscious figure they have left behind them, she turns the key in the door, and advancing to the bedside, falls upon her knees and takes the cold hand in her own.

"Philip!" she whispers softly, "Philip!"

But the dead face remains as it was laid, stiff and quiescent on the pillow, and the dead eyelids neither quiver nor unfold themselves. They are alone now, husband and wife, who have been so close and so familiar, and yet he does not answer her. The utter absence of response or recognition, although she knows that he is dead, seems to make her realise for the first time that he is gone.

"Philip," she repeats, half fearfully, "it is I—it is Irene."

"Oh, my God!" she cries suddenly, to herself; "how full of life and hope he was this morning!"

That recollection—the vision of her husband as she saw him last, his beaming face, his cheerful voice, his promise to be back with her by seven, all crowd upon her heart and make it natural a gain.

She begins to weep.

First it is only a tear, which she drives back with the worn-out platitude that he is happy, and so she must not grieve: then her lip quivers and she holds it fast between her teeth and tries to think of Paradise, and that it is she alone who will have to suffer: but here steps in the remembrance of how he used to sympathise in all her troubles, and pity for herself brings down the tears like rain.

"Oh, my poor love! I shall never hear you speak again. I shall never see your eyes light up when I appear. It is all over. It is all gone for ever; and we had so much to make up to one another."

At this she cries for everything—for her husband—for herself—for their separation and her future; and in half an hour rises from her knees, wearied with weeping, but with a breast already easier from indulgence.

But she does not hang about the corpse again. Irene's notions with respect to the change which we call Death preclude her clinging with anything like superstition to the cast-off clothing of a liberated spirit. She knows it is not her husband that is there, nor ever has been; and she will cry as much to-morrow at the sight of the last suite he wore as she has done over his remains, and for the same reason, because it reminds her of what was, and still is, though not for her. All her sorrow lies in the fact that the communication which she loved is for a while concluded.

When her grief is somewhat abated, she rings the bell for Phoebe. The girl answers it timidly, and on being bidden to enter, stands shivering just within the threshold of the room, with eyes well averted from the bed.

"Phoebe," says her mistress wearily, "I want you to tell me—to advise me—what ought I to do about this?"

"Oh, bless you, ma'am, I don't even like to think. Hadn't we better send for Mrs. Quekett?"

"Certainly not, Phoebe! Don't mention Mrs. Quekett's name to me again. This is not her business, and I have no intention of permitting her to enter the room."

"She seems to expect as she's to have the ordering of everything," says Phoebe, as she blinks away a tear.

"She is mistaken, then," replies Irene. The allusion to Mrs. Quekett has strengthened her. She has no inclination to cry now. Her eyes sparkle, and her breast heaves.

"Is that gentleman—the doctor—here still?" she inquires.

"Yes, ma'am, Mr. Fellows, his name is. We've put him in the Blue Room."

"Ask him to come here."

The young man, a surgeon from a neighboring village, soon makes his appearance, and to his hands Irene confides the charge of everything connected with the last offices to be performed for her husband, which Mr. Fellows, being much impressed with her beauty and her grief, undertakes without any hesitation, and promises to act for her until the arrival of Oliver Ralston shall set him at liberty again. Upon which she rises and bows to him, and, without another glance towards that which bears so small resemblance to the gallant, fine old man who promised but last night to grow young again for her sake, leaves the room and creeps away to the side of Tommy's cot, and remains there till the morning rocking herself backwards and forwards, and wondering why God should have especially selected herself to suffer such repeated separations.

"First my dear father, and then mother, and now Philip! They all weary of me—they will not wait until I can accompany them. They are too anxious to get free—they forget I shall be left alone. Oh, Tommy, my darling, stay with me! Don't you go too. And yet Heaven only knows how long I shall be permitted to keep you, either."

She makes herself miserable with such thoughts until the day breaks. How strange to see it dawn, and remember with a start that for him time is no more! She rises chilled and stiff from her position with the daylight, and performs the duties of dressing mechanically; yet she will not quit the nursery, but sits there hour after hour with her hands crossed upon her lap, listening to Tommy's broken phraseology, or issuing necessary orders in a languid, careless voice from which all hope seems to have evaporated. In the course of the afternoon Sir John Coote asks to see her, and she hears for certain what rumor from the servants' hall has already acquainted her with.

