

her mind, the blank sense of nothingness dispersed, she wakes to find the necessity for restraint withdrawn, and (as she told Colonel Mordaunt) the old grief pressing her down so hard, she has no strength to cope with it.

Mistress of herself, free to think, and act, and look as her heart dictates, she has leisure to contemplate and dissect and analyse the haunting query, 'Why?' Why did Eric Keir seek her company—why ask her friendship—why intimate, if not assert, he loved her?

Was the fault on her side? Had she given him too much encouragement—been to pleased to meet him, answer the tender questioning of his eyes? Or had he a design against her? Was he really so cold-hearted, so shallow, so deceitful, as to affect a part to ensure the empty triumph of winning her—for nothing. In fancy, with glowing cheek and bright feverish eyes, she traces again and again each scene in that sad episode of her existence, until she reaches the culminating point, and hears once more her mother's words, 'He means nothing by it all; and the glow dies out to be replaced by pallor.

And then comes the last question of the anguished spirit—the question that rises to so many white lips every day, "Why does Heaven permit such unnecessary pain? Is there really a Father-heart up there above, beating for and with our own?" I have said that this woman is no weak creature, ready to sink to the earth beneath the first blow from Fate's mallet.

Does this phase of her character belie the assertion? I think not. Strong bodies fight and struggle with the disease under which weak frames succumb, and muscular souls wrestle with and write under an affliction which feeble souls may suffer but not feel.

When Irene St. John had her mother to support as well as herself, she stood upright and smiled; now that the incentive for action is withdrawn, she bends before the tempest. Then she suffered more acutely; now she suffers more continuously; but acute suffering, with intervals of numbness, is more tolerable than continuous pain borne in monotony. There is nothing now to stir Irene up—to deaden the echo of the question reverberating against the walls of her empty heart; to blind her eyes mercifully to the fact that she has delivered herself over to a love that is not mutual; and that do all she will, she cannot stamp the accursed remembrance from her mind.

She knows all this; it is in black and white upon her soul; she is lowered, degraded, contemptible in her own eyes, and life becomes more intolerable with each rising sun.

It is May before Colonel Mordaunt dares to revert to the proposal he made Irene St. John in Brussels. He has written frequently to her; he has seen her more than once, but there has been a quiet dignity about the girl which forbids him to break the compact they had entered on. He felt, without being told, that to do so would be to mar all his chances of success; so he has only paid Mrs. Cavendish two or three ordinary visits, offered Irene two or three ordinary presents (which she has quietly rejected), and tried to wait patiently until the six months' probation agreed upon should be completed. When it is, Colonel Mordaunt feels as free to speak as he had felt bound before to hold his tongue; now he knows that he will be listened to and answered. For Irene, amongst many other virtues, has no young-lady mannerisms about her, but is, in the best sense of the word, a Woman.

It is a warm, soft afternoon in the latter part of May; the little garden at Norwood is full of springs and laburnum and lilac blossoms; and the voices of the children playing at hide-and-seek amongst the bushes come pleasantly in at the opened windows. Mrs. Cavendish has left the house to call upon some friend, and Irene and Colonel Mordaunt are alone.

"I hope you received your dividends all right this quarter," he commences by saying; for since her orphanhood he has taken sole charge of her small income.

"O, yes! thank you. I sent you cheque to the bank, and there was no difficulty about the matter. You are most punctual in your payments."

"Will you be as punctual, Irene? You have not forgotten, have you? what you promised to give me in May?"

The colour mounts to her pure pale face, but she does not turn it from him.

"Your answer! Oh, no! how could I forget it? Only I wish—I wish you could have guessed it, Colonel Mordaunt, without giving me the pain of repeating what I said before."

His countenance falls.

"Are your feelings, then, quite unchanged? Have you no kinder thoughts of me than you had then?"

"How could any thoughts be kinder than they have been, or more grateful? But kindly thoughts and gratitude are—are not love, Colonel Mordaunt."

"Then you are not yet cured of the old wound, Irene?"

The girl leans her cheek against the window-sill, and gazes with languid, heavy eyes into the open space beyond.

"For God's sake! don't speak of it!"

But he continues.

"Six months' reflection has not had the power to convince you that the most mortifying of all enterprises is the attempt to regain our influence over an errant heart."

"I have never attempted to regain it," she exclaims, indignantly, "I would not take it were it offered me. I have done with the name and the thought of the thing, for ever!"

She looks so beautiful—so strangely as she

did of old, with the hot, angry colour rising and falling in her face, that he is more than ever eager to win her for himself.

