

The mere question "throws Miss Mordaunt into a state of extra flurry."

"I don't know, Philip—I know so little, you see. I am sure I cannot say. Perhaps you had better—but if Mrs. Mordaunt could wait—it is no use to ask me."

"Is the old woman ill?" demands Irene. It is the only solution of the apparent mystery she can imagine.

"Bless you! no! as well as you are," says her husband, forgetting the inexpediency of the confession; "only used to rise late. She has had no mistress, you know, my darling, and you must make some excuses for her in consequence; but—there, I hope to goodness you will get on well together, and have no quarrels or disagreements of any sort."

"Quarrels, Philip, with the servants!—you need have no fear of that. If Mrs. Quekett has not yet risen, I can easily give my orders for today to the cook: I suppose she is efficient and trustworthy?"

"Oh, yes; only, don't you think that it would be better, just at first, you know, to leave things as they are, and let Quekett manage the dinners for you?"

"No, Philip; I don't. I think, were I to do so, that I should be very likely never to gain any proper authority amongst my servants; and I should rather begin as I intend to go on. I see you have not much faith in my house-keeping," she continues, gaily; "but you have never had an opportunity of judging my powers. Wait till this evening. What time shall we dine?"

"When you choose, my darling; but seven has been the usual hour. I think, Isabella," turning to his sister, "that, as Irene says, it will be better for her to give her dinner orders this morning to the cook: what do you say?"

"Oh, don't ask me, Philip; it must be just as you please: only, what will Quekett think?"

"You can explain the matter to her, surely; and by to-morrow she will be acquainted with Irene. Perhaps she had better not see her till I return. I will come back to lunch."

"What a fuss about nothing!" says Irene, laughing. "My dear Philip, one would think I had never had the management of any servants before. I see how it is—the old housekeeper is jealous of my coming, and you are afraid she may let me see it. Well, then, have no fears; I will talk her out of her jealousy, and we shall be the best of friends by the time you return."

"Who could resist you?" replies the enamored Colonel, as he embraces his wife, and leaves the room.

"Now, the very first thing I want to see, Isabella," says Irene, rising from her chair, "is the drawing-room; for people will be coming to call on me by-and-by, you know, and I never fancy a sitting-room till I have arranged it according to my own taste. Will you come with me? You must let me be very *exigeante* for the first few days, and keep you all to myself."

For this expression of interest, to which she is so unaccustomed, Isabella Mordaunt feels very much inclined to cast her arms about the speaker's neck and thank her; but her natural nervousness rises uppermost, and she only looks foolish and uneasy.

"The drawing-room!—well, I hardly know—of course it is no business of mine—but I think it is locked."

"Locked!—don't you use it, then?"

"Not often—that is to say, only when we have a dinner-party."

"Oh, I mean to use it every day, and make it the prettiest room in the house. Let us go and inspect it at once. Who has the key?—Quekett?"

"I believe so—I am not sure," commences Miss Mordaunt. Irene answers by ringing the bell.

"James, desire Mrs. Quekett, or whoever has the key of the drawing-room, to send it down to me."

There is a delay of several minutes, and then the footman re-appears, with the key in his hand, and a comical expression in his face, half of pleasure and half of fear, as though a battle had been found necessary in order to archieve his purpose, but that he rather liked the warfare than otherwise. Irene thrusts her arm through that of her sister-in-law, and leads her off in triumph.

"Shocking! Horrible!" is her verdict, as the glories of the Fen Court drawing-room come to view. "My dear Isabella, how could you allow things to remain like this? No flowers—no white curtains—and all the furniture done up in brown holland, as though we had gone out of town. The first thing we must do is to strip off those horrid covers. Where is the housemaid?"

"But, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt"—Isabella cannot yet pluck up courage to address her sister-in-law by any other name—"she thinks—that is, Mrs. Quekett thinks—they are quite necessary for the preservation of the damask."

"And I think them quite unnecessary," retorts Irene, merrily. "Here, Anne; take off these covers; strip the muslin off the chandeliers, and open all the windows. The room feels as though a corpse had been laid out in it! What a fine piano!—that must come out into the middle of the room."

"It has always stood against the wall," says Isabella.

"Then I am sure it is quite time it had a change. Oh! what a lovely thing for flowers!" seizing on an old basin of embossed silver which stands on the floor; "what is this rubbish in it?—rose-leaves? Turn them out, Anne, and put the bowl on the sideboard in the dining-room. And, stop!—take all the vases away at the

same time: I never keep a vase in sight unless it is filled with flowers."

