

years. And yet she is not cold to him — she does not repulse his attentions nor refuse to acknowledge them; on the contrary, as they commence their drive to Priestly, and he wraps a shawl about her feet, and makes her put them upon the opposite seat, the smile with which she thanks him would be sufficient to put a younger man "off his head."

"How beautiful the country is!" she says, as they pass fields of clean-shorn sheep, and rosy children bobbing curtseys by the cottage gates, and waggons of late-gathered hay breathing "odors of Araby" as they crawl by; "how sweet and clean everything looks and smells. Philip, I long to see the garden; I am so fond of flowers. Do you remember the lovely bouquets you used to send me in Brussels?"

"Perfectly, my darling" (Colonel Mordaunt seldom calls his wife anything but "darling," and the word has ceased to grate on her ears as it did at first, recalling the lost voice that spoke it once); "and how you used to turn your nose up at my humble offerings."

"I never told you so, Philip; that must be an invention of your own."

"Perhaps I divined it, Irene; for my eyes were very keen for anything that concerned you in those days."

"Well, it was very wicked of me, then, and I promise that I won't turn up my nose at the first bouquet you give me from Fen Court."

"You shall have a beauty the very first thing in the morning. I hope the garden will be in good order—I have given sufficient directions on the subject."

"Doesn't Isabella care for flowers?"

"Not much, I think. She is a strange creature in some of her ways. I sometimes wonder, darling, how you and she will get on with one another."

"Why, admirably, of course—I mean to get on with her."

Colonel Mordaunt turns round and gazes at his wife adoringly.

"You are too good!" he says; "Oh, Irene! if I don't make you happy, may God's judgment—"

"Hush! hush!" she interrupts him quickly, "pray don't say that, you make me feel so small."

But see how much less than a woman she would have been not too care for him, who had taken her to his arms, despite his knowledge of her outraged affections, and treated her as though she had flown to them of her own accord. She does not love him, this gallant gentleman who almost worships her, but she is very grateful and almost happy, and bids fair to make a model wife and mistress. As the carriage reaches the entrance to Fen Court, and rolls up the broad drive through the shrubbery, she becomes quite excited in her admiration.

"Is this ours—really?" she exclaims, inquiringly.

"It is yours, my own darling, every inch of it!" replies her husband.

"Oh! Philip!" and in her delight and surprise she turns and kisses him, for the first time of her own accord.

Colonel Mordaunt flushes up to his eyes with gratification, and this trifling episode has the power to dispel much of the nervousness with which he has looked forward to introducing his wife to Fen Court.

"Here we are, at last!" he exclaims, as the carriage stops before the bold porch, and a couple of menservants appear upon the doorstep. "Jump down, my darling; Isabella is sure to be waiting for you, and you must be tired to death with this long drive."

"I am not at all tired," is her rejoinder; "and I mean to see every bit of the garden before I go to bed to-night."

Miss Mordaunt is waiting for them in the hall.

"Oh my dear Mrs. Mordaunt! I came — I thought, perhaps—I didn't know—"

"Did you not expect us so soon?" replies Irene, stooping to kiss her sister-in-law. "I think we have come rather quickly."

"Quickly!" echoes Colonel Mordaunt, who is close upon her heels; "why, we have been hours on the road. What time have you ordered dinner, Isabella?"

"At seven—at least I believe at seven—but if you would rather not—"

"The sooner the better," says her brother; "seven will do admirably. And now, if you will take Irene up to her bedroom and help her off with her things, I think she will be obliged to you. You won't dress to-night, darling?"

"Oh, no! Philip; only take the dust off. What a wide staircase, and such pretty carpets! Oh! is this my room? it is beautiful. How nice and fresh it looks. And blue, too! I wonder who chose blue? it is my favorite color."

"It was my brother who ordered it to be re-furnished with this color. Can I help you off with your bonnet, Mrs. Mordaunt? or perhaps—if you had rather be alone—if I had better go—"

"Oh, no! don't go! I shall be ready directly. But why do you not call me by my Christian name? Surely we are not to be 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' to one another!"

"If you wish it—of course—but I shouldn't have thought—" Miss Mordaunt's deprecating manner is already casting a chill over Irene's coming home.

"Since we are to be sisters, I think it should be so," she answers, with a glance of scrutiny at her companion; but she is not so eager in her manner of addressing her again, and it is a relief to hear her husband's voice asking for admittance.

"Have you everything you want — are you quite comfortable? Isabella, where is Mrs. Que-

kett? I thought she would be here to welcome Irene to Fen Court."

