

seizes one of the candles off the table and leaves the room. In a few minutes—minutes which seem like ages to him—she is back again, with the corresponding fragment of her mutilated letter (which, it may be remembered, she thrust into her davenport) in her hand. She does not deign to offer any further explanation, but places them side by side upon the desk before him, and stands there, silent and often led, until he shall see how grossly he has wronged her. He reads the unfinished epistle in its entirety now:

"MY DEAR LORD MUIRAVEN,

"What you said this evening has decided me to write to you on a subject which has given me much anxiety of late. It is very painful to me to have to allude to it before you; but I believe it to be my duty. You have taken a great interest in the child called Tommy Brown, and you say that, should I discover who is his father, I should be bound to let him know of the boy's existence.

"What will you say if I tell you that I firmly believe he is your own child? Do not think I have condemned you without proof. The papers in my possession contain your letters to Myra Cray, his mother—your photograph, and a lock of your hair—so that I cannot believe that I am mistaken. I love the dear child as my own; indeed, to all intents and purposes he is my own, and it would break my heart now to part with him; so that you may think how much it costs me to make this known to you. But, since it belongs to you, I feel you have the better right to him. In the old days I told——"

He arrives at the finish, where Irene's mind came to the conclusion that she could write something better, and induced her to break off and tear her letter into the halves that lie, side by side, before him now. He has read it all, and sees the groundlessness of the suspicion he has entertained against her fair fame, and is ready to sink into the earth with shame to think he has been base enough to suspect her at all. And he dares not speak to her, even to entreat her pardon, but lets the paper slip from beneath his trembling fingers, and sits there, humiliated even to the dust.

"When I told you that I had never met Lord Muiraven before," rings out through the awful stillness Irene's clear, cold voice, "I said what I believed to be the truth. I had met Eric Keir; but I did not know at that time that he had inherited his brother's title. When I saw him at the ball, and learnt my mistake, I tried all I could to dissuade you from asking him to Fen Court. I did not wish to see or meet him again. But when he came, and I saw him and Myra's child together, and heard his opinion on the subject, I thought it would be but just to let him know I had discovered that he was Tommy's father; and I wrote more than one letter to him, but destroyed them all. How that fragment came into your possession I do not know; but of one thing I am certain," continues Irene with disdain, "that I have never deceived you wittingly, and that when I kept back the knowledge I had gained respecting the child's parentage, it was more from a wish to spare your feelings and my own, than not to repose confidence in you. And when I took the boy under my protection, I had no idea whose child he was. I learnt it from some letters which his mother left behind her, and which Mrs. Cray brought to me, weeks after he had come to the Court."

She finishes her confession, as she began it, with an air of conscious virtue mixed with pride; and then she waits to hear what her husband may have to say in reply.

But all the answer she obtains is from the sound of one or two quick, gasping sobs. The man is weeping.

"Oh, my poor love!" she cries as she flies to fold him in her arms. "How you must have suffered under this cruel doubt! Forgive me for being even the ulterior cause of it. But how could you have thought it of me, Philip—of your poor Irene, who has never been otherwise than true to you?"

"My angel!" is all he can murmur, as they mingle their tears and kisses together.

"Why did you never tell me?" continues Irene. "Why did you keep this miserable secret to yourself for so many weary months?"

"How could I tell you, my child? What I come boldly and accuse your innocence of that which I blush now to think I could associate with you, even in thought? Irene! can you forgive?"

"Not the doubt—the silence—the want of faith," she answers; but then, perceiving how his poor face falls again, quickly follows up the new wound with a remedy. "Oh yes, my dearest, I can forgive you all, for the sake of the love that prompted it."

"I have loved you," he says simply; and she answers that she knows it well, and that she had no right to place herself in a position to raise his inquiry. And then they bury themselves anew in one another's arms, and peace is forever cemented between them.

"Let me tell you everything—from the very beginning," says Irene, as she dries her eyes and seats herself at her husband's knees.

"Nothing that will give you pain, my darling. I am a brute to have mistrusted you for a moment. Henceforward you may do just as you like."

"But I owe it to myself, Philip, and to—to—Lord Muiraven. With respect, then, to having met him before: it is the truth. We knew each other when my mother was alive."

"And you loved each other, Irene," suggests her husband, impatient to be contradicted.

