

"I hope you are not annoyed at the disrespectful manner in which I spoke of your exceedingly pretty little prayer-book," says Muiraven, breaking the ice for her.

"It is not mine," she answers briefly; "it belonged to Tommy's mother. I am keeping it for him."

"Indeed! that makes it interesting. Is it long since she died?"

"Nearly a twelvemonth. I have several of her little possessions—a photograph amongst the number."

"What, of—of—the child's father?"

"I conclude so."

"You must take great care of it. It may prove of the utmost use some day in tracing his parentage."

"So I think. His poor mother had been so utterly deserted that the only clue she could give me was the name (which she had discovered to be false) by which the man who betrayed her called himself. I wonder, if I ever meet that man or discover his identity, whether I should be bound to give up the child to him. What is your opinion, Lord Muiraven?"

"You set me rather a difficult task, Mrs. Mordaunt. It so entirely depends upon whether the father will be anxious to assume his guardianship or not. He could claim the boy, of course, if he could prove his right to do so; but the greater probability is, that he would deny the relationship. Had he had any intention of acting the part of a parent to his child, he would never have abandoned the mother."

"You think so—it is your real opinion?" she demands eagerly.

"I think every one must think so. Poor little Tommy is most fortunate to have fallen into your hands. You may depend upon it, you will never be troubled by a gratuitous application for him."

"How hard-hearted some men are!" she sighs.

"They are brutes!" replies her companion determinately; and Irene is more puzzled than before.

"Lord Muiraven—" she commences again.

"I am all attention, Mrs. Mordaunt."

"If I were to arrive accidentally, at the knowledge of who is the child's father, and found he was not aware of the fact of his existence, ought I to make it known to him?"

"Certainly!"

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure!—unless you wish to injure both parent and child. However kind and good you may be to him, no one can care for a boy, or advance his interests in life, as a father can; and life, under the most favorable circumstances will be a serious thing for poor little Tommy. If you are to keep him, I am sorry he is not a girl. I am afraid you will find him troublesome by-and-by."

"I have no fear of that—only of his being taken away from me. Still—if you consider it would be right—"

"Do you know who his father is, then?"

"I think I do; but, please, don't mention it again: it is quite a secret."

"Well, if I were in that man's place I should think that you were wronging me: but it is a matter of opinion. Tommy's father may—and probably will—be only too glad to leave him in your hands."

"But if it were you?"

"If it were me, I should prefer to look after my own child: I should not feel justified in delegating the duty to another. I should consider it the only reparation that lay in my power to make him; and any one who deprived me of it, would rob me of the means of exhibiting my penitence."

This burst of eloquence decides her. Sorely as she will mourn his loss, she dares not keep Tommy's parentage a secret any longer. If he belongs to Lord Muiraven, to Lord Muiraven he must go. But she hardly dares to think what Fen Court will look like when both of them are lost to view again.

"How you have been crying!" remarks her husband the next day, as she issues from her morning-room, and unexpectedly confronts him.

"It is no matter," she answers evasively as she tries to pass him to go upstairs. She is vexed he has commented on her appearance, for the housekeeper is standing in the hall at the same time.

"But it does signify," he continues pertinaciously. "What is the reason of it? Are you ill?"

"Not in the least; but I have been turning over old letters and papers this morning—and it is never a pleasant task to undertake. I shall be all right again by luncheon time." And she escapes to the shelter of her bedroom.

"Lor, Colonel! how inconsiderate you are, questioning Madam about the whys and wherefores of everything!" ejaculates Mrs. Quekett. "As if a lady could turn over her stock of treasures—her little tokens and bits of hair and old love-letters, without bringing the tears to her eyes. You've no knowledge at all of women, Colonel, and it seems to me you've quite forgotten you ever were young yourself."

"But to see her eyes so red as that!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt.

"Bless you! do you think when you marry a woman, you walk at once into all her troubles and secrets, past, and present, and to come? Colonel, you've the least discrimination of any man I ever knew. She might just as well expect you to turn out the bundle of your past life—and there'd be a pretty kettle of fish if you did—that I know!"

"You have the most extraordinary habit,

Quekett, of talking of one's private affairs in public places. I wish you'd remember where you are."