Miss Mordaunt telegraphs a look of meaning to her brother — it is very slight, but Irene catches it, and feels immediately that there is something to be concealed.

"Who is Mrs. Quekett?" she demands abruptly, looking from one to the other.

"The housekeeper—" commences Miss Mordaunt.

"Well, hardly a housekeeper, Isabella, although she certainly does keep house for us," interrupts her brother.

"She does keep house for you, and yet she is not your housekeeper," says Irene, merrily; "she must be an anomaly, this Mrs. Quekett. Pray, is she young or old, fat or thin, wise or foolish? though, after what you have just said, Philip, I should not be at all surprised to hear she is all of them put together."

"You are a saucy girl, and don't deserve an answer; but when you come to know her, you will acknowledge that Mrs. Quekett is a very wonderful woman, and can be almost anything she chooses. When I said she was hardly a housekeeper, I meant she was superior to the place. But she lived for many years with my father in that capacity, and has always had a home with me since his death. You will find her a great help to you, darling, for I'm sure you cannot know much about housekeeping; and I hope you will get on very well together."

"There is no doubt of it; I always get on well with servants; that is, if they keep their places. But with regard to housekeeping, Philip, I intend to agreeably surprise you. I know much more than you imagine, and mean to make myself perfect. I always thought I should like to have a large house like this to look after, and to keep in spick-span order. I like pretty things, but the romance of untidiness never held any charms for me. I was out out for an old maid."

"It is lucky for me, darling, that we met before you had made up your mind unalterably upon that subject," says Colonel Mordaunt, laughing, as he draws her arm within his own to lead her to the dining-room. "But, however good a manager you may be, I am sure you will find Mrs. Quekett an admirable assistant, to say the very least of it. She has been always used to manage the household affairs, and, were I you, I should leave them in her hands. Why should you trouble your head about such matters, when I can afford to keep some one to do it for you?"

"Mrs. Quekett will have plenty to do, Philip. I did not mean that I should rise with the lark each morning to call the maids, or walk about in the trail of the broom and dust-pan, to see that they do their duty; but I've no opinion of a mistress who leaves her work to the servants. Have you?"

At these words Isabella again steals one of those furtive, mutual-understanding glances at Colonel Mordaunt, with an expression that rouses not only Irene's curiosity, but her spirit, and she does not wait for an answer to her question:

"At all events, I mean to try and make myself equal to the position you have placed me in, Philip," she continues.

"And you would be so, my darling, a thousand times over," he whispers, fondly "even I had placed you on a throne."

This conversation gives a brief insight to the state of mind in which Irene enters on the performance of her new duties. The glances which she intercepted between her sister-in-law and her husband do not give her more than a moment's uneasiness, whilst they strengthen her purpose of self-dependence.

She misinterprets their meaning; she imagines they arose from their doubt of her capability to maintain her position as mistress of Fen Court; and she becomes determined, in consequence, to prove that they are mistaken. From the hour she accepted Colonel Mordaunt's proposal, and fixed her thoughts upon a future shared with him, Irene has experienced more pleasure from the prospect of having the entire management of this household at Fen Court upon her hands than anything else.

For, in order to fight successfully with disappointment, or even to fight, at all, we must have some definite employment. A man generally has a business or profession to engross his loyal thoughts and shut the door in the face of all the rebel ones (though what a knack they have of peeping through the chinks!); with him the grinding necessity of making bread, either for himself or others, is paramount, and leaves little leisure for painful introspection. It is not that he feels the less for being busy; it is that he has less time to feel. The female sex has in all ages, most undeservedly, gained credit for being the more constant of the two: but, though they mourn more expressively, their grief is neither so bitter nor so long. A man and woman who love each other are irrevocably separated: what happens to them? He seldom speaks of his loss to any one; if he does, it is in short, sharp sentences, that are dismissed as soon as possible: and he goes about his work as usual; worries his head over the ledger in his counting-house; strains every nerve to outwit the counsel for the other side; conducts three or four services a day, or sits up all night writing for the press. Every now and then, doubtless, a sad thought comes between him and his employment; he sees her, or hears of her, or the remembrance of something they have shared in the past smites him with sudden pain; but he puts it away: he must put it away, if he is to pursue the business which depends upon his brain, or hand, or skill. Where is the woman, meanwhile, who mourns him, poor wretch, as

hopelessly, (I have no wish to detract from the sex's capability of loving) as only a woman can?