"Yes, we loved each other," she answers quietly. After the excitement she has just gone through, even this avowal has not the power to disturb her.

Colonel Mordaunt sighs deeply.

"Oh, Philip; do not sigh like that, or I shall not have the courage to be frank with you."

"I was wrong, Irene; for let me tell you that this portion of your story I have already heard from your mother."

"She told you all?"

"She told me that some one (whom I now conclude to have been this man Muiraven) paid his addresses to you; and, on being asked what were his intentions, veered off in the most scoundrelly manner, and said he had none."

She has not blushed for herself, but she blushes now rosy red for him.

"Poor mamma was mistaken, Philip. She thought too much of me and my happiness. She could make no allowances for him. And then it was partly her own fault. I always had my own way with her, and she left us so much together."

"You want to excuse his conduct?"

"In so far that I am sure he had no intention of injuring me. What he said at the time was true. It was out of his power to marry me—or any one. Had he been able to adduce his reasons, it would have saved both my mother and myself much pain; but he could not. He was thoughtless—so were we. I exonerate him from any greater crime."

"He has made you believe this since coming here, Irene."

"Don't say 'made' me believe him, Philip. He only told me the truth; and it was an explanation he owed both to me and himself. Had I thought my listening to it would impugn your honor, I would not have done so."

He squeezes the hand he holds, and she goes on:

"I had no idea that Tommy was his child until I read some papers that Myra Cray had left behind her, and which contained, amongst other things, his photograph. The discovery shocked me greatly, and I had no wish to meet him afterwards. You may remember how earnestly I begged you not to invite him to stay at the Court."

Colonel Mordaunt nods his head, then stoops and kisses her.

When Lord Muiraven came, he seemed to take a great interest in Tommy, and expressed himself so strongly on the subject of my not keeping the boy's birth a secret from his father, should I ever meet him, that it induced me to write the letter you have before you. I love the child dearly; but I felt that, after what had happened, it was a kind of fraud to keep you in ignorance of his parentage, and therefore I had every intention of making him over to his rightful owner—and should have done so before now, only that Lord Muiraven is in India."

"I wish you had told me from the first, Irene. I can trust you to tell me the truth." Do you love this man still?"

She grows crimson, but she does not flinch.

"Yes," she says in a low voice. Colonel Mordaunt groans, and turns his face away.

"Oh, my dear husband, why did you ask me such a question? I love Muiraven—yes! It was the first romance of my life—and mine! not a nature to forget easily. But I love you also. Have I not been a dutiful and affectionate wife to you? Have I ever disregarded your wishes, or shown aversion to your company? You have been good and loving to me, and I have been faithful to you in thought, word, and deed. Philip, Philip—answer me. You married me, knowing that the old wound was unhealed; you have made me as happy, as it was possible for me to be. I say that I have not been ungrateful—that I have not left utterly unrequited your patience and long suffering."

He opens his arms, and takes her into his embrace, and soothes her as one would soothe a weeping child.

"No!—no, my darling! You have been all that is dearest and truest and best to me. You are right. I knew that the treasure of your heart was not mine. I said that I would accept the smallest crumbs of love you had to spare for me with gratitude; and I yet I have been base enough to consider myself wronged, because I find that I do not possess the whole. It is I who should ask your pardon, Irene—as I do, my darling—with my whole heart I say, forgive me for all the pain I have caused you, and let us thank God together that we have fallen into each other's hands. It might have been worse, my dearest, might it not?"

"It might indeed, dear Philip; and henceforward, I trust, it may be much better than it has been. You know everything now, and from this evening we will register a vow never to keep a secret from one another again. If you suspect me of anything, you must come at once and tell me, and I will do the same to you. And, to show you I am in earnest, I will give up—for your sake, Philip—I will give up—with a short sob—" Tommy!"

He does not refuse to accept this sacrifice on her part, although he longs to do so. Man-like, he decides on nothing in a hurry.

"I do not know what to say to your proposal, Irene. It is best left for future consideration. Meanwhile, I am determined on one point—Mrs. Quekett leaves my service as soon as ever I can get rid of her."

"Oh! I am so glad; everything will go right now. It is she, then, who brought you this letter?"

