

should wish him to be made as comfortable as possible."

Her brows are contracted—her breast is heaving—her eyes are staring at him angrily.

"And what on earth made you think of asking him?"

"My dear!"

"Of asking a perfect stranger," she goes on rapidly—"a man we care nothing for—whom you never set eyes upon till yesterday—to become one of us—to share our home—to—I never thought you could be such a fool!"

Colonel Mordaunt is more than shocked—he is angry.

"What do you mean by speaking to me in that way, Irene!"

"Oh! I was wrong—I know I was wrong; but you have upset me with this news. Am I not the mistress of this house?—have I not a right to be consulted in such matters?—to have a voice in the selection of who shall and who shall not enter our doors?"

"When you behave as you are doing now, you forfeit, in my estimation, all right to such consideration."

"I know I oughtn't to have used that word to you, Philip—it was very disrespectful of me, and I beg your pardon. But, if you love me, don't ask Lord Muiraven to come and stay at Fen Court."

"What possible objection can you have to the proceeding?"

"We know so little of him," she murmurs indistinctly.

"Quite enough to authorise a casual visit, such as he intends to pay us. I do not suppose, from what he said, that he will remain here more than two or three days."

"A man may make myself very disagreeable even in that time."

"But what reason have you to suppose Muiraven will do so? I never met a fellow better calculated to make his way at first sight. You are incomprehensible to me, Irene! No trouble appears too great for you to take for a 'ne'er-do-well' like Oliver Ralston, or a child who has no claim upon you, like Tommy Brown; and yet, now when I wish to introduce into the house a man unexceptionable in name, birth, character, and position, you raise puerile objections, simply, as it appears to me, to give annoyance."

"I have not been in the habit of giving you annoyance, Philip."

"No, darling! of course not; but in this instance you are most unreasonable. Do you not begin to see so?"

"If it is unreasonable for a wife to wish to be consulted before her husband takes any step of importance, it may be the case."

"Step of importance! stuff and nonsense! What do you call, then, bringing a beggar's brat into the house to be reared as your own son? You didn't stop to consult me before you pledged yourself to that undertaking, Irene!"

He turns away, puzzled and irritated by her conduct, and she sees that she has played a wrong card. If the evil that assails her is to be averted, it is not by threatening or complaint. She tries the female remedy—coaxing.

"Philip, dear!" putting her arms about him, "don't ask Lord Muiraven to come here."

"Why?"

"Because I—I don't like him."

"For what reason?"

"How can I give a reason?" impetuously. "It is not always one can say why one does or does not like a person. I don't like him—that's sufficient!"

"For you, perhaps, my dear—but not for me it is useless to say, 'Don't ask Lord Muiraven,' because I have already asked him, and he has accepted the invitation. Nothing therefore remains but for you to play the hostess as agreeably as you can to him; and I trust," adds the Colonel gravely, "that, for my sake, and for your own, you will do your utmost to make our guest's stay here as pleasant as may be."

"You must do that," she returns shortly. "He is not my guest, and I have no wish he should be so. You must take the charge of him and of his pleasure yourself. I decline to share in it."

"Very well, my dear—be it so," replies her husband coldly, as he rises to leave her. "I hope you will think better of your inhospitable resolution; but if not, I dare say I shall be equal to the occasion. However, the spirit in which you receive my caution confirms me in one thing—Lord Muiraven's visit to Fen Court shall not be put off, if I can avoid it."

In the evening she makes another attempt. "Philip! pray do not bring Lord Muiraven to our house: I ask it of you as a favor."

Colonel Mordaunt wheels round on his chair (he has been writing letters at his study table, while she sits beside him reading one of Mudie's last importations), and stares at his wife with unfeigned surprise.

"This is the most extraordinary thing I ever knew in my life!" he exclaims. "Pray where, and under what circumstances, have you met with Lord Muiraven before?"

At this point—blank question, so sudden and so unexpected, Irene naturally loses somewhat of her confidence.

"Met him before! Who says I have done so?"

"No one says it; but no one could help inferring it. Your evident aversion to his becoming our guest must have its root in something deeper than a mere dislike spontaneously conceived, for a stranger who has not taken your fancy at first sight!"

"One has at times presentiments of evil," she replies in a low voice.