Sitting by the fire, most likely, if it is winter, or lying on her bed if it is summer, with a novel in her hand, or a piece of fancy work, and all her mind fixed upon her absent lover: ready and willing to talk over the cruelty of her disappointment with the first friend who calls: crying till she can hardly see out of her eyes: refusing to attend any party of pleasure (women think giving up balls and theatres and concerts an immense proof of constancy; they don't understand how the lightest laughter is often used to conceal the heaviest hearts); even refusing to eat: sitting down, in fact, with her dead love in her lap, determined to nurse it and weep over it, and recall all she has lost with it, until she makes herself first hysterical and then useless, and lastly ill, and a worry to every one connected with her. Our friends die, and we bury them. Why can't we bury the corpses of our dead hopes in the same way? The regret we feel for those whom we have lost by death is sad enough and sharp enough, God knows, as it returns in the silent watches of the night, or even amidst the clamorous hurry of the day; but what would it not be were we to keep those still forms ever beside us, to prevent all hope of sorrow sinking into natural sleep? Yet that is what most women do with their blighted affections; and many of them experience actual disappointment when they discover that Time has mercifully closed the wound, and they are 'getting over it.' They keep it open as long as they possibly can; they tear the bandage away which opportunity affords them; and when the healed spot is no longer capable of laceration, they will sit down and begin to cry afresh over their own inconstancy. And, perhaps, when they have reached this epoch, the man is still experiencing those occasional sharp, cruel stabs of remembrance which are all the worse to bear because they come so seldom, and the flesh is unused to them.

But if women were brought up to work like men (in other kind, perhaps, but with the same necessity), active employment, either of brain or hand, would place the sexes, in this matter, on a level; and whilst much needless misery would be spared to the one, a large amount of comfort would come to the other; for, of all persons with whom to shun intercourse in this life, give me the flabby thing which calls itself a woman who has had 'a disappointment'—as though there were no disappointment in the world but that which springs from love turned sour with adversity, like small beer by thunder.

Irene has never been a woman utterly without a purpose. In her early girlhood, and before she experienced any necessity to gamble with life for forgetfulness, she was accustomed to look upon each day in which she had done nothing as a day to be regretted. She used to read much at that time, not desultorily, but on a fixed plan; and she would allow no pleasure, however tempting, to lure her from her self-imposed task until it was accomplished. She took a very bright interest in politics; in the projects for improving the condition of the nation at large, and all new discoveries, whether in art, science, or nature; attempted, also, as most able minds do, to put down her thoughts on all these things in writing, but was quite satisfied with the ample variety of mental food which ancient and modern literature placed before her, and never had the least desire to cram her own ideas down the throats of others. In fine, until the unfortunate moment arrived in which she met Eric Keir, Irene was a happy, helpful, matter-of-fact woman; and though the two blows which she received so close together did for awhile crush life's purpose out of her and blur her vision of a noble and elevated future, it is all coming back to her now as she finds herself mistress of Fen Court, and the mists that obscured her duty are clearing away from before her eyes. To make her husband's house what it should be (and what Colonel Mordaunt has already deplored, in her hearing, that it is not), one of the best-appointed and pleasantest houses in the county; to render herself an agreeable, favourite hostess; to be the ruler of his household, the friend of his tenants, and the benefactor of the poor who are dependent on him—this is the path which she has chalked out for herself, and in which she is resolute to walk. Some women think it beneath them to make their husbands' home comfortable. They want to deliver lectures like Emily Faithful, or write books like Mrs. Riddell, or compose songs like Elizabeth Philp, or play Juliet like Mrs. Scott-Siddons; and if they are not permitted to labor through the medium of the stage, the platform, or the press, their mission is wrested from them: there is nothing more to live for.

Irene Mordaunt knows better. She knows that if genius is not required to keep the machinery of a large establishment in working order, good sense is; and, however capable and far-seeing and practical her head may be, it is none too much so for the worthy employment of the large sums of money that must annually pass through her hands. She does not think the work beneath her; she feels like a queen entering upon her territory; and as her husband, when their dinner is ended, makes the tour with her of his possessions, she notes with a keen eye where improvement is most needed and registers inward vows to be faithful to the trust committed to her. The knowledge of her responsibility works on Irene like a charm: her spirits rise; her eyes become brighter, her pulses beat more healthfully, and she retires to rest full of expectation for the coming morrow. Such are some of the good effects of realizing

that there is work left in the world to do which no one can accomplish so well as ourselves. Had Irene remained at Laburnum Cottage with Mrs. Cavendish, she might have continued to be a love-sick maiden to this day; as it is, the task which she has undertaken with a sincere intention of fulfilling, will lift her, step by step, above the earth-stained troubles of the world, until she has reached the highest elevation her mortal nature is capable of attaining.

