

after he brought her home, until the child came here. Was the child always here? Was it in Priestley when Irene came, or did it follow her? Poor Colonel Mordaunt's head is becoming so confused that he can think of nothing collectedly; but all the events of his married life are being shaken up together like the pieces of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, and working in inextricable confusion in his seething brain.

But he is sure of one thing. His wife told him Lord Mulraven was a stranger to her, and yet she writes him private letters concerning this child of his and Myra Cray's. But did the boy belong to Myra Cray? Quekett has discovered the truth in one instance: may she not have done so in the other? He raises his head slowly and sorrowfully, and drawing a long breath, reads through the fragmentary witness to Irene's deception once again.

Heavens! how the faint colour deserts his cheek, and his eyes rivet themselves upon the last line but four, where the words, "he is my own," stand out with fatal perspicuity and want of meaning, except to his distempered vision. He has read the letter over several times already, but his sight and understanding were blurred the while with an undefined dread of what it might reveal to him; and he was unable to do more than read it. But now it seems as though the scales had all at once fallen from his eyes, and he sees men, not "as trees walking," but in their own naked and misshapen humanity. He sees, or thinks he sees it, and rises tottering from his chair with twenty years added to his life, to hide with trembling hands the fatal witness to his wife's degradation in the deepest drawer of his private escritoire. He feels assured that he is not mistaken. He believes now as completely in her guilt as he once did in her innocence; but for the sake of the love however feigned, she has shown him, and the duty she has faithfully performed, no eye, beside his own, shall henceforward rest upon these proofs of her indiscretion. The shock once over, memories of Irene's goodness and patience and affection for himself come crowding in upon his mind, until, between grief and gratitude, it is reduced to a state of the most maudlin pathos.

"Poor child! poor unhappy, misguided child," he thinks at one moment, "without a friend to guide her actions, and her own mother her accomplice in deceit; what else could one expect from her than that she should eagerly embrace the first opportunity that presented itself for escape from the dangers with which error had surrounded her? But to deceive me, who would have laid down my life to redeem her: to accept the most valuable gift my heart was capable of offering—the pent-up affections of a lifetime, only to squander and cast it on one side! And yet—God bless her—she never did so. She has been tender and considerate in all her dealings with me, and would have warded off this terrible discovery, even at the expense of incurring my displeasure. Why else should she have shown such remarkable distaste to the idea of that man being located here?"

"Yet," his evil genius whispers to him, "her objections may have been prompted only by the instinct which dictates self-preservation. This letter proves now easily it comes to her to address him in terms of familiarity. And the child too!"

"Good God! if I think of it any longer I shall go mad. What can I do? What can I say? Shall I go straight to her with this letter in my hand, and accuse her of a crime—too horrible to think of in connection with my wife—and see her look of terror and dismay—to be followed, perhaps, by a bold denial—more sin, more guilt upon her poor young head—or by avowal and separation; and for the rest of my days—solitude, and hers—disgrace, with his off-spring on her bosom? Oh! no! no!—the happiness of my life is ended—but the deed is done. No accusation, no reproach can mend it—it must remain as it is now—for ever; and I—heaven pity my weakness—but I cannot live without her. Oh, Irene! Irene!" in a rush of unconquerable tenderness, "my darling, my treasure would to God that the joy of possessing you had killed me before I had learnt that you never were mine! But you are mine—you shall be mine—no one shall take you from me! I—I—" and here Philip Mordaunt's reflections culminate in a burst of bitter tears that shake his manhood to the core, and a resolution that how ever much he may suffer, Irene's shameful secret shall be looked within the recesses of his own breast.

He will prevent her ever meeting Lord Mulraven again. He may in time, perhaps, effect a severance between her and the child, but she shall never hear from his lips that he has arrived at a knowledge of the truth she had sinned so deeply to conceal from him.

This is the most impolitic resolution which Colonel Mordaunt could register. It is always impolitic for friends who have a grudge against each other to preserve silence on the subject, instead of frankly stating their grievance and affording an opportunity for redress; and impolicy between husband and wife, is little short of madness. Did Colonel Mordaunt at this juncture go to Irene and overwhelm her with the reproaches which he naturally feels, he would receive in answer a full and free confession which would set his mind at rest for ever. But he has not sufficient faith in her to do so. He has too humble an opinion of himself and his powers of traction, and is too ready to believe his incapacity to win a woman's love, to think it possible that he could ever hold his own against such a man as Mulraven, or even be able to claim sympathy in his disappointment. So, in his pride and misery, he resolves that he