"Very well, Colonel; that's a hint for me to go. But I couldn't help putting in a word for Mrs. Mordaunt. You mustn't expect too much of her. She's yours—be content with that. Wiser men than you have found it best, before now, to keep their eyes half shut." And with that, Mrs. Quekett, picking up a thread here and a scrap of paper there, disappears quite naturally into the morning-room. Irene, meanwhile, is bathing her eyes in cold water. She has really been only occupied in turning over old papers—the papers that concern Tommy—and trying to write a letter to Lord Muiraven on the subject, which shall tell all she wishes him to know, in language not to plain. But she has found the task more difficult than she anticipated; ugly things look so much more ugly when they are written down in black and white. She has made five or six attempts, and they are all in the waste-paper basket. As she comes downstairs to luncheon, looking quite herself again, and passes through the morning-room, her eyes catch sight of these same fragmentary records lying lightly one upon the other, and she thinks how foolish it was of her to leave them for any one to read who passed that way. The gong is sounding in the hall, and the gentlemen's voices are heard from the dining-room; so she gathers the torn sheets of paper hastily together, and thrusting them into a drawer of her davenport, turns the key upon them until she shall have an opportunity of destroying them more thoroughly. But she cannot imagine what makes her husband so silent and constrained, during lunch that day—and concludes something must be going wrong with the farm, and trusts Philip is not going to break through his general rule of keeping outdoor worries for out-door consideration; or that Philip is not going to develop a new talent for indulging in the sulks—which appears to be the likeliest solution of the change at present.

The next day is the one fixed for Lord Muiraven's departure, and the Colonel no longer presses him to stay. As breakfast is concluded and the carriage is ordered round to convey him and his portmanteau to the station, Irene remembers her attempted letter of the day before, and feels sorry that it proved a failure. She foresees a greater difficulty in writing to him through the post, and does not even know where to address him. Colonel Mordaunt has edged off to the stables to worry the grooms into harnessing the horses at least ten minutes before the time that they were ordered to be ready; and (except for Tommy, who interrupts the conversation at every second word) she is left alone with their guest.

"Do you know," she commences timidly, "I wanted to speak to you, Lord Muiraven, before you went—that is to say, I have something rather particular to tell you."

"Have you? Oh, tell it now!" he exclaims eagerly, his hopes rising at the idea that she has plucked up courage to allude to the past.

"I could not—it would take too much time; besides, it is a subject on which I would much rather write to you."

"Will you write to me?"

"I did write yesterday—only I tore up the letter."

"What a shame! Whatever it was, why did you not let me have it?"

"I could not satisfy myself: it was too hard a task. Only—should I be able to do so—where may I address to you?"

"To the St. James's Club, or Berwick Castle. My letters will always be forwarded from either place."

"Forwarded! Are you not going to London, then?"

"Only for a day or two. I leave England next week for India."

"India! What should take you there?"

"Hopelessness, Irene!"

"Hush!"

"Mamma, why did gentleman call you Reny?" interposes Tommy from the folds of her dress.

"Forgive me," he murmurs, "I am very careless. What takes me to India, Mrs. Mordaunt, is idleness and love of change. Last autumn I spent in the United States; this I hope to do pig-sticking in Bengal; and the next will probably find me in Tasmania. What would you have me do? I am independent, restless and in need of excitement; and there is nothing to keep me at home."

"Your father, Lord Muiraven!"

"My father knows that I am never so little discontented as when I am travelling, and so he consents to it. And he has my brother. And I have—no one."

"But India! such an unhealthy climate. I thought nobody went there for choice."

"On the contrary, to go there for choice is the only way to enjoy the country. I can return whenever I like, you know. And as to the climate, it cannot be worse than that of New York, where the hot weather sweeps off its sixty head a day."

"And you will return—when?"

"In about six months, I hope, that is when the hot season recommences. I do not go alone. A cousin of my own, and a very jolly fellow of the name of Stratford, go with me. I shall come back so brown, you won't know me. What shall I bring you home from India, Tommy. A big elephant?"

"Yes, yes! bring a lum-a-lum. Mamma, gentleman going to bring Tommy a big large lum-a-lum!"