She wakes in the morning, fresh as a flower, and active as a squirrel. She has not opened her eyes two seconds before she has thrown up the casement and is inhaling the sweetness of the noisette roses that cluster round it. The pure, cool country air is like a draught of life; the scented flowers are hanging, six and eight upon one stem; across the meadow comes the lowing of the cows as they return from the milking shed, and the bleating of the calves that welcome them; and underneath her are the gardeners, sharpening their scythes to mow the dewy lawn. The freshness, the sweetness, the simplicity, the peace of all around her, wake the deepest gratitude in Irene's heart, and make the tears rise to her eyes. She is all anxiety to mingle again in the scenes that lie before her; to retrace her footsteps of last night, and make sure that it was all reality; and before Colonel Mordaunt has realised that she has left him, she is up and dressed, and roaming over the wet grass and through the shrubberies and gardens, whence, at sound of the breakfast-bell, she reappears, with rose-tinted cheeks, damp boots, a dragged muslin dress, and her hands full of flowers. Her husband, now looking one way and now the other, is on the door-step, anxiously awaiting her.

"My darling!" he commences, reproachfully. "Now, Philip, don't scold! I know I'm a horrid object, but it won't take me a minute to change. I've been all through the hot-houses and the kitchen gardens, and down the wilderness, and over the bridge by that piece of water; and then I got into a field and found lots of mushrooms. (Do you like mushrooms? they're in my skirt, under the flowers.) And I came back by the meadows you showed me last night, where the horses are, and—oh! I am so tired, and so wet; but I haven't enjoyed anything like it for months past."

Colonel Mordaunt looks as though he were enjoying the recital as much as she has done the reality.

"I am so glad to hear it," he says, as he kisses her; "but you can come in to breakfast as you are, can you not?"

"What! with my hair half-way down my back, and my dress clinging to me like a wet flag? I should scarcely look dignified at the head of your table, Philip. Give me ten minutes' grace, to set myself to rights. Good morning, Isabella. I have not a hand to offer you, but I have had such a delightful ramble."

Then she turns to the servant in attendance. "Take these flowers, James, and place them on the sideboard; and bring up the breakfast. Have you been used to make the tea, Isabella? Will you be so good as to do so for one morning more, in consideration of the novelty of the situation? I will be in good time to-morrow, Philip; but I had no idea the place was half so lovely, and I ran on from one delight to another, and could not tear myself away."

She is mounting the staircase now, still attended by her husband; and Miss Mordaunt looks after her with unfeigned surprise. So young and strange—and yet so cool and at her ease! The woman who has spent all her life in fear, lest she should be saying or doing something wrong, cannot understand the confidence which is engendered by a knowledge of our own powers of pleasing. In another minute Irene is down again, her hair rearranged, and her dress exchanged for a wrapper of pale blue, which is wonderfully becoming to her; and as her sister-in-law sees her smile, and hears her talk, and watches her do all the honors of the breakfast-table as though she had sat there for years, she marvels how so bright an apparition can ever have been persuaded to link her fortunes with those of Philip, and take up her residence at Fen Court.

"What are you going to do to-day, Philip?" says Irene, as the meal draws to a conclusion.

Colonel Mordaunt has already risen from table, and taken up his station on the hearth-rug.

"Well, that depends mostly on yourself, my darling. I have a great deal to do, of course, after two months' absence, about the kennel and the farm; but I should hardly like to leave you alone so soon."

"But I shall have Isabella, and plenty of employment. There are all my things to be unpacked; and the new maid seems stupid; so I shall go and superintend her; and I have the dinner to order, and the kitchen to inspect, and to make the acquaintance of Mrs. What's-her-name."

Colonel Mordaunt starts. "Mrs. Quekett! Ah! true; I should like to introduce Mrs. Quekett to you before I go out, Irene. She is such a very old servant of the family."

"All right, dear. Ring the bell, and tell her to come up now. I am quite ready to see her."

Again does Isabella raise deprecating eyes to her brother's face. Something, which the unsuspecting bride is sure to resent, must come to the surface before long, and, man-like, Colonel Mordaunt tries to throw the responsibility of the disclosure on to his sister's shoulders.

"Oh!—ah!—yes; to be sure! I suppose Mrs. Quekett will be able to see Irene now, Isabella?"