will suffer in silence; and the unnatural constraint which he is thus forced to put upon himself eats like a canker into his loving, honest soul, and kills it. The change is not all at once apparent; but from the hour Colonel Mordaunt leaves his study on that fatal evening, he is another man from what he has been. Irene, indeed, is much astonished, when on inquiring later, why her husband does not join her in the drawing-room, she hears that, without a word of warning, he has retired to rest; still more so, when, on seeking his bedside to know if he is ill, or if she can do anything for him, she receives no sort of explanation of his unusual conduct, and the very shortest answers to her expressions of surprise and sympathy. But after the first brief feeling of vexation, she does not think much more about it; for Philip's temper has not always been equitable of late, and Irene is beginning to take into consideration the fact that her husband is much older than herself, and cannot be expected to be always ready to enter into the spirit of her younger moods and fancies; so, with a little sigh, she goes downstairs again, and, in the absorbing interest of planning and outfitting out master Tommy's first suit of knickerbockers, has soon forgotten all about it. In a few weeks, however, the alteration in her husband's demeanor is palpable enough, and accompanied by such a visible falling-off in outward appearance, that Irene at first ascribes it entirely to want of health. She cannot imagine that she has done anything to offend him; and so entertains him pathetically to see a doctor. But Colonel Mordaunt is roughly obstinate whenever the subject is mentioned, and curtly informs his wife that she knows nothing at all about it, and bids her hold her tongue. Still, he has no appetite and strangely variable spirits. Irene sees his health is falling, and sometimes, from his unaccountable manner towards herself, she almost fears his brain must be affected. She becomes thoroughly alarmed, and longs for the presence of Oliver Ralston at Fen Court, that she may have an opportunity of confiding her suspicions to him, and asking his advice about them. But Oliver is working valiantly at his profession, as assistant to a surgeon in a country village miles away from Leicestershire; and, thanks to his own poverty and Mrs. Quekett's continued influence over his uncle, there is little chance of his visiting the Court again for some time to come. So Irene is reduced to confide in Isabella; but though Miss Mordaunt sees the change, she dares not acknowledge it.

"Oh dear, Mrs. Mordaunt, is it really so? Well, perhaps—but yet I should hardly like to say—and is it wise to notice it?—the toothache is a distressing complaint, you know—no! I never heard that Philip had the toothache; but still I think it so much better to leave these things to mend themselves."

So the spring and summer days drag themselves away, and Irene finds herself thrusts farther and farther from her husband's confidence and affection, and growing almost accustomed to its being so. His loves for her at this time is shown by strange fits and starts. Sometimes he hardly opens his lips for days together, either at meals or when they are alone; at others he will lavish on her passionate caresses that burn at the moment, but seem to leave no warmth behind them. But one thing she sees always. However little her husband cared for her adopted child in the olden days, he never notices him now, except it be to order him out of the way in the same tone of voice that he would use to a dog. For this reason Irene attributes his altered mood in a great measure to the effect of jealousy (which she has heard some men exhibit to the verge of insanity), and, with her usual tact, keeps Tommy as much out of his sight as possible. She institutes a day nursery somewhere at the top of the house, and a playground where the boy can neither be seen nor heard; and lets him take his meals and walks with Phoebe, and visits him almost by stealth, and as if she were committing some evil by the act. It is a sacrifice on her part, but, although she faithfully adheres to it, it does not bring the satisfaction which she hoped for; it makes no difference in the distance which is kept up between her husband's heart and hers.

She follows Colonel Mordaunt's form about the rooms with wistful, anxious eyes, that implore him to break down the barriers between them, and be once more what he used to be; but the appeal is made in vain. Her health, too, then commences to give way. There is no such foe to bloom and beauty as a hopeless longing for sympathy which is unattended to; and Irene grows pale and thin and miserable looking. At last she feels that she can bear the solitude and the suspense no longer. June, July, and August have passed away in weary expectation of relief. Mulraven is in India, Oliver at Seamount. She looks around her, and can find no friend to whom she can tell her distress. One night she has gone to bed in more than usually bad spirits, and laid awake thinking of the sad change that has come over her married life, and crying quietly as she speculates upon the cause. She hears Isabella stealing upstairs, as though at every step she were asking pardon of the ground for presuming to tread upon it; and Mrs. Quekett (of whom the poor child can scarcely think without a shudder, so truly does she in some occult manner connect her present unhappiness with the housekeeper's malignant influence) clumping ponderously, as if the world itself were honored by her patronage; and the maids seeking the upper stories, and joking about the menservants as they go; and then all is silent and profoundly still, and the stable clock strikes the hour of midnight, and yet her husband does not join her. Irene knows where he

