

cannot believe that any explanation can alter matters as they now stand between you and me, nor do I see the necessity of one. But if you are still desirous of speaking to me, I am ready, as I said before, to listen to you. Shall we go indoors, or remain here?"

"Come into the shrubbery," he says earnestly; and into the shrubbery they go.

When they arrive there, they pace up and down the winding pathway more than once, in utter silence.

"Please say what you have to say," she pleads at last.

"I will! Irene, when your mother spoke to me that day in the library at Brook Street, I felt as though a thunderbolt had fallen at my feet!"

"Oh, why allude to that? It is all passed and done with. Who cared about it?"

"You did—and so did I. It nearly broke my heart, and yet I was powerless to act in any other manner."

"Then why speak about it? I wish that you would not."

"I must speak about it, even at the risk of tearing open my own wounds and yours. You see how coolly I take it for granted that you cared for me, Irene."

"Your wounds?"

"Yes, mine! Good God, do you suppose that any obstacle short of insuperable would have made me act as I was forced to do? Do you believe that I didn't love you with all my heart and soul, Irene?"

She does not answer him, but draws a deep, long sigh of gratitude. Some of the black cloud that has darkened her existence is cleared away already. Eric Keir loved her.

"If I had but known it!" she says at length.

"Would it have made you happier?"

"I could have borne what followed by myself," she answers simply.

Then a light breaks in upon Muiraven, and he sees what he has done. He understands that this girl has entered upon marriage to save her from the apathy that succeeds despair.

"God forgive me!" he cries aloud. "Oh, Irene! I dared not tell you—I dared not tell it to myself until your mother crushed me with her inquiries, and I had no alternative but to preserve a houndish silence and to leave the house that held everything that was dearest to me in the world. My crime—my madness was to linger near you for so long—when I knew a barrier was raised between us that even time itself might never have the power to pull down. But I did not know my danger, Irene, far less could I guess yours: exonerate me so far, if you can. I was so lonely at that period of my life—so much in need of sympathy and counsel—and the friendship you accorded to me was so sweet, I was wicked enough never to stop to consider what the consequences of the intercourse might be to both of us. Oh, Irene! I will never again insult you by asking you to be my friend, but say that you will try to forgive me for the wrong I did you, and to think less hardly of me than you do."

"The barrier!" she murmurs. Her voice is full of tears, and she dares not trust herself to say another word.

"I will tell you all I can. I will tell you more than I have ever told to any other human creature on the subject. When I was very young—long before I met you—I got myself into a dreadful scrape; so great a scrape that I did not care—and never have dared yet—to tell my father of it; and this scrape involved consequences that utterly precluded—and preclude still—my ever thinking of marriage."

"But—but I thought I heard—a rumor reached us two years ago that you were engaged to a Miss Robertson."

"Nothing but rumor, Irene. Your informant must have meant my brother Cecil, who is to marry Harriet Robertson next month. But to return to ourselves. I know my explanation is a very unsatisfactory one, and that I am presumptuous to hope you may accept it. But I cannot help making it. Will you trust me so far as to believe that I speak the truth?"

"I do believe it!"

"Thank you, a thousand times. Oh, if you knew the load your words have lifted off my breast! Had I followed the dictates of prudence, and of what the world calls propriety, I should have sneaked away whenever I heard your name mentioned, and died, as I have lived, under the ban of your contempt. But I was determined, as soon as ever Fate sent me the opportunity, to try and clear myself in your eyes. It is very little I can say. I can only throw myself on your compassion, and ask you to believe me, when I swear that I never loved any woman as I loved you; and that had had it been in my power to marry you, I should have spared no pains to make you love me in return."

"I do believe you," she repeats again.

He stops, and she stops, and he confronts her on the shrubbery path.

"You believe—as surely as though I were yourself—that there exists a fatal and insurmountable obstacle to my marrying any one?"

"I do—since you assure me it is so!"

"And that, had that obstacle not existed I would have sought you, so long as you were single, through all the world, in order to persuade you to become my wife?"

"Since you affirm it—yes!"

"And that when I asked for your friendship and affection, it was with no base intention to deceive or trifle with your love, but because my own yearning to be associated with you was so deep that I gratefully gathered up the least

crumb of consolation without considering what the issue might bring to us?"

"I do!"

"Oh, Irene, if I had but known all this before!"