"Yes, ma'am; but, please, what am I to do with these dead leaves?"

"Throw them away."

"Yes, ma'am; only," looking towards Miss Mordaunt, "Mrs. Quekett placed them, here, you know, miss!"

"Yes; to be sure; so she did. I hardly know, Mrs. Mordaunt, whether you ought—"

"To throw away Quekett's rose-leaves?" with a hearty laugh; "well, perhaps not; so you can return them to her, Anne, if you choose; only please to relieve my bowl of them as soon as possible."

Then she flits away, altering the disposition of the chairs and the tables; discarding the ornaments which she considers in bad taste; scattering music on the open piano, books and work upon the table, and flowers everywhere—doing all that a woman can, in fact, to turn a commonplace and dull-looking apartment into a temple of fanciful grace and beauty.

"Come, that is a little better!" she exclaims at last; "but it will bear any amount of improvement yet. Flowers are the thing, Isabella; you can make even an ugly room look nice with plenty of flowers; and there are really beautiful things here. It shall be a very picture of a room before the week is out. And now to my dinner—I had nearly forgotten it. That old woman must be up by this time."

"It is only just eleven," replies Miss Mordaunt.

"As much as that!" with a look of dismay: "my dear Isabella, I shall be all behind-hand, and when I have been boasting to Philip! I must see Quekett at once in the morning-room and then we will arrange our plans for the day."

She flies to the morning-room—a pleasant little apartment next the dining-room, which is to be dedicated to her use—and pulls the bell rather vigorously in her haste.

"James, desire Mrs. Quekett to come up to me at once."

"Yes, ma'am," replies James, and retires, inwardly chuckling. He reads the character of his new mistress, and views with unholy delight domestic differences looming in the distance.

"Won't there be a row!" he remarks, as the housemaid goes unwillingly to deliver the message at the door of Mrs. Quekett's room.

Now, as it happens, Mrs. Quekett is up and stirring; for curiosity to see the bride has overpowered her natural indolence; but she has not quite completed her toilette, and the unwelcome information that she is to "go downstairs at once and take her orders from the new mistress in the morning-room" does not tend to promote her alacrity.

Another ten minutes have elapsed when Irene rings the bell again.

"Have you delivered my message to the housekeeper?"

"Yes, ma'am; and she's just coming down the stairs now."

"She must be a little quicker another time," his mistress murmurs. She feels, prophetically, that she is about to have trouble with this "old servant of the family," and she determines at once to assert her authority as head of her husband's household.

Mrs. Quekett enters; Irene looks up, meets her eye, and feels at once that they are enemies. There is something in the woman's glance and manner, even in this first interview, that savours so much of insolent familiarity, that her indignation is roused, and she can hardly speak to her without evincing it.

"I hope I see you well, ma'am," says Mrs. Quekett, sinking into the nearest chair.

"Quite well, thank you!" replies Irene, chocking down her wrath and trying to remember all her husband has told of the faithful services of the creature before her. "I have sent for you, Quekett, to take the orders for the dinner. We are rather late this morning"—glancing at her watch—"but, as it is the first time, it is perhaps excusable."

"Ah! I manage all that, ma'am; you will have no trouble about the dinners. I've pleased the Colonel and his father before him for over a matter of thirty years, and as I've begun so I shall go on. My cook gives me more trouble than she ought to do, but I shall get rid of her at Michaelmas, if not before, and try one from London instead. They're better taught than these country women. You're from Loudon yourself, aren't you?"

Under this address Irene sits for a moment stupefied. She can hardly believe she is listening to a servant speaking. She has never been used to hear the domestics in her parents' house address her but in the most deferential tones; and as she realises that it really is the housekeeper who sits before her, her blood boils with indignation, and the look she raises should have withered Mrs. Quekett in her chair.

"I think we had better keep to the matter in hand," she answers, loftily. "I intend to give my own orders, Mrs. Quekett, and it will be your place to transmit them to the other servants. I shall very soon be able to judge what the cook can do, and to decide on the necessity of parting with her or not. Meanwhile, we will speak about the dinner."

She runs through the list of dishes rapidly, names the hour at which she desires the meal to be served, and enjoins the strictest punctuality on the astonished housekeeper.