is; she can picture him to herself—sitting all alone in his study, poring over his accounts, and stopping every other minute to pass his hand wearily across his brow and heave a deep sigh that seems to tear his very heart-strings. Why is it so? Why has she let all this go on so long? Why should she let it last one moment longer? If she has done wrong, she will ask his forgiveness; if he has heard tales against her, she will explain them all away. There is nothing stands between them except her pride, and she will sacrifice it for his sake—for the sake of her dear old husband, who has always been so kind to her until this miserable, mysterious cloud rose up between them. Irene is a creature of impulse, and no sooner has her good angel thus spoken to her than she is out of bed, and has thrown a wrapper round her figure and slipped her naked feet into a pair of shoes. She will not even stay to light a candle, for something tells her that, if she deliberates, the time for explanation will have passed away—perhaps for ever; but quickly leaves her bedroom, and gropes her way down the staircase to the door of her husband's room. A faint streak of light is visible through the keyhole, but all within is silent as the grave; and as Irene grasps the handle she can hear nothing but the throbbing of her own impatient heart.

Colonel Mordaunt is sitting, as she imagined, in his study-chair, not occupied with his accounts, but leaning back, with his eyes closed, and his hands folded before him listlessly, inanimately, miserably. He used to be an unusually hale and young-looking man for his age. Irene thought upon their first introduction, that he was the finest specimen of an old gentleman she had ever seen; but all that his past now. Life and energy seem as completely to have departed from the shrunken figure and nerveless hand as the appearance of youth has from the wrinkled face. It is about the middle of September, and the next day is the opening of the cubhunting season—an anniversary which has been generally kept with many honors at Fen Court. Colonel Mordaunt, who before his marriage held no interest in life beyond the pleasures of the field, and who has reaped laurels far and wide in his capacity as master of the Glattonbury foxhounds, has been in the habit of throwing open his house to the public, both gentle and simple, on the occurrence of the first meet of the season; and, although the lack of energy which he has displayed of late is a general theme of conversation amongst the sportsmen of the county, the hospitable custom will not be broken through on this occasion. Preparations on a large scale for the festivity have been arranged and carried out, without the slightest reference to Irene, between himself and Mrs. Quekett; and to-morrow morning every room on the lower floor of the Court will be laid with breakfast for the benefit of the numerous gentlemen and their tenant-farmers who will congregate on Colonel Mordaunt's lawn to celebrate the recommencement of their favorite amusement. At other times how excited and interested has been the Master of the Foxhounds about everything connected with the reception of his guests. To-night he has permitted the housekeeper to go to bed without making a single inquiry as to whether she is prepared to meet the heavy demands which will be made upon her with the morning light; and though, as a matter of duty, he has visited the kennel, it has been done with such an air of languor as to call forth the remark from the whipper-in that he "shouldn't be in the least surprised if the Colonel was breaking up, and this was the last season they would ever hunt together."

And then the poor heart-broken man crept back, like a wounded animal, to hide himself in the privacy of his own room, where he now sits, alone and miserable, brooding over what has been and what may be, and longing for the time when all shall be over with him, and his sorrows hidden in the secret keeping grave. He is so absorbed in his own thoughts that he does not hear the sound of Irene's light footsteps, though she blunders against several articles in the dark hall before she reaches him; and the first thing which apprises him of any one's approach is her uncertain handling of the door.

"Who is there?" he demands sharply; for he suspects it may be Mrs. Quekett, come to torture him afresh with new tales and doubts against Irene's character.

The only answer he receives is conveyed by another hasty battle at the handle of the door, and then it is thrown open, and his wife, clad in a long white dressing-gown, with her fair hair streaming down her back, appears upon the threshold.

He shudders at the sight, and draws a little backward; but he does not speak to her.

"Philip! Philip!" she exclaims impatiently and trembling lest all her courage should evaporate before she has had time for explanation, "don't look like that. Speak to me. Tell me what I have done wrong, and I will ask your forgiveness for it."

He does not speak to her even then; but he turns his weary, grief-laden face towards her with silent reproach that cuts her to the heart, and brings her sobbing to his feet.

"What have I said? What have I done?" she questions through her tears, "that you should behave so coldly to me? Oh, Philip, I cannot bear this misery any longer! Only tell me how I have offended you, and I will ask your pardon on my knees."

