

"Please go on, and let me hear how the accident occurred."

"Well, he went into the dining-room when it was—was occupied—and—and—when he was told to go, and would not obey (he is one of the most disobedient little animals I ever met), he was sent out. That's all."

"Sent out! Did you strike him, Philip?"

"Oh! no, ma'am, 'twasn't master," interposes Phoebe quickly.

"Who, then?"

"Naughty ooman," explains Tommy.

"Who dared to do it?" repeats Irene.

"Well, my love, it's really nothing to make such a fuss about: it's not everybody that would think so much of giving a tiresome child a tap on the head as you do. And I dare say she never thought twice of what she was doing."

"She!—she! Not Isabella, surely?"

"Oh! Lor, no, ma'am. Miss Mordaunt ain't out of her room yet," cries Phoebe.

A thought strikes Irene. The mystery becomes clear.

"Has Quekett returned?" And the change in her voice as she puts the question is so patent to her hearers that Colonel Mordaunt becomes quite alarmed for what may follow.

"Yes, yes, dear; she has. Now you know all. But I am sure she didn't mean to offend you. Phoebe, you had better go, and take the child with you."

But Irene folds the boy closer in her arms.

"I can do without you, Phoebe; but I shall keep Master Tommy." And the bedroom door recloses on the servant only.

"And so that woman has come back, and dared to strike my child," says Irene, as soon as they find themselves alone.

"Poh! nonsense! my love. Your child. Do just think what you are saying. And, as for daring, I consider that a very strange term for you to use when speaking of any action from so old and valued a friend as Mrs. Quekett is to me, towards so very recent an acquisition as that nameless *protégé* of yours." The Colonel tries to speak with his usual ease and composure, but the attempt is a melancholy failure.

"She has dared to strike my child," repeats his wife, with a heaving breast.

"The boy refused to obey her, and she boxed his ears. It was a very natural thing to do."

"It may be very natural, but it shall not be repeated."

"Then you must teach the child to be more obedient."

"I shall teach him nothing for that woman's sake. When did she return?"

"This morning, at about six. She prefers travelling by the night train."

"It appears to me that she prefers any mode of action by which she can best show off her insolence and the unusual position she has permitted to attain here. She leaves us without a moment's warning in order to humiliate her own caprice; and she returns in the same manner, without the slightest consideration for our convenience. A pretty way for a servant to go on in, truly."

"Irene, I thought this subject had been discussed and done with."

"I shall never have done with it whilst she remains here, and is permitted to behave as she does. It is past all bearing."

"Well, there is no chance of her leaving," replies the poor Colonel, with a sigh; "so the prospect is cheerful."

"If her presence here is a necessary evil, I must bear it; but she shall not interfere in my private affairs. Philip, I have borne more from that woman than you know of; and I tell you candidly, were it not for your sake, I would not remain another moment under the same roof with her. But, as she has really returned, for which I am infinitely sorry—"

"Why, you did not imagine she was gone for good, surely?" interrupts the Colonel. "This is her home, and always has been."

"But she might have died, or something, in the interim."

"Irene, I am surprised to hear you speak in that strain."

"Don't be surprised at anything I say of that woman. Nothing could be too bad for her. But of one thing I am determined. She shall not strike this child. And of that I shall make her aware on our first meeting."

"I advise you not to quarrel with her."

"I shall not condescend to quarrel. I shall simply give my orders; and if she doesn't choose to obey them—"

"What then?"

"I shall appeal to you."

"And if I am powerless?"

"Why, then—but it will be time enough to decide what I shall do when the occasion for decision arrives. Meanwhile I shall speak my mind very plainly to Mrs. Quekett."

"I advise you to keep good friends with her," repeats the Colonel, who appears to his wife to have assumed quite a depressed and craven air since the night before. "She is an estimable woman in many respects: faithful, honest, and to be depended on; but she makes a bitter enemy. It will be far wiser to have her on your side."

Irene's lip curls in proud contempt.

"Thank you, Philip; but I have been used to choose my allies from a class superior to that of Mrs. Quekett. I have borne with her patiently hitherto, but she has put me on my mettle now; and, if I die for it, she shall not strike this child again!"

"Oh, hush!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, fearfully, as they issue on the landing together (the little boy still clinging round Irene's neck), and commence to descend the staircase, at the foot of which appears the housekeeper, proceed-

ing in state to her own apartment, and followed by a couple of menservants bearing her boxes.