"Presentiments of fiddlesticks! I don't believe in presentiments at all, in the first place, and certainly not in those that come over one at a ball. But what may your evil presentiment tend to?"

"That Lord Muiraven's presence at Fen Court will create dissension between us."

"In what way?"

"I hardly know in what way; but I—I don't like him, and you evidently do—and the mere difference of opinion may be the cause of a quarrel."

"I don't see that! I don't like many people that you do—yet we do not squabble about them—your nameless protégé, for instance——"

"Unfortunate little being! Cannot any topic be introduced between us without dragging him in by the neck and shoulders?"

"Hardly, when the topic is one of diversity of opinion concerning another, and when I feel that you owe me a concession, Irene. For I have given up more of my own idea of what is consistent and becoming, in permitting you to adopt that child, than you seem to be aware of."

"Oh! let it pass, then—I concede everything. I resign my own opinion on the subject of Lord Muiraven staying with us."

"Had you done so or not, my dear, it would have made no difference to the fact, which, as I said this afternoon, is already an established one. But I am ready to allow that I prefer your going hand in hand with me in this, as in all matters, to attempting anything like a defiance of my wishes. So I trust we have safely tided over this little difficulty, and that when Lord Muiraven appears amongst us he will find his hostess as ready to welcome him as I shall be."

"It is utter bad taste on his part coming at all, without some intimation on mine that his visit is desired."

"At it again, Irene!" says the Colonel with a sigh, as he returns to his papers. "Well, I must totally refuse to continue the discussion with you. As long as I am master of Fen Court, my will here must be law."

Which is a maxim the good man is very fond of repeating, little dreaming the while that, of all the inmates of the Court, he has his way perhaps the least of any.

She has done everything that she dares in order to prevent Eric Keir being thrown in her society again; but her efforts have proved futile, and she becomes despondent. Yet she is resolved of one thing: the new guest shall receive nothing at her hands but the barest courtesy. If, after all that has passed, he is sufficiently devoid of feeling and good taste to force himself into her presence, she will make him conscious that it is unwelcome to her: she will be his hostess, and nothing further. Never again shall the hand of the man who betrayed poor Myra and trifled with herself touch hers in friendship and good-fellowship. Armed with this resolve (which pride and the remembrance of her bitter pain alone could enable her to fulfil), Irene receives Lord Muiraven on the day of his arrival at Fen Court with a degree of dignity and coldness she has never assumed to any one before.

Her husband, who has met him at the hall-door, bring him with some trepidation to the drawing-room, to be presented to a beautiful statue, who, with features pale as death and lips tightly pressed together, acknowledges the honor of his presence there in chilling tones, that would have induced an ordinary visitor to return in the same vehicle in which he came.

But Muiraven knows the cause—his heart acknowledges the justice of the sentence—and he replies so humbly to her icy welcome as half to deprecate the anger that induced it.

Not so Colonel Mordaunt, who stands by watching them, indignant that Irene should so palpably disregard the warning he administered to her, and resolved to show their guest double the attention he otherwise should have done, in order to atone for his wife's unpoliteness.

He is almost fearful that her contrary mood may take the turn of not considering Lord Muiraven's comfort as she should; but here his vexation does her wrong. The dinner that follows has been ordered with consummate care—every arrangement is perfect—too perfect, indeed, not to intimate that she feels, and intends to maintain, a great distance between herself and the man who has so suddenly been thrown amongst them.

At the dinner-table, Muiraven and the Colonel have the conversation all to themselves, for Isabella does not dare to speak, and Irene will only reply in monosyllables. They talk of politics, and hunting, and agriculture, and travel; and then they veer round to the London season, now fast approaching.

"Do you go up to town this year?" demands Muiraven.

"I think not. My wife cares nothing for gaiety, and the love for it has mostly died out of me; yet she used to be very fashionable before her marriage—usedn't you Irene?"

"Wonderfully so."

"But you have discovered the superiority of a quiet life, I suppose, Mrs. Mordaunt."

"I have not been out since my mother died," she answers coldly.

"But for you," continues the Colonel in order to change an unpleasant topic, and addressing Muiraven, "the gay metropolis can hardly have lost its charm. Are you looking forward to a vigorous campaign?"

"I shall not be in town this season."

"Indeed! you surprise me. With your advan-

tages, I should have thought it resolved itself into a very paradise of society."