"It was impossible that you could know it. It is an adverse Fate that has divided us. Be content to learn it now."

"I am content—and deeply grateful for your trust. But with your trust, shall I regain your friendship?"

She hardly knows what to answer to this question. She is glowing with the excitement of his revelations, but sober enough to be aware that such a friendship as they once promised one another, can never exist between them in their new relations.

"Lord Muiraven!"—she commences—

"Oh! I do not call me by that name. Freshly as it brings back to me my brother's death, it is hateful upon all occasions, and more than ever from your lips."

"I must not call you otherwise," she answers quickly. "You have been very frank with me, and I will be the same with you. I will acknowledge that your conduct—your supposed indifference—"

"My indifference—oh! Irene!"

"—has been the cause, at times, of great pain to me, and that to hear you clear yourself is comfort; and if I were still single, I might say, let us renew the friendship which was so rudely broken; but I am married, Lord Muiraven, and what we promised to be to one another in those old days we can never be now!"

Lord Muiraven receives this announcement with a deep groan.

"I am sure you will see the justice of my remark," she goes on presently. "The counsel and advice and sympathy which were to form that bond, and which, more often than not, involve fidelity, might not be pleasant to my husband, and—I promised to be frank with you—I love my husband, Lord Muiraven."

"You do?" he says incredulously.

"I do indeed! Not in the way, perhaps, you think of love, but, any way, too much to engage in anything that might distress or wrong him. And you know that a man of his age might well be unhappy and suspicious at his wife having a young and close friend like yourself. So that anything more than good companionship is utterly denied to us."

"The devil!" says Muiraven under his breath.

"Hush! don't speak of it so lightly. You know well what I mean. My husband married me when most people would hardly have thought I should have made a pleasant wife, and —"

"Oh! say you love me still," he interposes eagerly, guessing at the reason of her doubt.

She turns her calm sad eyes on him in silence, and the rebuke is sufficient; he permits her to proceed.

"—through all my indifference and depression, and often, I am afraid, my ill-temper (for I have not been half grateful to him for his kindness), he has been so patient and attentive and affectionate, that I never could forget it—if I would. And therefore it is that I cannot give you back my friendship, Lord Muiraven. My sympathy will be always yours; but friendship includes confidence, and I am sure that confidence between me and any other man would give my husband pain."

"Is a married woman never to have any friends, then?" he says discontentedly.

"I am not called upon to decide for other women. Some, unfortunately, have no friends in their husbands, and they must judge for themselves; but my husband was my best friend when—when I really seemed to be without one in the world, and I feel bound to return his goodness where I can."

"All right, then I conclude everything's over between us. I am sorry I spoke—in a voice of the direst offense."

"Oh, Eric! don't break my heart!" she cries involuntarily.

"Break your heart, when I would lay down my life to save you from a moment's pain! Irene! I am the most miserable man on God's earth. By one fatal mistake I wrecked all my hopes of happiness; and now you consider me unworthy even of the notice you accord to the commonest of your acquaintances."

"I never said that. I shall always think of you, and treat you as a friend; but, under the circumstances, don't you agree with me that there might be danger in a closer intimacy?"

"Would there be danger?" he says joyfully.

Alas for the weakness of human nature! He has just declared he could lay down his life to save her from a moment's pain; and yet it thrills him through with happiness to find that she fears lest nearer intercourse might bring wretchedness for both of them; and he would consent to the nearer intercourse, and the prospect of wretchedness, with the greatest alacrity, and believe firmly that he loves her through it all!

Alas for human nature! Blind, weak, wavering, and selfish. From the crown of its head to the sole of its foot, there is no whole part in it!

"I think I will go in now," says Irene, without taking any apparent notice of his last remark. "I have said all that I can say to you, Lord Muiraven; and further conversation on the subject would be useless. You have made me much happier by what you have told me to-day, for I have had a hard battle sometimes since we parted to reconcile your conduct with the notion I had formed of you. I only wish you had spoken as frankly to my poor mother as you have done to me."

"I should, had Mrs. St. John only given me the opportunity."

"Never mind! It is a thing of the past, and perhaps she sees the reason of it now more clearly than I do. Thank you for telling me as much as you have. But we will not allude, please, to the subject again."

"Must I never speak to you of my troubles?"