"And to-morrow morning," says Irene, as she rises from her chair, "I must request you will be in this room by ten o'clock, to receive my orders—and if I am not here, you can wait for me. I shall go over the kitchens and lower

offices this afternoon. Let the servants be prepared to receive me. And—one word, Mrs. Quekett: I have not been accustomed to see servants sit down in my presence."

With that she sails out of the room with the air of an offended queen.

Mrs. Quekett is not subdued, but she is enraged beyond measure. She turns purple and gasps in the chair where her new mistress has left her; and it takes a great deal of bottled porter and a great many stewed kidneys that morning to restore her to anything like her usual equanimity.

"Wait about here till it pleases her to come and give me her orders! Not for the highest lady in Christendom would I do it, and I'm sure I shan't for her. She may give her orders to the cook, and welcome. I don't stir out of my bed for any one until I'm inclined to do it. And not sit down in her presence, indeed! I must speak to the Colonel about this. Matters must be settled between the Colonel and me before this day closes."

And so, in truth, they must have been, to judge from the forlorn and henpecked appearance with which the Colonel enters his wife's dressing-room that evening before retiring to bed. He has passed a very happy day, for Irene has not confided the little domestic troubles of the morning to him; she has thought that she will fight the ignoble battle by herself, and that no servant will presume to make a few quietly-spoken words of caution a pretext for appealing to her master's judgment; but she is mistaken. Colonel Mordaunt has been enduring a very stormy half hour in that study of his before making his escape upstairs, and the vision of a peaceful married life has fled before it like a dream. He comes up to Irene's side, looking quite fagged and worn-out, and older by ten years than he did in the morning. She notices it at once.

"My dear Philip, how tired you must be! You have been exerting yourself too much after our long journey yesterday."

"I am only worried, my darling. What is this row between you and Quekett? I did so hope you would have been able to get on with the old woman."

"Has she been complaining to you?"

"She came into my study just now—she has been used to have a talk with me occasionally in the evenings—and told me what had happened. She is very much put out about it, naturally."

"So was I put out about it—naturally! But I didn't immediately bring my troubles to you, Philip, though I conclude I have more right to your sympathy than a servant can have."

"How did it happen?"

"Nothing happened. If Mrs. Quekett is vexed—which she did not intimate to me—I suppose it is because I told her I intended to give the household orders in future. I dare say she has had a great deal of liberty; but that kind of thing can't go on when a man marries."

"Of course not—and I hope she will come round to see it in that light after a time. But she says she would rather you gave your orders to the cook instead of her. You won't mind that, will you?"

"Not at all—I shall prefer it; for, to tell you the truth, I don't quite like your Mrs. Quekett, Philip: her manners are too familiar and assuming to please me."

"Remember how long she has been with us; old servants are apt to forget themselves sometimes."

"Do you think so? My mother had a lady's-maid who had been with her since her marriage, and only left us for a home of her own; she never addressed me except by name, nor thought of sitting down in my presence, though she had known me from my birth."

Colonel Mordaunt grows fidgety.

"Well, dear, I think the best way will be for you and Quekett to see: as little of one another as possible. She has been accustomed to a great deal of consideration from us (rather more, perhaps, than the occasion warrant), and I dare say she does feel a little jealous, as you suggested, of your coming here, and monopolising all the attention. But it will wear off by-and-by. Don't you think so?"—wisely.

"I don't understand servants being jealous of their mistresses, Philip. But if Mrs. Quekett and I are not to meet, what is the use of our keeping her? After all I shan't want a housekeeper. Let her go."

But at this piece of rank blasphemy her husband looks almost horrified.

"My dear child, do you know what you are talking about? Why, she has been with us for the last thirty years."

"No reason she should remain thirty more. I don't like her, Philip, and I never shall."

"Hush! Pray don't say that. I am sure you will grow to like her."

"I am sure I shan't."

"You have not had a proper opportunity yet of judging her character."

"I have seen quite enough of it. If I were superstitious, Philip, I should think that woman possessed the evil eye—at all events for me."

"What nonsense, my darling! I thought you were too clever to talk like that. Why, if Quekett were to leave Fen Court I should think the whole house was going to topple down on our heads!"

"And so you wouldn't get rid of her, even for me?" whispers Irene, with the most insinuating of upward glances.