"I hope I see you well, Mrs. Mordaunt," she says, with a smirk, as she encounters the couple about halfway down.

Colonel Mordaunt, who is as nervous as a woman, nudges Irene upon the elbow.

"Mrs. Quekett speaks to you, my love."

"I heard her.—I should think you might have given us some notice of your return, Quekett. It is rather unusual to take people by surprise in this way."

The tone in which she is spoken to makes Quekett flush up at once, and her voice changes with her mood.

"I couldn't have let you know beforehand," she replies rudely, "as Lady Baldwin didn't say till yesterday that she could dispense with me. And it's quite a new thing, into the bargain, for me to hear that I'm to account for all my comings and goings to a family where I've lived for—"

"Of course—of course," interrupts the Colonel hurriedly. "You mistake Mrs. Mordaunt's meaning, Quekett, altogether.—Irene, my dear, breakfast is waiting. Had we not better go down?"

He is terribly afraid of what may be coming, and has but one wish: to separate the combatants. But Irene's cup of wrath is filled to the brim, and she stands her ground. With Tommy clinging tightly to her from pure fear, she feels brave enough to say or do anything.

"One moment, Philip.—As you have returned, Mrs. Quekett, you and I had better understand each other. You struck this child this morning. Don't do it again!"

"Irene! Irene!" implores the hapless Colonel.

"Don't do it again!" pants Mrs. Quekett.

"Don't do it again," repeats her mistress calmly. "I have adopted him: he is under my protection; and I will allow no one to correct him but myself."

"A pretty pass things is come to!" exclaims the housekeeper, whose rage at being rebuked before the footmen is beyond all description. "I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself, Colonel, to allow it. A dirty brat, belonging to the Lord knows who, and coming from the lowest lot in Priestley, to the brought up here and prinked out like a young gentleman, and not a finger to be laid on him. Why, what'll the neighbor say? What do you expect the village is saying at this very moment? Do you want a reputation of old times?"

"Hush, Quekett! Pray be silent!"

"Oh, yes! it's very easy to bid me hold my tongue, when I come home to find the Court run over with bye-blow—"

"How dare you speak of this child in my presence by such a name?" exclaims Irene.

"Philip, will you permit such an insult to be offered to your wife—and before your servants, too?"

"No, no, my dear, of course not.—Quekett, I must entreat you to pass on to your room. Neither you nor Mrs. Mordaunt are in a fit state to discuss this matter now."

"But remember, Mrs. Quekett," adds Irene, "that whatever you may think, you shall not speak of Master Tommy in that way again."

"Master Tommy, indeed!" sneers the housekeeper.

"Yes, Master Tommy. Whoever he may be, wherever he has come from, I have adopted him as my own child, and I will have him treated as my own child."

"Oh! very well, ma'am, just as you please."

"I am glad you see it in its proper light at last. Let me pass." And with the boy still in her arms, Irene marches stately to the breakfast-room, whilst the Colonel, glad at any cost to see the interview come to an end, follows, though with his spirits down at zero.

As they leave her, Rebecca Quekett turns round upon the landing to gaze at the retreating form of the mistress of Fen Court, with a look of unmistakable hatred.

"Humph! To be treated as her own child, is he?" she says maliciously aloud, so that the servants in attendance can overhear her; "and he a nurse-child of that creature Gray's, left unclaimed for any lady to adopt. That's a queer story, ain't it?" she continues, appealing to one of the men beside her; "and perhaps she ain't so far wrong when she stands out for his being treated as her own. There's lots more things happen in this world than we've any notion of. Well, you'd better get up with the boxes now, James. They've kept us on the landing long enough, Lord knows!"

And so the worthy disappears into her own room, and is lost to the view, at all events, of Irene for the remainder of the day.

Colonel and Mrs. Mordaunt have a sharp little discussion on this subject during breakfast time—quite the sharpest they have engaged in since their marriage; and though Irene will not yield one inch with regard to stooping to conciliate the housekeeper, she feels, at the termination of the meal, that she has been worsted in the fight. For the subject of her adoption of Tommy Brown has necessarily formed part of the argument, and her husband has gone so far as to observe that if a child who is no relation to either of them is to bring discord into the house, he had better go. And he Irene recognizes, for the first time, her impotence to keep him in opposition to her husband's wishes, and the knowledge silences her, even to making her reflect sadly whether she may not ultimately (unless her *protégé* is to be cast on the world again) be compelled, for his sake, to submit to Mrs. Quekett's terms of peace; and the fear lowers Colonel Mordaunt in her eyes—with him lowers herself, and renders her morbidly de-

pressed. She spends all the morning in the shrubbery, running about with Tommy, for she cannot stand Isabella's deprecating air and deep-drawn sighs; and here, after a while, Oliver Ralston comes to find her, with bad news written on his countenance.

