

mestic is ready to abuse her behind her back and to rake up old dead scandals, which might well be permitted to lie forgotten amongst the ashes of the past. As she enters her sanatorium, a dish of stewed kidneys and a glass of stout are placed before her, with punctuality; but it is well, as she came down-stairs, that she did not hear the cook ordering the kitchen-maid to take in the "cat's meat" without delay. Somebody else in the kitchen hears the remark, however, and laughs—not loudly but discordantly—and the harsh sound reaches the housekeeper's ears.

"Who's that?" she demands, sharply, "Mrs. Cray? Tell her she is to come here and speak to me."

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Cray is a hard-featured, angular woman, with rather a defiant cast of countenance, but she obeys the summons to the housekeeper's room promptly enough, bringing a huge basket, the emblem of her trade, which is that of a laundress, beneath her arm.

"And pray what may you be doing in the kitchen at this time of day, Mrs. Cray?" commences Mrs. Quekett, uncovering the kidneys, "I'm doing what it would be well as every one did, mum—minding my own business."

"Don't speak to me in that tone of voice. You can't have any business here on Tuesday, unless you neglected to send the servants' things home in time again last week."

"No, mum, I didn't neglect to send the servants' things home in time again last week," replies Mrs. Cray, with insolent repetition, "and my business here to-day is to get the money that's due to me; and if that ain't my business, I'm sure I don't know what is. There's three weeks owing, and I'm sure it can't be by the Colonel's wish that a poor hard-working creature as I'm kept waiting day after day in this manner."

"It's your own fault if you are. I've told you several times that if you want your bill paid, you must come up between seven and eight every Saturday evening, and fetch the money."

"And I've told you, mum, that I can't do it; and if you had six children to wash and put to bed, besides grown sons a-coming home for their suppers, and the place to ruddle up, and all with one pair of hands, you couldn't do it neither."

"What's your niece about that she can't help you?"

Mrs. Cray looks sulky directly. "A hulking young woman like that!" continues the housekeeper, with her mouth full of tomtit and kidney, "idling about the village and doing nothing to earn her living, I am quite surprised you should put up with it. Why don't she come up for the money? I suppose she can read and write?"

"Oh, she can read and write fast enough—better than many as thinks themselves above her—but she can't come up of Saturdays, for a very good reason—that she ain't here."

"Not here! Where is she gone to?"

"That's her business, mum, and not ours. Not but what I'm put out about it, I must own; but she was always a one to have her own way, she was, and I suppose it will be so to the end."

"Her own way, indeed; and a nice way she's likely to make of it, tramping about the country by herself. You should take better care of her, Mrs. Cray."

Now, Mrs. Cray, a virago at home and abroad, has one good quality—she can stick up for her own relations; and Mrs. Quekett's remark upon her niece's propensity for rambling raises all her feelings in defence of the absent.

"She's as well able to look after herself, my niece is, as many that wear silken gowns upon their backs—ay, and better too. Take more care of her, indeed! It's all very well to give good advice, but them as preaches had better practise. That's what I say!"

"I don't know what you mean," says Mrs. Quekett, who knows so well that the glass of porter she is lifting to her lips jingles against her false teeth.

"Well, if you don't know, mum, I don't know who should. Anyways, I want my three weeks' money, and I stays here till I gets it."

"You shall not have a sixpence until you learn to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Then I shall have to send my Joel up to talk to the Colonel about it."

"He will not see the Colonel unless I give him permission. You're a disgrace to the village—you and your family—and the sooner Priestley is quit of the lot of you the better."

"Oh, it's no talking of yours, mum, as will turn us out, though you do think yourself so much above them as wouldn't stoop to eat with you. There's easy ways for some people to get riches in this world; but we're not thieves yet, thank God, nor shan't begin to be, even though there are some who would keep honest folks out of the money they've lawfully earned."

Conceive Mrs. Quekett's indignation. "How dare you be so insolent?" she exclaims, all the blood in her body rushing to her face. It requires something more than the assumption of superiority to enable one to bear an inferior's insult with dignity.

Mrs. Quekett grows as red as a turkey-cock. "Insolent!" cries Mrs. Cray. "Why, what do you call talking of my niece after that fashion, then? De you think I've got no more feeling for my own flesh and blood than you have yourself?"

"Mary!" screams Mrs. Quekett from the open door, "go upstairs at once and fetch me the washing-book that lies on the side table in my bedroom."

"Oh yes, your bed-room, indeed!" continues the infuriated laundress. "I suppose you think as we don't know why you've got the best one in the house, and not a word said to you about it. You couldn't tell no tales, you couldn't, about the old man as is dead and gone, nor the young 'un as wears his shoes; only you durstn't to, because you're all tarred with the same brush. You thinks yourself a lady as may call poor folks bad names; but the worst name as you ever give a body would be too good for yourself."