"And you will really be away six months,"

she says dreamily. She is thinking that here is a respite from divulging the secret of her adopted child's parentage, for if Lord Muiraven's arrangements for leaving the country are all completed, he would hardly thank her for thrusting so onerous a change upon him as the guardianship of a little child on the very eve of his departure. But he misinterprets the subdued and dreamy tone; he reads in it, or thinks he reads, a tender regret for his contemplated absence, and is ready to relinquish every plan which he has made upon the spot.

"I thought of being so, Mrs. Mordaunt," he replies quickly, "but if there were any chance—any hope—if I believed that any one here—oh! you know what I mean so much better than I can express it; if you wish me not to go, Irene, say the word, and I will remain in England for ever."

"Gentleman say Reny again," remarks Tommy as he pulls his adopted mother's skirts and looks up in her face for an explanation of the novelty.

"Both that child!" exclaims Muiraven angrily.

"Be quiet, Tommy! Go and play," replies Irene. "Lord Muiraven, you quite mistake my meaning. I think it is a very good thing for you to go about and travel; and am glad that you should be able to enjoy yourself. I was only thinking of—my letter."

"Send it me. Pray send it to my club. I shall be there to-morrow!"

"I do not think I shall. It was only about this child," in a lower voice. "Do you remember what you said once about being a friend to him if he lost me?"

"Perfectly; and I am ready to redeem my word!"

"Should anything happen whilst you are absent, Lord Muiraven, will you take care of him on your return? The letter I spoke of—and which will contain everything I know about his parentage—I will leave behind me, sealed and addressed to you. Will you promise me to ask for it, and to follow up any clue it may give you as faithfully as may be in your power?"

"I promise. But why speak of your death, unless you wish to torture me?"

"Is it so great a misfortune, then, to pass beyond all the trouble of this world, and be safely landed on the other shore?"

"For you—no!—but for myself—I am too selfish to be able even to contemplate such a contingency with composure. If I thought it probable, or even possible, nothing should take me from England! You are not ill?"

"Not in the least! I only spoke of death coming to me as it might come to you, or any one. I do not desire it. I am content to live, or—"

Her voice breaks.

"Or—what? For Heaven's sake, speak!"

"I was so before we met again!"

"Good God!" he utters; "why did I not put a bullet through my brains before I was mad enough to come here?"

He walks up to the mantelpiece as though he could not bear to meet her gaze, and she catches up the child and sets him on the embrasured window-still before her, and looks into his eyes with her own brimming over with tears.

Each has spoken to the other: the pent-up cry of their burdened heart has broken forth at length; and they stand silent and ashamed and overwhelmed in the presence of Nature. Tommy is the first to recall them to a sense of their equivocal position.

"Mamma is crying," he observes pointedly. "Naughty gentleman."

His shrill little voice attracts the attention of Mrs. Quekett, who is loitering in the hall (a favorite occupation of hers during that season of the year when the sitting-room doors stand open), and she immediately commences, noiselessly, to rearrange the pieces of old china that ornament the shelves of a carved oak buffet outside the dining-room.

At the sound of the child's words, Muiraven quits his place, and advancing to Irene, takes her hand.

"Forgive me," he says earnestly, "for all that I have brought upon you. Say that you forgive me!"

Mrs. Quekett pricks up her ear like a hunter when the dogs give tongue.

"You wrong me by the request," Irene answers. "I cannot think how I forgot myself so far as to say what I did; but I trust you never to take advantage of my words."

"Except in letting their memory lighten my existence, I never will. And I thank you so much for permitting me to feel we have a mutual interest in this child. I see that he is very dear to you."

"He is indeed! I don't think any mother could love a child more than I do him."

"And you will let me love him too. He shall be the link between us; the common ground on which we may meet—the memory left, to whichever goes first, of the affection of the other. Henceforward Tommy shall have a father as well as a mother."

"I will be sure and leave the letter that I spoke of."

"And you will not write to me—not one line to cheer me in any way."

"I must not; and it would be impossible if I could. When you return—perhaps—"

"If you say that I shall return to-morrow."

At this moment the carriage-wheels are heard grating on the gravel drive.

"Here is the Colonel, Mrs. Mordaunt!" Irene starts—flushes—and withdraws her hand quickly from that of Lord Muiraven.

Mrs. Quekett, duster in hand, is looking in at the open door.