"It's all knocked on the head, Irene. I can't close with Robertson."

"Why not? Has he changed his mind?"

"On the contrary, I had a letter from him this morning, begging for my final decision, as he is in need of immediate help; but my uncle has just had me into his study, and he says it's no go."

"Oliver! surely not on account of Quekett?"

"Most surely yes, Irene. I'm as certain that old fiend is at the bottom of it as I am that I'm alive. Not that Uncle Philip told me so. He hummed and hawed—you know his way when that woman's got him into a scrape—and said he had been thinking the matter over, and looking at it from all points of view, and it seemed to him now that it would be more prudent of me not to accept a trust I might not care to retain."

"But didn't you tell him you do care for it?"

"Of course I did. I said everything I could think of, but without effect. The fact is, he doesn't wish me to stay here. I could take the appointment without consulting him further; but I owe everything to him, Irene, and—"

"Oh, yes! Don't go against his wishes. But perhaps he may change his mind again. Shall I speak to him?"

"I wish you would."

"Well, look after Tommy, and I'll go at once."

She finds her husband still in his study, apparently wrapt in thought, and dashes at the matter in hand in her own frank, straight-forward way.

"Philip, why have you altered your mind about Oliver going to Fenton?"

"I have altered it, my dear, and that should be sufficient."

"Not at all, unless you have a good reason. It isn't fair."

"I would rather not discuss the matter with you, Irene. We have had bickering enough for to-day."

"Need we bicker because we talk? This subject does not touch my interests so nearly as the other; but I think you owe Oliver some explanation of the change."

"The explanation is very simple. Upon consideration, I don't think the plan a good one, or likely to prove for his happiness or mine."

"And the consideration came through that woman Quekett?"

"Why should you think so?"

"Because I know it. Oh, Philip, Philip!" And Irene, kneeling down by his arm-chair, puts her head upon her husband's knee, and begins to cry.

His tender affection is aroused at once.

"My darling, why is this? Have I really made you unhappy?"

"Yes, you have. To see you so completely under subjection to your own servant; to know that she can sway you when I fail; that her wishes can make you act contrary to your own good judgment, as you are acting now—you, who I looked up to as so strong and brave, and worthy to command all who came within your range: it lowers you in my eyes; it makes you contemptible in the eyes of others, and I cannot bear it!"

"Irene, Irene! for God's sake, spare me!"

He has grown very pale during the progression of this speech, and now it is ended, he takes out his handkerchief and passes it across his brow.

"Spare you! Why don't you spare me from insult in the house where you have made me mistress?"

"My darling, you don't understand. How I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't. But several members of my family (my father, for instance) have been laid, at different periods of their lives, under great obligations to Mrs. Quekett. I acknowledge she is not always pleasant in her manners, and I regret to see she has not taken so kindly to you as I should have wished; but, notwithstanding, I could not feel myself justified in not doing all in my power to repay the debt I owe her."

"And which I should imagine she had cancelled a thousand times over by her insolence. But why should poor Oliver suffer for your father's liabilities?"

Colonel Mordaunt is silent.

"Fenton is more than three miles from Fen Court. Surely his presence at that distance can have no influence on Mrs. Quekett's peace of mind."

"He would always be over here, my dear."

"And so, because she objects to it, your own nephew is to be banished from your house. Oh, Philip! I could hardly have believed it of you."

"Pray, don't make me more unhappy about it, Irene, than I am. Do you think I don't feel it also?"

"Is that possible?"

"I am suffering, at this moment, far more than you, my child, or than Oliver either, for that matter."

"Poor Philip, I am so sorry for you! But is it quite, quite necessary that Oliver should go?"

"It is 'quite, quite necessary.' If he did not go now, he would be compelled to do so in a few months, and perhaps under circumstances most unpleasant for us all. And yet sometimes I think, if I could trust you, Irene—"

"You may trust me, Philip, and to any extent."