"What is there I wouldn't do for you?" her husband answers; and for a few moments delivers himself up to the charms of reality

that he has secured the desire of his heart. But when he leaves her to herself again, the cloud returns to his brow, and his soul is disquieted within him. He feels that he is living on a volcano which is even now trembling beneath his feet, and may at any moment erupt in flames of malice and revenge which shall bring destruction in their train. His life is scarcely more enviable than that of Eric Keir. Each man walks the world with a heavy secret in his breast.

It is August. The harvest is nearly all gathered in, and every one is looking forward to September. Irene has issued her first invitations for the shooting season: one to her aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, and her daughter Mary, another to Mr. Pettingall—who is most anxious to see his young friend in her new position—and a third to some bachelor acquaintances of her husband's, whom Colonel Mordaunt assures her she will find delightful. In fact, the house is to be full; and Irene is quite excited at the prospect of entertaining so many guests. She flits about from room to room, followed by the meek Isabella, and issuing her orders without the slightest regard to the feelings of the great Mrs. Quekett. Not that Irene has forgotten Mrs. Quekett during the past month, or forgiven her. The mere fact of the housekeeper's refusal to receive her orders serves to keep her memory alive in her mistress's bosom and to make the intercourse between them purely nominal. Together they are frigidly polite to one another; and apart they are determinately hostile. Irene has ceased to make any comment on the housekeeper's behaviour or to express any desire for her dismissal; she has seen and heard enough during her residence at Fen Court to convince her that to pursue either course is futile, but she does what is far more galling to Mrs. Quekett's pride—she ignores her presence altogether. She makes no calls upon her duty; she neither blames nor praises her—she simply acts as though there were no such person in the house. So Rebecca Quekett continues to lie abed until noon, and to feed off the best of the land, and to twist her master round her little finger; but the servants no longer tremble at her presence; she has lost the absolute authority she held over them—she has been transformed from a captious tyrant into an injured but faithful servitor; and she takes good care to drum the fact into the Colonel's ears, and to hate the one who has brought about the change. Yet little does Irene reckon her annoyance or her hate, she considers the presence of the housekeeper at Fen Court as an intolerable nuisance, and often wonders how her husband, who can be so firm in some things, should be so weak in this; but consoles herself with the idea that no lot in this world is entirely without its annoyance, and that she might have encountered a worse skeleton in the closet than Mrs. Quekett. Whether the Colonel would have agreed with her it is impossible to say. And so we bring them up to the latter days of August.

One morning Colonel Mordaunt receives a letter which seems greatly to disturb him.

"What is the matter, Philip?" demands Irene.

"Nothing that concerns you, my darling!—nothing, in fact, at all."

Yet he sits, with knitted brows, brooding over the contents of the epistle during the rest of breakfast, and reads it through three or four times before the meal is concluded. As Irene leaves the room, he calls his sister to his side.

"Isabella, I am greatly annoyed. Here is a letter from Oliver. He has heard of an opening for a practice somewhere in this neighborhood, and proposes coming down to speak to me about it."

"He can't expect to stay here," says Miss Mordaunt—"at least I hardly think so—there will not be room for him, you know. The house will be full next week."

"If he sleeps at the inn it will be all the same. I don't want Irene and him to meet."

"Have you never mentioned Oliver to her, then?" demands his sister, timidly.

"Cursoryly I may, though I doubt if she will remember it. But it not that, Isabella. You know well enough that if I introduce young Ralston to Irene it will be difficult to explain why I don't ask him to the Court."

"And you think he might not come. It is nearly a year since he has been here."

"Good God! You have not the slightest perception. If Oliver comes here, he must see Quekett; and you know they never meet without a disturbance of some sort; and in her present state of feeling towards Irene I couldn't risk it. There is no knowing what she might not say."

"Then, what do you propose to do?"

"Put off Oliver till Quekett goes to town. If she were away, I should have no fear. Doesn't she intend to pay her usual visit to Lady What's-her-name this autumn?"

"I don't know—I am almost afraid she doesn't. I was speaking to her about it yesterday; but she has not been herself at all lately—she's quite—crochety," says Miss Mordaunt; as though crochety were an entirely new phase in Mrs. Quekett's character.

"Means to stay here on purpose, I suppose, because she knows we want the house to ourselves. Isabella, I often wish I had taken Irene abroad again. I question whether it would not be worth my while to take up a residence there, even now. She likes continental life, and I—well, any life almost would be preferable to this. I live in constant dread of an explosion."

"Wouldn't it"—commences Miss Mordaunt, timidly—"wouldn't it be better, Philip—of