"As she has brought me endless tales and insinuations against yourself, which, whilst my reason and faith rejected, my memory could not help retaining. That woman is mixed up with

all the misery of my youth, and she would have poisoned the happiness of my later years. She grudges me even to die in peace."

"She can never harm us again," says Irene soothingly.

"She has tried to harm you, poor darling, more than you have any idea of. Her hints and repetitions, and shameful innuendoes worked so upon my evil nature that they corrupted all my sense of justice, and turned my blood to gall. Do you remember my going up to town for a couple of days in the beginning of August, Irene?"

"Yes, Philip."

"Do you know what I left home for?"

"I have not the least idea. Business, was it not?"

"The devil's business, dear. I went to consult my lawyer about drawing up a new will, and leaving everything I possess, away from you, to Oliver Ralston."

"Did you?" she says, a little startled.

"I thought to myself," continues Colonel Mordaunt, "that, as soon as ever I was dead, you would go and marry Muiraven on my money, and instal him here."

"Oh, Philip!"

"Don't interrupt me, darling, and don't curse me; remember I was mad with jealousy and love of you; so I did it. Yes, Irene; had I died before this explanation took place between us, you would have been left (but for your own little portion) penniless. My will, as it now stands, leaves you nothing but a dishonored name. Thank God, who has given me the opportunity to undo this great wrong!"

"I should not have cursed you, dearest," she says softly.

"But He would. Yet not now—not now. There are two things for me to do to-morrow. One is to dismiss Quekett, and the other to go up to town and see Selwyn again."

"You can't go to-morrow, Philip; it is cub-hunting day."

"Bother the cub-hunting! I must go! I shall not rest until this matter is put right."

"But what will every one say? It will look so strange. The first meet of the season, and the Master absent! Indeed, dear Philip, you must put off your visit to town; one day cannot make much difference."

"It may make all the difference in the world, Irene."

"Nonsense!" she says playfully, for she knows it will be an immense concession on his part to go. "Now, take my advice; wait till the day after to-morrow to accomplish both these changes. When the house is full of company is not the time to choose for dismissing servants or altering wills. Let us spend to-morrow as we intended. You will be hunting all day, you know, and the day after you shall have your own way."

"My sweetest! That I should have done you such an injury. How can I ever forgive myself? What can I do to show my penitence and make amends? I, too, have a story to tell you, Irene—a confession to make, that, but for my cowardice should have been yours from the very first; but I feared so greatly to lose your esteem. The past life of a man of my age cannot be expected to prove an unwritten page. Yet I believe that even your purity will be able to make some excuse for me."

"Do not tell it me to-night, Philip; you are looking overtired as it is. Come to bed, and leave all these vexing questions alone for the present. Why, it is past one, and the breakfast is to be laid at seven. Come, dear Philip, you will be fit for nothing without a good night's rest."

Still he lingers and is doubtful.

"I ought to be as frank to you as you have been to me."

"You shall, at a more fitting moment, dearest. You shall tell me everything, and I will pardon you before I hear it. But this is not the time; think how much you have to go through to-morrow."

"Irene! I ought to go to town to-morrow; something tells me so."

"And something tells me that the whole county will be talking about it if you do. Why, my dearest Philip, just think of the general dismay when the members of the hunt arrive to find you going or gone. What on earth should I say to them? They would declare you were out of your mind. Indeed, you must think of it."

"Well, I suppose I mustn't; but the first thing on Friday morning I am off. Oh! my child, how different the world looks to me to what it did an hour ago. What a load you have lifted off my heart! And you love me a little still, don't you?"

"I love you a very great deal, Philip; nor would I change your love now for that of any man living. Oh, how wrong it was of you to suspect me, dearest! How thin and hazy it has made you! I believe even you are weaker than you were."

"Turned me into quite an old fogey; hasn't it, my child? Who would think, looking on you now for the first time, that we were man and wife? Though my rose is not so blooming as she used to be either; and it has been all my fault. Never mind; we are happy again once more, and it shall be my endeavor to preserve our peace undisturbed. I shall look on my five-and-twenty by the end of next month, Irene."

"I like you best as you are," she whispers softly, and, encircled by each other's arms, they wind up the staircase to their bed-chamber, though Colonel Mordaunt cannot resist leaving hold of his wife for one instant to shake his fist at Mrs. Quekett's door.