"Then, Irene! what are you waiting for? My home is open to you: why not accept it? I am sure you are not happy here."

"O! I am well enough! The children bored me at first; but I am getting used to them, as I am to everything else," with a deep sigh.

"I cannot believe you, Irene. You, who have been accustomed, both during your father's and mother's lifetime, to be fêted and amused, and carried hither and thither; you cannot be contented to spend your days in this small, dull cottage, with no better company than your aunt and her governess, and her overgrown boys. It cannot go on, my child; it will kill you!"

"I am tougher than you think. I wish that I were not."

"You are bearing up wonderfully, but you will break down at last. Come, Irene! let me reason with you! You acknowledged just now that all you desire is to forget this disappointment. Why not try to forget it in my house as well as in this?"

She shudders—slightly—but he sees it.

"Colonel Mordaunt! it is impossible!"

"I cannot see the impossibility. I know that you are not in love with me, but I am content to be in love with you. I am content to make you mistress of my fortune and my house, and everything I possess, in return for yourself. It is a fair bargain—if you will but subscribe to it."

"O! it is not fair. You do not know what you are agreeing to—how terribly you might feel it afterwards."

"I am willing to take the risk."

She hesitates a moment; it is very sweet to a woman to feel she is loved so entirely and recklessly and devotedly, that her possession is the only one thing in this world that her lover acknowledges worth living for. It is sweet to be loved, even when we can give nothing in return. A selfish satisfaction that has no part nor lot in the first requirement of the divine passion—self abnegation; but still it falls soothingly upon the wounded spirit that has been rudely thrust from its legitimate resting-place. It is not so sweet as loving, but it is the next best thing, and Irene feels gratitude, and hesitation. After all—can any change make her position worse than it is now?

Colonel Mordaunt sees the hesitation and— forgets the shudder which preceded it!

"Irene! my dearest girl! think of what I say. You imagine that life is over for you; that it can never have any charm again; that it will be all the same if you pass the remainder of it here, or anywhere! Then come to me! Fen Court, at the least, is as comfortable a home as Laburnum Cottage; here you are but a guest, there you will be a mistress; and have—may I not say it?—as devoted a friend as any you will find in Norwood! Will you not come?"

He pleads with as much earnestness as though he had been young; his fine face lighted up as only Love can light up a man's countenance, and his firm hands closed upon her own. The day is nearly won. It is on her very lips to answer "yes," when, from beyond the garden-gates, comes the sound of that most irrepensible of acclimatisations, the Italian organ, and the air it murders is that of the "Blue Danube" waltzes.

"No!—no!" cries Irene as both hands wrench themselves away from his and go up with startling energy to shut out the maddening strains; "you must not—you shall not ask me that again. I have told you that it is impossible!" and with that leaves him to himself.

Colonel Mordaunt is bitterly disappointed: he had made so sure, he had hardly say why, that this final appeal would be crowned with success, that the girl's determinate refusal comes on him like a great blow. He can hardly believe that he will really lose her—that she will not return and tell him it was a mistake; and in that belief he still lingers about the cottage—futilely.

Mrs. Cavendish returns and begs him to remain to tea, but he declines, with thanks. The opportunity for speaking to Irene by herself is over, and he is not likely to drive any further benefit from seeing her in the presence of the governess and children. So he returns to his hotel for the night, not having quite made up his mind whether he shall bid the inmates of the cottage a formal farewell upon the morrow, or slip back to Leicestershire as he had come from it—unnoticed. With the morning, however, he finds his courage has evaporated, and that he cannot leave Norwood without at least looking in her fair face again.

"So, after having made a pretence of eating breakfast, the poor old gentleman (all the poorer for being old, and feeling his age at this moment more acutely than any youngster can imagine for him) strolls up to Laburnum Cottage, and enters at the wicket gate.

The lawn is covered with children, playing croquet with their governess and mother, who nods to him as he enters, with an inclination of her head towards the open door.

"Irene is in the school-room," she says, gaily. But Irene is not in the school-room; she has seen him enter, and comes to meet him in the narrow passage, clad in a soft muslin robe of white and black: the shape and folds and general appearance of which he ever afterwards remembers.

"Colonel Mordaunt," she says hurriedly, with heightened colour, and trembling, parted lips, "were you sincere in what you told me yesterday, that you would take me for your

wife, just as I am, without one particle of love in me, except for a shameful memory?"

"Irene, you know I was!"