All of which vituperation is bawled into the housekeeper's ears by Mrs. Cray's least dulcet tones, whilst Mrs. Cray's hardworking fists are placed defiantly upon her hips. By the time Mary returns with the washing-book Mrs. Quekett is trembling all over.

"Take your money, woman," she says, in a voice which fear has rendered wonderfully mild, compared to that of her opponent, "and never let me see your face, nor the face of any one that belongs to you again."

"That's as it may be," retorts Mrs. Cray; "and, any way, we're not beholden to you, nor any such dirt, for our living."

"You'll never get it here again. Not a bit of washing goes over the threshold to your house from this time forward, and I'll dismiss any servant who dares to disobey me!"

"Oh, you needn't fear, mum, as I'll ask 'em. There's other washing in Leicestershire, thank God! beside the Court's; and, as for your own rage, I wouldn't touch 'em if you were to pay me in gold. You'll come to want yourself before long, and be glad to wash other people's clothes to earn your bread; and I wish I may live to see it!" With which final shot, Mrs. Cray pockets her money, shoulders her basket, and marches out of Fen Court kitchen.

This interview has quite upset the housekeeper, who leaves more than half her luncheon on the table, and goes upstairs to her bedroom, in order to recover her equanimity.

"Serve her right," is the verdict of the kitchen, while Mary finishes the kidneys and porter and repeats the laundress's compliments verbatim.

"I'd have given something to hear Mother Cray pitch into the old cat."

"Only hope it'll spoil her dinner."

"No fear of that. She'd eat if she was dying."

And so on, and so on; the general feeling for the housekeeper being that of destitution.

It takes longer than usual for Mrs. Quekett to calm her ruffled dignity, for she is unaware how much the servants have overheard of the discussion between her and Mrs. Cray, nor how much they will believe of it. So she remains upstairs for more than an hour; and when she descends again she has changed her dress; for in a black satin gown, with a blonde lace cap ornamented with pink flowers, who amongst the lower menials would presume to question either her authority or her virtue?

She does not forget what has passed however. It returns upon her every now and then during the afternoon, with an unpleasant feeling of insecurity; and when—the Court dinner being concluded—she makes her way up to Colonel Mordaunt's private sitting-room, she is just in the mood to make herself very disagreeable.

The room in question is called the study though it is very little study that is ever accomplished within its walls; but it is here that the Colonel usually sits in the evening, smoking his pipe, looking over the stable and farm accounts and holding interviews with his head groom, kennel-keeper and bailiff.

He does not seem over and above pleased at the abrupt entrance of Mrs. Quekett; but he glances up from his newspaper and nods.

"Well, Quekett! have you anything to say to me? Time to settle the housekeeping bills again, eh?"

"No, Colonel. If I remember rightly, we settled those only last week," replies Mr. Quekett, as she quietly seats herself in the chair opposite her master. "My business here is something quite different. I want to put a question to you, Colonel. I want to know if it's true that you've asked Master Oliver down to Fen Court for Easter this year?"

Why doesn't Colonel Mordaunt act as nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand would have acted under similar circumstances? Why doesn't he resent the impertinence of this inquiry by the curt but emphatic remark, "What the d—! is that to you?"

He is not a timid, shrinking creature like his sister: he could talk glibly enough, and plead his own cause bravely enough, when in the presence of Irene St. John; what remembrance, what knowledge is it that comes over him when confronted with this menial, that he should twist his paper about to hide his countenance, and answer, almost evasively:

"Well, Quekett, I did think of asking him! It would only be for a few days. There's no objection, is there?"

"I think there's a very great objection, Colonel. Master Oliver's not a gentleman as I can get on with at all. The house is not like itself whilst he is hanging about it, with his bad manners, and his tobacco, and his drink."

"Come, come, Quekett, I think you're a little hard upon the boy. Think how young he is, and under what disadvantages he has labored! He is fond of his pipe and his nonsense, I know; but it doesn't go too far; you'll allow that."

"I don't allow nothing of the sort, Colonel. I think Master Oliver's 'nonsense,' as you call it, goes a great deal too far. He's an ill-mannered, impertinent, puny upstart—that's my opinion—as wants a deal of bringing down; and

he'll have it one day, if he provokes me too far; for as sure as my name's Rebecca Quekett, I'll let him know that—"

"Hush!" says Colonel Mordaunt, in a prolonged whisper, as he rises and examines the door to see if it is fast shut. "Quekett, my good creature! you forget how loud you are talking."