"It was so once."

"And how long is it since you turned misanthrope, my lord?" says the Colonel, laughing heartily at what he supposes to be his guest's affectation, and never expecting to receive a serious answer to his query.

"Since two seasons ago."

At this juncture Irene rises to leave the room. Muiraven holds the door open and gazes earnestly at her as she passes through. She chooses to take his words as covert insult—his look as malice—and answers both with a flash of indignant scorn. He interprets her glance rightly, returns to his seat at the dessert-table with a sigh.

When the gentlemen rejoin the ladies in the drawing-room, Mrs. Mordaunt professes to be sleepy, but rouses herself at their entrance and directs her attention for the remainder of the evening to the columns of the "Morning Post."

Colonel Mordaunt is supremely vexed at her behavior, but he will not mention it again to her; even after he has had a cigar with Lord Muiraven in the smoking-room, and parted with him at his bedroom door, he meets his wife in silence, and still in silence betakes himself to rest. Only, her conduct puzzles as well as vexes him, and his curiosity is all on the alert; whilst Irene, lying sleepless, reviews again and again the scene she had passed through, and wanders if she has been harsh or wrong—or could have met Muiraven differently had she wished to do—and always arrives at the same conclusion, that whilst his past conduct remains unexplained, it is impossible she can receive him as anything but a cruel and deceitful foe.

She comes down the next morning with no kinder feelings in her breast towards him, but conscious that his presence is losing its first strange sting for her, and that she shall be able to greet him with more ease than she had done the day before.

As she passes her morning-room she hears the sound of Tommy's voice within, and enters prepared to find him up to mischief amongst her ornaments or flowers, for like most children, he is of an inquiring turn of mind, and apt on occasions to do great damage in his researches after the origin of all he sees about him.

But as she crosses the threshold she starts back amazed, for at the further end of the room, comfortably ensconced in an arm-chair, she perceives Lord Muiraven, and on his knee, playing with his watch and chain and babbling of everything that comes within the scope of his horizon, is Master Tommy. They are so engrossed with one another that for the moment they do not perceive her.

"My mamma got a tick-tick," the child is saying, "a very little one, with white and green stones on his back. I like my mamma's tick-tick; but he's too small for a man. When I'm big man, my mamma going to give me big tick-tick—my mamma says so," he winds up with, confidently.

"And who is your mamma, Tommy?" inquires Muiraven.

"Don't you know my mamma? Good mamma, who loves Tommy! Why—why there she is!" exclaims the child, in a burst of glee, as he discovers Irene standing in the doorway, and, wriggling off his new friend's lap, rushes noisily to greet her.

"Mrs. Mordaunt!" ejaculates Muiraven, as he leaps up from his position, "I beg a thousand pardons; I did not perceive that you were there."

"There is no need to apologise," she answers as coldly, though more calmly, than before. "Tommy, you know you have no business in this room; I have forbidden you to come here."

"Pray don't blame the child—it was my fault; the room looked so cool and pleasant, I turned in for half an hour's reading before breakfast, and hearing his voice in the hall, called him in, and we have been amusing ourselves admirably since."

"You forgot to bring mamma her rose this morning, Tommy," says Irene, fixing her attention on the child. "Won't you go and pick her one now?"

"Yes! I go get a bootiful rose—a very big one!" he answers, darting from her side.

"Mind you put on your hat!" she calls after him into the hall. Poor Muiraven is standing by the window meanwhile, looking sadly conscious of not being attended to.

"A very intelligent little boy," he says presently, with a nervous smile; "what age is he?"

"Three and a half."

"Only three and a half! why, he seems to understand everything. But—pardon me—I don't quite comprehend the relationship between you—a nephew?"

"There is no relationship between us, except that of a common need. Tommy is my adopted child."

"And you permit him to call you mother?"

"No! I never encourage him to call me by that name. His mother," and here Irene stops moment to recover confidence, "his mother is gone from us; but he must call me by some name, and 'mamma' is most convenient."

"And you have adopted him—how very good of you," returns Muiraven musingly. "Well! I should think the little fellow would repay your kindness. I don't think I ever saw a brighter child; he interested me strongly. And he appears to have so thorough and affectionate a reverence for you——"

"Breakfast is ready," says Irene, as she cuts

short his eloquence by leading the way into the next apartment.