"The Colonel!" cries Muiraven, looking at his watch to cover their confusion; "how time flies! It is nearly eleven. Well, good-bye, Mrs. Mordaunt. I shall have shot a real Bengal tiger before we meet again."

"Tiger will eat you," interposes Tommy, sentimentally.

"Oh, take care of yourself," says Irene, with quick alarm.

"I will—believe me! since you ask it! How big is the lum-a-lum to be, Tommy? Top feet high?"

"As tall as the house," replies Tommy.

"Are your traps brought downstairs yet, Muiraven?" demands Colonel Mordaunt, as he enters the room. "We haven't much time to spare, if you're to catch the one o'clock train. That fellow William is shirking his work again, Irene; I found the grey filly with her roller off. I declare there's no getting one's servants to do anything unless one is constantly at their heels."

"Look what gentleman given me!" says Tommy, who has been occupied with Lord Muiraven at the window.

"Your watch and chain!" exclaims Irene. "Oh, no, Lord Muiraven, indeed you must not. Think how young the child is. You are too generous."

"Generous!" says the Colonel; "it's d—d foolish, Muiraven, if you'll excuse my saying so. The boy will never be in a position to use it, and it will be smashed in an hour."

"No! that shall not be, Philip. I will take care Lord Muiraven's kindness is not abused—only a toy would have been so much better."

"Pray let him keep it, Mrs. Mordaunt. It will be rather a relief to get rid of it. I so much prefer to wear dear old Bob's, that was sent home to me last autumn."

"You certainly must have more watches than you know what to do with," grumbles the Colonel. "Put Lord Muiraven's portmanteaus in the carriage, James:—wait a minute. Let me speak to the coachman."

Irene has taken the watch from the child's hand, and is holding it in her own.

"It is so kind of you," she murmurs.

"Not at all; it is a pleasure to me. Keep it as a pledge of what I have promised in respect of him. And if I thought you sometimes wore it, Irene, in remembrance of our friendship, it would make me so happy."

"I will."

"Thanks—God bless you!" and with one long look and pressure, he is gone.

Irene takes an opportunity during the succeeding day to examine her behavior and its motives very searchingly, but she thinks that, on the whole, she has acted right. What could Muiraven have done with a young child just as he was starting for a place like India? He could not have taken Tommy with him; he would have been compelled to leave him in England under the care of strangers; who, in the event of his father dying abroad, would have had him reared and educated without any reference to herself. Yes! she believes she has done what is best for all parties. When Muiraven returns she will tell him the truth, and let him do as he thinks fit; but until that event occurs, she shall keep the child to herself. And as the blankness of the knowledge of his departure returns upon her every now and then during that afternoon, she catches up Tommy in her arms and smotherers him with kisses, as she reflects with secret joy that she has something of Muiraven left her still. How surprised she would be to compare her present feelings with those with which she first learned the news of the boy's paternity.

The sin and shame of that past folly are not less shocking to her than they were; but the sting has been withdrawn from them. Eric loves her. He was not base and cruel and deceitful; it was Fate that kept them separate; and on the strength of his own word, he is forgiven for everything—past, present, and to come! What is there Woman will not forgive to the man she loves?

Irene almost believes this afternoon, that if she is but permitted to bring up Tommy to be worthy of his father, so that when he is a man, and Eric is still lonely and unmarried, she may present them to each other and say, "Here is a son to bless and comfort your old age," she will desire nothing more to make life happy. And feeling more light-hearted and content than she has done for many a day—although Muiraven has put miles between them—goes singing about the garden in the evening, like a blithe-some bird. Her carolling rather disturbs Colonel Mordaunt, who (with his study window open) is busy with his farm accounts; and making small way as it is, with Mrs. Quekett standing at his right hand, and putting in her oar at every second figure.

"Not oats, Colonel; it was barley Clayton brought in last week; and if an eye's anything to go by, ten sacks short, as I'm a living woman."

"How can you tell, Quekett?" replies the Colonel fretfully; "did you see them counted?"

"Counted! Is it my business to watch your stable-men do their work?"

"Of course not; but I suppose Barnes was there; he is generally sharp enough upon Clayton."

"Well there it is in the granary—easy enough to look at it. It seems short enough measure to me. Perhaps some has been taken since it was unloaded."

"It's very unpleasant to have those doubts. I hate suspecting any one, especially my own