"It is better not; and you need not fear I shall forget you or them. I have always prayed for you—I shall do so still."

"God bless you, Irene!" he says beneath his breath; and at the entrance of the shrubbery they part, he to go towards the stables, she towards the house.

But she has not left his side one minute before a thought flashes across her mind—a thought which never once presented itself throughout the interview.

"The Child! What of the Child!"

What of the child, indeed! Is she to restore him to the man who has reinstated himself in her good opinion; or does not the mere fact of his existence render much that Lord Muiraven has said to her in the shrubbery null and void? Is the word of the betrayer of Myra Cray a word to be trusted; or is it certain that Eric Keir was that betrayer? Between excitement and expectation and doubt and uncertainty, Irene becomes quite confused, and the first thing she does on re-entering Fen Court is to take out the packet of letters, the ivory-backed prayer-book, and the photograph, and to examine them carefully again. Somehow they do not seem so thoroughly convincing to her as they did before.

Lord Muiraven's proper name is certainly "Eric Hamilton," but the notes are only signed "E. H." and the name of Hamilton is very common. The initials may stand for Edward Hamilton or Ernest Hamilton. It is rather poor evidence to condemn a man upon a couple of initials. The handwriting she could never positively swear to, because she has never seen that of Lord Muiraven's, except in answer to invitations, and these notes have evidently been written hurriedly. They might be the letters of anybody; she will think no more about them. But the photograph, faded as it is, is a more startling witness to his identity. It is not flattering; *coram-de-viâ* seldom are: it is too dark, and he is frowning, and his nose and chin are out of focus. Still, as she twists it about in the clear morning light, she cannot deny that it is like him—or like what he may have been some years ago. Yet it seems hard to accuse a man of so serious a fault upon the evidence of a bit of cardboard! Irene would have twisted that photograph up and down and round about until she had convinced herself that it was not the least like Lord Muiraven, nor ever could have been; but at this moment the door opens to admit Tommy. Here comes the living witness of his father's frailty to put to shame all the inanimate mementoes by which she is trying to delude herself into the notion that Lord Muiraven is an injured man. Here come the dark wavy locks, the deep blue eyes, the pointed nose, already showing evidence of the possession of a bridge; the deep chest and sturdy limbs that Tommy's progenitor must certainly have displayed when at the same age as himself. Irene is almost cross with the little fellow for looking so abominably like his father.

"Oh! he must have been the man! It is quite impossible I can be mistaken," she inwardly ejaculates as she throws herself into a chair.

"Come here, Tommy! What on earth does Phoebe mean by parting your hair in the middle, just as if you were a girl—it makes you look quite absurd."

"Gentleman has got his hair parted in the middle!" says Tommy, alluding to Lord Muiraven.

"That's no reason you should have it too," replies Irene, quite sharply, as she divides his curls with her fingers, and effects a general disturbance thereof, of which her protégé disapproves. "Sit still, can't you? What a dreadful fidget you are!"

"You hurt!" says Tommy, at last, as the tears well up into his eyes at her roughness. At that sight her mood changes.

"Oh, my blessed boy! my own little darling! do you want to go away from your poor mamma, who loves you so?"

"I won't go, mamma," replies Tommy stoutly. "I will always live with my mamma, and take great care of her, I will."

"My precious! what should I do without you? He would never be so cruel as to take you away. And yet, were he to know the truth, how could he do otherwise? How could I keep you? Oh, what shall I do?"

"I will not give him up in a hurry," she ruminates presently, as Tommy, having had enough embraces, wriggles off her lap again and runs away to play. "If I am to part with the child, it shall only be upon the most convincing proofs of the relationship between them"—forgetting that only on the most convincing proofs would Muiraven be likely to acknowledge the responsibility. Brooding on this resolution, however, Irene grows cunning, and bent on ascertaining the truth, lays little traps wherein to catch her guest, inwardly triumphing every time they fail. She has many opportunities of laying them, for her spirits are lighter and brighter after the shrubbery *sté-à-sté*, and Muiraven enters more freely into conversation with her. But it puzzles him considerably at this period to discover what motive she can have for continually speaking in parables to him; or why she should drag in subjects irrelevant to the matter in hand, by the head and shoulders, as she is so fond of doing.

"What a beautiful evening," he remarks

casually as the whole party seat themselves after dinner on chairs on the lawn. "I consider the evening by far the most enjoyable part of the day at this season of the year."