"Always a determined fellow with dogs and horses, poor dear Mordaunt," says her visitor, in the course of explanation. "I have heard that his intimate friends might twist him round their little fingers, but that's neither here nor

there; he would never let an animal get the better of him. Well, that—d brute of his—excuse my vehemence, Mrs. Mordaunt, but I can't speak of it with anything like calmness—was in a temper from the first of the morning. Mordaunt had a deuce of a trouble to keep him straight at all, and, after two or three hard fights between them, the animal's blood was fairly up, and he began to show vice. It happened at the wide jump by Chapelle's farm in Stotway. The brook's very much swollen, and we mostly went round. "I'll take it out of my brute," says poor Mordaunt, and put him at it like blazes. The animal refused the water twice, then took it with a rush—fell short of the opposite bank, rolled over, and there was an end of it. And I wish to God, my dear child, I had to tell the story to any one but you."

"Did he speak? Who saw him first?" she asks, with white, trembling lips.

"Not a word; it must have been the work of a second—dislocation of a spinal vertebra, you know. I was next behind him, and off my horse in a moment, but it was no use. I saw that directly. We shall never have such a Master of the Hounds again, Mrs. Mordaunt. It's the saddest thing that's ever happened to me since I rode to my first meet."

"Thank you for telling me. I would rather know all. And you are sure he did not suffer?"

"Quite sure. You should ask Fellows, he belongs to Stotway, and was on the spot in five minutes; but it might as well have been an hour for all the good he could do. And then we carried him to a farmhouse close by, and I sent on Colville to break the news to you; but the fool couldn't go through with it, and slunk home halfway, leaving us quite in the dark as to his proceedings; else you may be sure we would never have started you in the manner we did by bringing the poor fellow straight home without any previous warning."

"Never mind; it was just as well, perhaps; nothing could have softened it," she says quietly.

"You bear it like a—like a—like a Trojan," exclaims Sir John, unable to find any term more suited to the occasion by which to express his admiration.

"I am obliged to bear it," replies Irene; "but it was very sudden, and I don't think I can talk any more about it to-day, please," upon which her visitor takes the hint, and leaves her to herself.

The next day brings Oliver Ralston, full of concern and interest for Irene, as usual, and also not a little grieved at the loss they have mutually sustained.

"He was always so good to me," he says, as soon as the first ice is broken, and Irene has in part confided to him the last interview she had with her husband, "particularly when that old brute Quekett was out of the way."

"Oliver, promise me that I shall never see that woman to speak to again. I feel as though it would be impossible to me—as though I could not trust myself to hear her whining over my husband's death, or offering me her hypocritical condolences, without saying exactly what I think and know of her."

"My dear Irene, why ask me? Surely it will be in your own power to decide what is to become of the whole establishment, and Mother Quekett into the bargain."

"I don't know that, Oliver," she says, with a slight shiver. "I know nothing for certain; but I suppose it will be in my power to settle where I shall live, and I feel that that woman and myself can never continue under the same roof."

"Where should you live but here? You would not abandon the poor old Court? But perhaps you would find it lonely all by yourself."

"Don't let us talk of it until we hear what arrangements Philip may have made for me, Oliver. I shall be content to abide by his decision. But he told me, the night before he died, that he had lately altered his will."

"Not in old Quekett's favor, I trust. Irene, do you think we shall find out the truth about that woman now? Will the secret concerning her (for I'm sure there is one) be brought to light with my uncle's will?"

"I have never seen it, Oliver; you must not ask me. For my own part, the only feeling I have upon the subject is, that I may be rid of the sight of her. She has done her best to poison the happiness of my married life, and turn my dear, noble husband's heart against me; and, if I live to be a hundred, I could never forgive her for it. It was sheer malice, and God knows what I have done to provoke it!"

"You came between her and her hope of inheriting my uncle's money; that is all the explanation I can offer you, Irene. It makes me very uneasy to hear you say the will has been altered. What should Uncle Philip have altered it for?"

"Because, after what he heard, he naturally believed me to be unworthy of having the charge of so much property."

"But without ascertaining if his suspicions were correct? I cannot believe it of him, Irene, if he has permitted this old woman to inveigle you out of your legal rights under false pretences, I shall begin to hate his memory."

He is startled by her burst of distress.

"Hate his memory! Oh, Oliver! for shame. How dare you say so before me? My poor, kind Philip—my dear, generous husband, who would have laid down his life for my sake; if he was misled in this matter, it was through his great love for me; and I was wrong in not seeking an explanation with him sooner. If—if—things do not turn out exactly as the world may have expected of him, I, for one, will not hear the slightest imputation of blame cast on his me-

mory. My darling Philip (weeping), would God had spared him one short month more to me, that I might have tried, in some measure, to atone for the suffering his suspicions caused him!"