"Then, take me!" she answers, as she submits to the arms that are thrown about her, and the lips that are laid upon her own.

Women are problems: *cela va sans dire*; though why the problems should remain insoluble is, perhaps, less due to their intricacy than the middle heads who strive to fathom them by beginning at the wrong end. I don't know what reason Colonel Mordaunt may assign to this apparently sudden change in Irene St. John's sentiments; perhaps he attributes it to the effect of deliberation—more likely to the irresistibility of his own pleading; but anyway he is quite satisfied with the result.

Mrs. Cavendish is not in the least surprised, but thinks it the very best thing her niece could do; and the governess and children become quite excited at the prospect of a wedding. No one is surprised, indeed, after the lapse of half an hour, unless it be Irene herself; and even she, once reconciled to the idea, tells her own heart that it is fate, and she might have guessed that it would end so, all along.

Perhaps I have even failed in surprising my reader! Yet there had been an impetus, and a very strong one, given to Irene St. John's will that day.

The impetus came in a letter bearing the post-mark of Berwick, where Mrs. Cavendish's daughter Mary was staying with some friends, and which letter her mother had read aloud for the benefit of the breakfast table.

"We were at such a grand party last week"

(so part of Mary's innocent communication ran)

"at Lord Norham's. I wore my blue silk, with the pearl ornaments you lent me, and they were so much admired. Lord Muiraven (Lord Norham's eldest son) was there, and Mr. Keir. Lord M. danced twice with me, but his brother never even spoke to me, which I thought rather rude. However, he is engaged to be married to a Miss Robertson, such a pretty girl, and had no eyes for any one else. They danced together all the evening. Mr. Keir is considered handsome, but I like Lord Muiraven best."

"Very complimentary to Mary, I'm sure," remarked the gratified mother, as she refolded the letter. "My dear Irene, I wish you would just reach me down the 'Peerage.' What a thing it would be if Lord Muiraven took a fancy to the girl!"

*Voilà tout.*

Irene St. John having once made up her mind to accept Colonel Mordaunt's offer, puts no obstacle in the way of an early marriage; on the contrary, she appears almost feverishly anxious that the matter should be settled and done with as soon as possible; and, as they have none to consult but themselves, and her will is law, the wedding is fixed to take place during the succeeding month. All that she stipulates for is that it shall be perfectly private. She believes she has strength to go through all that is before her, but she would prefer not testing that strength in public; and her first consideration now is for the feelings of her future husband, that they may never be hurt by some weak betrayal of her own. So all the necessary preparations are expeditiously but quietly made, and when the morning itself arrives (a lovely morning in June, just twelve months after poor Mrs. St. John held that trying interview with Eric Keir, in Brook Street), there are not above a dozen urchins, two nursery-maids with perambulators, and a stray baker-boy, hanging about the wicket of Laburnum Cottage to see the bride step into her carriage. The paucity of Irene's male relations has made it rather difficult to find any one to stand in the position of a father to her on this occasion; but her uncle, Mr. Campbell, takes that responsibility on himself, and has the honor of sharing her equipage. Mr. Campbell is accompanied to Norwood by his wife and two eldest daughters, who, with Mary and Emily Cavendish, form Irene's most trusted bridesmaids; and Miss Mordaunt (to whom her brother, finding all persuasion unavailing, was forced to send a peremptory order to put in an appearance at the wedding) is also present.

She arrived the day before, and up to the moment of going to church has resisted all Irene's endeavors to make acquaintance with her, by entreaties that she will not trouble herself on her account—that she will take no notice of her—that she will leave her to do as she best can by herself, until the girl inclines to the belief that her new sister-in-law is most antagonistic both to the marriage and herself; and little dreams that Isabella Mordaunt's eyes have opened on a new world at the sight of her beauty, and are ready to shed tears at the slightest demonstration of interest on her part. Yet she is too miserably shy and reserved to show it.

There is little time, however, for Irene to think of that just now, or of anything except the matters in hand, through all of which she conducts herself with great dignity and sweetness.

Colonel Mordaunt naturally thinks there never was a lovelier or more graceful bride, and most of those who see her think the same; but Irene's outward comportment is the least noble thing about her that day. It cannot but be a day of bitter recollection to her; but she will not show it. She will not mar the value of the gift which she has freely given by letting the receiver see how little worth it is to herself. She goes through the religious ceremony in simple faith that she will be able to keep the promises she makes; and then she mixes in

the little festivity that follows with as much gaiety as is consistent with the occasion.