"Don't kneel there," he says in a dry, husky voice, as he tries to edge away from contact with her. "I have not blamed you. I have kept

silence, and I have done it for the best. By breaking it I shall but make the matter worse."

"I do not believe it," she says energetically. "Philip, what is this matter you are so desirous to conceal? If it is shameful, it can be in no wise connected with me."

"So young," he utters dreamily, "(were you nineteen or twenty on your last birthday, Irene?) and yet so full of deceit. Child, how can you look at me and say such things? Do you wish to crowd my heart with still more bitter memories than it holds at present?"

"You are raving, Philip," she answers, "or I have been shamefully traduced to you. Oh, I was sure of it! Why did you not speak before? That woman who has such a hold over you that—"

"Hush, hush!" he says faintly; "it is not so. I have had better evidence than that; but, for God's sake, don't let us speak of it. I have tried to shield you, Irene. I will shield you still, but whilst we live this matter must never more be discussed between us, or I cannot answer for the consequences."

"And do you think," she replies, drawing herself up proudly, "that I will live under your protection, and eat your bread, and avail myself of all the privileges which in the name of your wife accrue to me, whilst there is a dead wall of suspicion and unbelief and silence raised between us, and I am no more your wife, in the true meaning of the word, than that table is? You mistake me, Philip. I have been open and true with you from the beginning, and I will take nothing less at your hands now. I do not ask it—I demand as a right—to be told what is the secret that separates us; and if you refuse to tell me, I will leave your house, whatever it may cost me, and live among strangers sooner than with so terrible an enemy."

He raises his eyes, and looks at her defiant figure with the utmost compassion.

"Poor child! you think to brave it out, do you? But where would you go? What door would open to receive you?"

"I am not so friendless as you seem to think," she answers, growing angry under his continued pity. "There are some who love me still and believe in me, and would refuse to listen to accusations which they are ashamed to repeat."

"Would you go to him?" he cries suddenly, as a sharp pang pierces his heart.

As this insulting question strikes her ear, Irene might stand for a model of outraged womanhood—so tall and stately and indignant does she appear.

"To whom do you presume to allude?"

Colonel Mordaunt shrinks before her angry eyes. There is something in them and in her voice which commands him to reply, and he rises from his seat, and goes towards the escritoire.

"I would have saved you from this," he says mournfully. "I wished to save you, but it has been in vain. Oh, Irene, I have borne it for more than three months by myself! Pity, and forgive me that I could not bear it better. I would rather it had killed me than it had come to this."

He takes out the torn and crumpled sheet of note paper that he has so often wept over in secret, and lays it on the desk before her.

"Don't speak," she continues; "don't try to excuse yourself; it would be useless, for you see that I know all. Only remember that I—I—have forgiven you, Irene—and wish still to watch over and protect you."

She takes the scribbled fragment in her hand and reads it, and colors painfully in the perusal. Then she says shortly,

"Who gave you this?"

"What signifies who gave it me? You wrote, and I have seen it."

"Very true; but what then? Was it a crime to write it?"

Colonel Mordaunt regards his wife as though she had been demented.

"Was it a crime to write it?" he repeats. "It is not the letter—it is of what it speaks. Surely—surely you cannot be so hardened as not to look upon that in the light of a crime?"

"I know it to be a crime, Philip, and a very grievous one; but it has nothing to do with me—except, perhaps, that I should have told you when I found that it was his."

"When you found what was his? Irene! you are torturing me. You told me at the Glattonbury ball that you had never met this man Mulraven, with whom I find you correspond in terms of familiarity. What is the secret between you? In God's name speak out now, and tell me the worst! Death would be preferable to the agony of suspense that I am suffering."

"There is no secret between us. I never told Lord Mulraven of what I now see I should have informed you—that I found out from Myra Cray's papers that he is the father of her child."

"The child, then, is Myra Cray's?" he says, with hungry eyes that stare for her reply.

"Whose do you suppose it is?" she demands with an angry stamp of her foot. Her figure is shaking with excitement; she has struck her clenched hand upon her heart. Beneath her blazing looks he seems to shrink and shrivel into nothing.

"Forgive! oh! forgive me, Irene," he murmurs as he sinks down into his chair again, and covers his face from view. "But look at the paper—read what it says, and judge what I must have thought of it."

She seizes the letter again, and, running her eye rapidly up and down it; characters, gives vent to a sort of groan. But suddenly her face lights up with renewed energy.

"Stop!" she says commandingly, as she