"Irene, you are an angel," says Oliver, impulsively; "but I can't say I see this thing in the same light as you do. However, speculation is useless. We shall know everything soon. Meanwhile, I suppose it wouldn't be considered decent to kick old Quekett out of doors before the funeral has taken place."

"You must do nothing, but be good and quiet and save me all the trouble you can, Oliver, for the next few days; and after that, when it is all over, we will consult together as to the best course to pursue."

He sees her every day after this, but not for long at a time; for, strange and unnatural as it may appear to the romantic reader that any woman who loves a man as completely as Irene loves Mulraven should feel almost inclined to despair at the death of a prosy old husband like Colonel Mordaunt, the young widow is, for a time, really overwhelmed with grief. Most of us know, either from experience or observation, what it is to wake up after many days and nights of fever, to the joys of convalescence—to feel that the burning pain, the restlessness, the unquiet dreams, the utter inability to take any interest in life, have passed away and that instead, we can sleep and taste and understand, breathe God's fresh air, drink in His sunshine, and recognise our friends. How grateful—how good we feel! With what a consciousness of relief we remember the past horrors; and should we relapse and dream of them again, how thankfully we wake to find our hand clasped by some kind, sympathising nurse, who moistens our parched lips, and smooths our tumbled pillow, and bids us have no fear, since we are watched and tended even when unconscious.

Love for Mulraven was to Irene a fever of the brain. It was so deep and burning that the disappointment of its loss pervaded her whole being and almost worked its own cure by robbing her of interest in everything that had preceded it. When she commenced life anew with Colonel Mordaunt she was in the convalescent stage.

She was too weak as yet to care to take any trouble for her own benefit or pleasure; but he took it for her. It was from his hand she first became aware that she could still derive enjoyment from the blessings which Heaven provides equally for its children; his protection and tenderness sheltered all her married life; and if her love is Mulraven's, her gratitude is alone due to her husband. The first feeling makes her shudder even to look back upon—so fraught is it with pain, and heartburning, and misery; but the second (save for the last sad episode, which Irene attributes more to her own fault than his) provokes no thoughts but such as are associated with peace. Because we have been racked with anguish and delicious with pain, are we to turn against the kind hand that is stretched forth to tend and succor us?

There is no greater mistake in the world than to suppose that a man or woman can only love once, though, luckily, the foolish supposition is chiefly confined to establishments for young ladies, and three-legged stools. We may never love again so ardently as we did at first (though that possibility is an open question); but we may love, and love worthily, half a dozen times, if Heaven is good enough to give us the opportunity; and there are some natures that must love, and will go on loving to the end of the chapter. They resemble those plants that only require the topmost shoots to be taken off to make them sprout again at the bottom. And Irene has never resisted the promptings of youth and nature to make the most of the happiness the world afforded her. She has not, like some people, sat down in the dark with her lacerated love in her lap, and dared her grief to die by tearing open its wounds as quickly as they closed. On the contrary, her first wild burst of sorrow over, she placed it far behind her, and went out gladly to meet returning sunshine, and thanked God that she retained the power to appreciate it. If she has not enjoyed any vehement transports of delight, therefore, during her communion with Philip Mordaunt, she has acknowledged that his affection mitigated her regret; her heart has expanded beneath the influence of his devotion; she has known peace and quiet, and contentment; and she misses it all terribly now that it is gone. She feels that she is once more thrown on the world as she was by her mother's death—unloved, unguarded, and alone—and her sorrow is as genuine and honest as was her affection.

Colonel Mordaunt was lucky enough not to possess many relations, but two or three needy cousins, hitherto unheard of, crop up during the next few days, in hopes of finding their names mentioned in the will, and the lawyer, all bustle and importance, with the precious document stowed away in his deed box, comes down the day before the funeral and disgorges Oliver Ralston with his loquacity and pertinacious attempts at confidence.

"You know nothing of this, sir," he says, slapping the roll of parchment which he carries in his hand. "You were not in your late uncle's—yes—yes—of course, uncle's—secrets? Well, then, I flatter myself, sir, I have a surprise for you. If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Ralston, I have a little surprise here for every one connected with my late client."

"If you have, I have no desire to anticipate it, Mr. Selwyn. I don't like surprises at any time, and I consider them particularly out of place at a period like this."

"Ah—good, generous—of course—an admirable sentiment, sir; but these things are not in