"If one has a clear conscience," says his hostess pointedly; "but I think, if I had wronged any one very much in my lifetime, I should never be able to enjoy a summer's evening again. Everything seems so pure and calm then—one feels so near heaven."

"I am afraid, if every one felt the same as you do, Mrs. Mordaunt, we should have to shut up summer at once. We have all wronged, or been wronged, I suppose, during our lifetime."

"But I mean a real wrong!—such as ruining the happiness of another. Don't you think it is the very wickedest thing a person can do, Lord Muiraven?"

"I am not competent to judge. I think I have wronged myself more than anybody else in the world; at all events, intentionally," he adds, with a sigh.

"Have you had your photograph taken lately," she goes on in the wildest manner.

"My photograph! No! My dear old father insisted upon my sitting for a portrait in oils last autumn. That was bad enough, but nothing to being photographed. Why do you ask?"

"Irene is ambitious to fill that pretentious-looking album that lies on the drawing-room table as quickly as possible," says Colonel Mordaunt laughing.

"Indeed I am not! I call that album my menagerie. It contains such a set of gorillas. So few people take well. Do you?" addressing Muiraven again.

"I can hardly tell you. It is so long since I was immortalised by the photographic art. Not since—let me see—"

"Since when?" she interposes eagerly.

"The year before last, I think. The London Stereoscopic Company had the honor of taking me just before I left town, and I never even asked for a proof of the photograph."

"You must have had something very engrossing on your mind just then, Muiraven," remarks the Colonel.

"I had indeed."

"What made you sit to them at all?"

"I sat because I hoped the result of my sitting might be acceptable to a friend whom I had at that time, and I neglected to send for the photographs because I found they would not be so; and all interest in them departed with the knowledge."

"A woman, of course, Muiraven? Nothing but a woman, or the wind, could change in so short a time."

"I did not say she changed, Colonel."

"Then perhaps it was yourself. He looks fickle—doesn't he, Irene?"

"Then he looks what he is not," rejoins Muiraven. "Can I fetch anything for you, Mrs. Mordaunt?" as she rises from her chair.

"No, thank you!"

In another minute she is back again with the ivory-bound prayer-book in her hand. She is going to make her first grand experiment with that.

"What have you there, Irene?" says her husband.

"Only a prayer-book. A pretty little thing, isn't it, Lord Muiraven?" holding it out for his inspection: he examines it without the slightest change of countenance.

"Well, if you want my candid opinion, Mrs. Mordaunt, you must allow me to say, that I do not agree with you. I suppose it is quite a lady's idea of "pretty;" but it looks very useless to me. Is it a real prayer-book or a hoax?"

"Open it, and see. It is anything but a hoax."

"So I perceive. I thought it might prove to be a *bombonnière*, or a powder puff-box, or some other little feminine secret. So it is really and truly a prayer-book?"

"Of course! Have you never seen one like that before?"

"Yes; but not so small, I think. What a surprising print! I should have no eyes in a twelvemonth if I used a book like this."

"And you have really never seen an ivory-backed prayer-book before, or bought one?"

"Haven't I! I had to fork out five guineas for a church service for my sister-in-law that is to be, the other day. She took a fancy to it, and Cecil was so stingy, he wouldn't buy it for her, so I was compelled to. It was a very fat one, quite appetitic, in fact, and bound in ivory and silver. She said she should consider it as a wedding present; but I know I shall have to give her another, all the same."

"Well! I can't understand it," says Irene.

"My being generous for once in a way? Oh, Mrs. Mordaunt!"

"Give me back that little prayer-book, please. I am sure you must have seen plenty like it before. They're as common as possible."

"I daresay I have, but—please forgive my country manners, Mrs. Mordaunt—I really don't seem to care if I never see one like it again. It's a most shockingly attenuated little book: it looks as though it had been reared on water-gruel, and reminds me only of a pale, shrivelled-up, sickly old maid. It jars most terribly upon my feelings."

"I don't believe you have any," she answers quickly; and her husband thinks she is in fun, and laughs at the accusation, in which Muiraven joins him. At this moment Colonel Mordaunt is called away to hold an interview with his bailiff, and in the quickly-falling dusk, alone with their guest (Isabella having crept away some time before), Irene feels bold enough to make another attempt at discovery of the truth.