Two or three days pass in the same sort of manner; outwardly all is well, though rather constrained; inwardly there is much heart-burning and unpleasantness.

The stranger (owing probably to the hostess's evident avoidance of his company) has made more than one attempt to end his visit, but Colonel Mordaunt, determined to show his wife that she cannot have everything her own way, refutes all his arguments with respect to the advisability of leaving Fen Court; and Muiraven, hoping perhaps that time may bring the opportunity he covets for an explanation with Irene, is nothing loth to linger on.

And so they continue to meet at breakfast, and luncheon, and dinner, and life is a slow torture to her. For, since she caught Muiraven and little Tommy in the morning-room together, a new dread has sprung up in her bosom: the wonder whether she will be acting right in keeping the knowledge of the relationship between them a secret from the father. The horror with which her soul recoils from the shame of making such a communication is almost swallowed up in the pain with which she contemplates a parting from the child. Until she felt it, she could not have believed that in so short a time he would have wound himself so closely round her heart. To give up little Tommy!—to miss his dear little voice calling after her all over the house; his lisping words; his childish caresses—the idea is misery. She could hardly shrink from it more where he indeed her own. But yet, who has the better right to him, on whom has he the higher claim?

Is she injuring the boy's prospects by keeping from him the protection of so influential a father; or would the fact of his parentage turn Lord Muiraven's heart against the child?—and she would lose him only to see him turned over to the care of hirelings—brought up amongst them, as such unhappy children generally are, without one of those advantages which it is in her power, as it is her wish, to give him. Will such a discovery do her darling harm, or will it do him good? This is the thought that harasses Irene now, and adds gravity and depression to her former coldness of demeanor. The change is too palpable not to strike Colonel Mordaunt, but he does not shape his suspicions into facts until Mrs. Quekett is good enough to sid him.

"Your good lady don't look much lately, does she?" she remarks casually, as she is gathering up the money for the weekly bills, almost the only phase of the housekeeping department which remains in her hands.

"In what way, Quekett?" demands the Colonel, as he enters the amount in his ledger. "Mrs. Mordaunt is quite well, I believe; at least, I have heard nothing to the contrary."

"Oh! I don't mean in health exactly, though she's been going off in her looks too during the last few months; but her spirits are lower than usual, surely—she's shut up in her room one half of the day, and terrible mopey when she's about."

"I think you must be mistaken, Quekett; she was never what is termed bolterously inclined, and I believe she was rather put out at my inviting Lord Muiraven to the house——"

"Ah! why should she object to him now? A fine young man as ever I saw! Most ladies would be proud of such a companion—unless, indeed, there's a reason for it!"

"What reason could there be?" says the Colonel quickly.

"Well, there's no saying—she may have met him before, and seen too much or too little of him, as it may be."

"Mrs. Mordaunt has never met Lord Muiraven before!"

"Lor! Colonel—you must be joking!"

"It is a fact, Quekett; she told me so herself."

"Well, then I'm mistaken, and there's an end of it."

"Mistaken in what?—how?—do explain yourself, Quekett?"

"I'd rather not; least said, soonest mended; and if madam tells you she never met this gentleman before, of course she never did."

"Of course not! I would sooner doubt my own word than Irene's."

"Just so, Colonel; and therefore it would be useless to pursue the subject. But she has certainly enjoyed very bad spirits lately."

"What do you attribute them to?"

"Who can tell what a young girl like that may be thinking of? Perhaps she's getting tired of the country——"

"She was saying only yesterday that she loved it more than ever."

Mrs. Quekett laughs incredulously.

"Well, I'm wrong again, then, that's all. Perhaps the care of the child's too much for her."

"I have implored her again and again to leave him more with Phoebe, but she will hardly let the boy out of her sight."

"Ah!—hum!—it does seem to come wonderfully natural to her to be fond of him, doesn't it? 'Tisn't often that young women that have never been mothers take to a stranger's child like that; I hope it'll turn out for the best, Colonel. Well, if it's neither one or the other that worries Mrs. Mordaunt, perhaps this new friend of yours puts fancies into her head."

"How do you mean?—do speak out!"

"Lord Muiraven may remind her of some one she has known in old times, or——"

"Quekett! you are torturing me. Why on earth should a chance resemblance, even if it