"You go out of this as soon as ever I have

the time to kick you," he says defiantly; "and I never more shall you darken the threshold of mine. She has an annuity under my father's will," he continues to rene, "and she may make the most of it. We shall have one month's less to feed, and one room the more to live in on her departure, my dear."

"And an incalculably less amount of mischief, Philip. I don't mind telling you now, dear, that she has been the bane of my married life, and I wish to Heaven I had never seen her."

"Amen! But she has done her worst, my darling, and she shall never harm you more. God forgive me for having let her do so at all."

So they pass into their own room, and lie down and sleep the restful sleep that comes when souls are satisfied, and hearts are open and content.

The next morning Fen Court is a scene of unusual bustle and confusion. By the time Irene is dressed, the rattling of knives and forks and the popping of corks is over, the heavy breakfast has come to a close, and the lawn is covered with horsemen and dogs, and the crisp September air is filled with the sound of voices, the yelping of hounds, and the restless stamping of horses, impatient to be off.

She does not leave her room until they have all ridden away; but she watches the gay cavalcade through the open window. Whilst she is contemplating it, in rushes her husband, arrayed in pink, looking very excited, very happy, and full of spirits.

"We're off, my own darling," he says; "one kiss before I go," and then he holds her from him and regards her steadfastly. "God bless you, my Irene! God reward you for all your goodness to me! I shall be back by seven."

She embraces him eagerly in return.

"And I shall count the hours till you come home, Philip. What is that noise, dear?" as a considerable disturbance is heard upon the gravel outside.

Colonel Mordaunt looks through the window-blind.

"Only that brute of a horse of mine; he hasn't enough exercise lately. What a mess he's made of the drive. I'll take it out of the beast."

"Be careful, Philip."

"What! are you going to coddle me in my old age?" he says, delighted at her caution. "Yes; I'll be careful, darling. God bless you once more!" and with a final kiss, he tears himself away and runs downstairs. In another minute he has mounted his rebellious animal, and, in company with some of the principal members of the hunt, taken his way down the drive, followed by the remainder of the horsemen and the dogs. Irene's eyes follow him as long as he is in sight, and she sighs to observe how loosely his coat hangs about him, and how much more he stoops on horseback than he used to do.

"But, please God, we will remedy all that," she thinks, as the last man turns out of the gates, and she quits her post of observation. "As soon as we have settled what is to be done about Quekett and Tommy, I will persuade Philip to take a little change to the seaside with me, or, perhaps, to run over to Paris for a month."

At the thought of her adopted child, and the fear that she may have to part with him, the tears well up into her eyes, but she brushes them away.

"I will not cry about it until I am sure. Somehow I fancy, now Philip knows how attached I am to the boy, he will hit on some plan by which I may keep him; and, if not—well, I must do my duty, that's all."

She will not let her thoughts dwell on the subject, but orders the carriage and takes Tommy and Phoebe on a shopping expedition to Gtottonbury. She is anxious to keep away from the Court as much as possible until Philip comes back again, for fear she should encounter Mrs. Quekett, and not be able to restrain herself from saying what she thinks concerning her. So, on her return, she locks herself up in her bed-room with a book, and falls fast asleep, until her maid rouses her with an intimation that it is past her usual time for dressing.

The second gong has gone, ma'am, and the dinner's all ready, and I only waiting for the Colonel to be sent up."

"Why didn't you wake me before, Phoebe?"

"I knocked at the door several times, ma'am, but it was no use, you were that fast. Which dress will you please to wear to-night?"

"Oh, anything that will go on quickest. The old black one, that will do."

The clock on the mantelpiece chimes the half-hour as she enters the drawing-room.

"Philip is very late to-night," she thinks. "It's quite dark. They can't be hunting now. He must have gone home with some of his friends."

At the same time it strikes her as strange that, after their conversation of the night before, and his unwillingness to leave her this morning, he should permit anything to prevent his returning to her side.

The weather has become damp and chilly, and they have contrived to dress in the evening. She sits down before her now, and shivers slightly.

"I wish I hadn't put on a low dress, it is really growing cold, and this house is draughty. I wonder where Isabella is, I haven't seen her all day."

Then she rings the bell.

"Where is Miss Mordaunt?"

"In her room, I believe, ma'am."