Colonel Mordaunt is enchanted with her every look and word and action; the old man hardly knows whether he is standing on his head or his heels; he is wrapt up in the present, and has quite forgotten all that went before it. Even when he finds himself alone with his young wife in the railway carriage, speeding fast to Weymouth, where they are to spend their honeymoon, the vision is not dispelled. It is true that he throws his arm rather awkwardly about her slender figure, and kisses her for the first time as a husband, with more timidity than he would have shown had he been twenty-five years younger. But Irene's quiet, affectionate manners reassure him. She appears to take such an interest in all that is going on around them, and talks so naturally of what they shall do and see at Weymouth, and of the pleasant autumn they shall spend together at Fen Court, that his passing trepidation lest the girl should after all regret the decision she had made is soon dispelled; and, what is better, the days that follow bring no cloud with them to lessen his tranquillity. For Irene is not a woman to marry a man and then worry him to the grave by her sentimental grief for another; she has chosen her present lot, and she intends to make it as happy a lot as lies in her power. She is of an honorable and upright a nature to make a fellow-creature pay the debt of her own misfortune, and especially a fellow-creature who is doing everything in his power to make her happy. And added to this, she is too wise to call in a doctor and not follow his prescriptions. She has married Colonel Mordaunt as a refuge from herself; she never denies the truth even to her own heart; and if she is still to sit down and pine to death for love of Eric Keir, where was the necessity for action which her strong will brought to bear upon her feeble nature. She may break down hereafter; but Irene Mordaunt commences her march upon the path of married life bravely.

She not only strives to be pleased—she is pleased with all that her husband does for her—with the numerous presents he lays at her feet, the pleasant excursions he devises, the thoughtful care he shows for her comfort. She repays it all with gratitude and affection. Yes—Colonel Mordaunt has done well in confiding his honor and happiness to Irene's keeping!

About the same date, in that same month of June, a jolly, genial-hearted old man, commonly known as the Earl of Norham, is seated in the library of Berwick Castle, in her Majesty's "loyal and worshipful borough of Berwick. Lord Norham does not carry out in the faintest degree the idea of a lord, as usually depicted by the heated imaginations of the young and the uninitiated. His appearance alone would be sufficient to put to flight all the dreams of "sweet seventeen," or the ambitious cravings of a maturer age. He is a tall, stout man, of about five-and-sixty, with a smiling red face, a bushy head of gray hair, and "mutton-chop" whiskers just one shade darker; and he is dressed in black and white checked trousers, or decidedly county make: a white waistcoat, with the old-fashioned stock surmounting it; and a brown holland coat. The windows of the library are all open to the air, and Lord Norham is not warmly attired, yet he seems much oppressed by the weather; and to see him lay down his pen every two minutes (he is writing letters for the mid-day post), and mop his heated face round and round with a yellow and red silk handkerchief until it shines again, you would be ready to swear he was a jolly, well-to-do farmer, who had every reason to be satisfied with his crops and his dinner-table. In effect, Lord Norham is all you would imagine him to be; for agriculture is his hobby, and he allows no accidents to disturb his peace. But he is something much better into the bargain—a true nobleman, and the fondest father in the United Kingdom. He lost his wife at a very early stage of their married life, and he has never thought of marrying again, but devoted his life to the children she left behind her. There are only those three, Robert, Lord Muiraven, and his brothers Eric and Cecil; and when their mother died the eldest was just four years old. Then it was that all the latent worth and nobility of Lord Norham's character came forth. His friends had rated him before at a very ordinary standard, knowing him to be an excellent landlord and an indulgent husband, and crediting him with as much good sense as his position in life required, and a strict belief in the Thirty-nine Articles. But from that date they saw the man as he really was—from that moment, when he knew himself to be widowed and desolate, and his unfortunate little ones left without a mother at the very time they wanted her most he took a solemn oath never to place the happiness of her children at the mercy of another woman's caprice, but to be to them, as far as in him lay, father and mother both. The man must have had a heart as wide as a woman's to arrive at such a conclusion, and stick to it; for the temptations to change his state again must have been manifold. But as in some mothers' breasts the feelings of maternity, once developed, can never be rivaled by a meaner passion, so, though far more rarely, it occasionally happens with a father; and from that day to this, when we see him mopping his dear old face with his silk handkerchief, Lord Norham has never staggered in his purpose—more, he has never repented it. Lord Muiraven and his brothers do not know what it is to regret their mother. She died so early, that they have no recollection of her; and Lord Norham's care and indulgence have been so close and un-