"I believe it, my darling—but no, no, it can-

not be. Don't ask me again. Only go to poor Oliver, and tell him that I will hold myself responsible for any expenses he may incur, in the way of premium or outfit, in procuring another appointment, on the condition that it is not in this county—anywhere, in fact, but near here."

"And you won't trust me, then?" she says, with a reproachful air, as she prepares to leave him.

"I cannot—I dare not. Yes, dearest, I will." And with that he rises suddenly, and stands before her, and takes her two hands in his own.

"Irene, when you gave your dear self to me at the altar, did you not promise to honor me?"

"And I have honored you, Philip."

"I believe it; and I trust you to honor me still, notwithstanding that I am unable to explain all that you wish to know."

"But secrets are so horrid between husbands and wives," she says, pouting, with true feminine curiosity; "and it is so hard to forgive what one understands nothing about."

"Have you never kept a secret from me, then, Irene?"

He is alluding to the possible name of her former lover, and the circumstances of their intimacy, which have never been confided to him. But her thoughts fly immediately to her adopted child and the knowledge she possesses of his parentage; and under her husband's steady gaze she becomes crimson to the very parting of her hair.

"Oh, very well," she answers, with a light laugh; "don't let us say any more about it, since talking won't mend matters. Only I trust my confidence in your integrity, Philip, is not supposed to extend to holding out the right hand of fellowship to Mrs. Quekett."

But Colonel Mordaunt appears to have forgotten the root of the subject in question. He is still holding her hands, and looking fixedly at her downcast eyes and working features.

"My query seems to have affected you, Irene?"

"It would affect any one, I should think, to be stared at as you are staring at me. But this is child's play, Philip. What is it you want me to do?"

"Only to believe in me as I believe in you."

"That would be easy if believing in you did not involve believing in Mrs. Quekett also. However, I will leave the woman to go her way, if she will leave me to go mine. Is that a bargain?"

"I suppose you are alluding to the child; she has not interfered in anything else."

"I am. You gave me permission to adopt and bring him up. Will you make this fact clear to your housekeeper, and tell her, at the same time, that my forbearance depends entirely upon her own?"

"Then you sign a treaty of peace with her?"

"Under those conditions, and for your sake, yes. I feel myself degraded to enter upon any terms with a dependent; but, since it is for your comfort, I concede. Only it must be kept as religiously on her side as mine. And now I trust we have heard the last of so contemptible a business."

Colonel Mordaunt sighs, and turns away.

"You are not yet satisfied, Philip. What, in Heaven's name, would you have me do more?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing. Indeed I do not see what else there is to be done. Only, pray remember what I said to you this morning and do not irritate her more than you can help."

"I shall never speak to—or notice her!" replies Irene; and here, feeling that all that can be said has been said upon the subject, she leaves the study to communicate the upshot of the interview to Oliver.

Colonel Mordaunt, left to himself, looks more thoughtful than before. He has courted the information that his wife has not laid her whole heart bare to him, and yet now he feels miserable because she has put the sign-manual of silence on a fact which he knew to be such. Mrs. Quekett, Oliver Ralston, the child, everything which has worried him hitherto, passes from his mind to give place to the curiosity with which he longs to discover how much of her former life Irene has kept back from him. He remembers vividly all she said to him at Brussels, and in the little sitting-room at Norwood, on the subject of her disappointment; but he was so eager in the chase at that time—so anxious to secure her for himself at any cost—that he did not choose to believe what she asserted to be true—that the best part of her life was over. Yet had not the sequel proved him to be in the right? For the six months she has been his her spirits have gone on gradually improving day by day. Indeed a few weeks ago she was buoyant—radiant—running over with fun; and, if they have commenced to flag again, it has only been since—

Since when?

Since the arrival of Tommy Brown amongst them! As Colonel Mordaunt's thoughts, travelling backward and taking notes by the way, light on this fact, he rises from his seat, and walks aimlessly about the room.

"D—n that child!" he says without the least reserve, "I wished to God we had never seen or heard of him."

And then he goes out to his stables and kennel, and tries to forget all about it; but the idea haunts him nevertheless, and often after that day Irene, glancing up suddenly, finds him studying her face, with an earnestness, not altogether born of affection, which puzzles whilst it wounds her.

Mrs. Mordaunt, in desiring her husband to inform Mrs. Quekett that peace between them can only be maintained at the cost of a communication, has entered into the worst pact