"Oh! I don't forget it, Colonel. I've too good a memory for that. And don't you set Oliver on to me, or I may raise my voice a little louder yet."

"I set him on! How can you think so? I have never spoken to him of you but in terms of the greatest respect. If I thought Oliver really meant to be rude to you, I should be exceedingly angry with him. But it is only his fan!"

"Well, whether it's fun or earnest, I don't mean to put up with it any more, Colonel, so, if Oliver is to come here next Easter, I shall turn out. Lady Baldwin will be only too glad to have me for the season: I had a letter from her on the subject as late as last week."

Colonel Mordaunt dreads the occasional visits which Mrs. Quekett pays to her titled patronesses. She never leaves the Court, except in a bad temper. And when Mrs. Quekett is in a bad temper, she is very apt to be communicative on the subject of her fancied wrongs. And tittle-tattle, for many reasons, Colonel Mordaunt systematically discountenances.

"You mustn't talk of that, Quekett. What should we do without you? You are my right hand!"

"I don't know about that, sir, I have had my suspicions lately that you're looking out for another sort of a right hand, beside me."

Colonel Mordaunt starts with surprise, and colors. The housekeeper's sharp eyes detect his agitation.

"I'm not so far wrong, am I, Colonel? The post-bag can tell tales, though it hasn't a tongue. And I shall be obliged if you'll let me have the truth, that I may know how I am expected to act."

"What do you mean, Quekett? I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes, you do, Colonel; but I'll put in plainer, if you like. Are you thinking of marrying?"

"Really, Quekett, you are so—"

"Lord alive, man!" exclaims the housekeeper, throwing off all restraint; "you can't pretend not to understand me at your age. You must be thinking of it, or not thinking of it. What do all those letters to Miss St. John mean, if you're not courting her. There's as many as three a week, if there's one; and when a man's come to your time of life he don't write letters for mere pleasure—"

"No, Quekett, no; but business, you know—business must be attended to. And I was left a sort of guardian to my young cousin, so—"

"Fiddle-de-dee!" is the sharp rejoinder. "You can't stuff me up with such nonsense, Colonel. Are you going to marry this lady, or not?"

"Going! No, certainly not going, Quekett."

"But do you want to marry her? Do you mean to ask her?"

"Well, the thought has crossed my mind, I must say. Not but everything is very uncertain, of course—very uncertain."

"Oh!" says the housekeeper, curtly; and is silent.

"Quekett," resumes her master, after a pause, "if it should be, you know, it could make no difference to you; could it? It would be rather pleasanter, on the whole, Fen Court is a dull place at times, very dull; and you and Isabella are not the best of friends. A young lady would brighten up the house, and make it more cheerful for us all. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, much more cheerful, doubtless," is the sarcastic reply. "And, pray, Colonel, may I ask, in case of this very desirable event taking place, what you intend to do about Master Oliver?"

"About my—nephew?"

"About your—nephew; yes. Is he to be allowed to spend his holidays at the Court, as usual, upsetting our comfort, and turning the house topsy-turvy?"

"Well, I've hardly thought of that, Quekett. I suppose it would be as—as—she wished."

"Oh! very well, Colonel. I understand you: and if Fen Court is to be given over to a boy and girl like that, why, the sooner I'm out of it the better. It's hard enough that I should have to look for another home at my time of life; but it would be harder to stay and have a young mistress and master put over my head. Fifteen years I lived with your poor dear father, Colonel, and never a word with any of the family; and when I consented to come here, it was on the express condition, as you may well remember that—"

"Stay, Quekett; not so fast. I have only told you what I contemplated doing. Nothing is settled yet, nor likely to be; and if I thought it would annoy you, you know, Quekett, for my father's sake, and—various other reasons, how highly we all esteem your services; and I should be most concerned if I thought anything would part us. Even if I do marry, I shall take care that everything with respect to yourself remains as it has ever done; and as for Master Oliver, why, I'll write at once and tell him it is not convenient he should come here at Easter. He wished to visit us this year; but nothing is of more importance to me than your comfort, nor should be, after the long period during which you have befriended my father and myself. Pray be easy, Quekett. Since you desire it, Master Oliver shall not come to Fen Court."

The housekeeper is pacified: she rises from her seat with a smile.

"Well, Colonel, I am sure it will be for the best, both for Master Oliver and ourselves. And as for your marriage, all I can say is, I wish you good luck! 'Tisn't just what I expected; but I know you too well to believe you'd let anything come between us after so many years together."

And more than ever certain of her power over the master of Fen Court, Mrs. Quekett bids him a gracious good-night, and retires to her own room.

When the door has closed behind her, Colonel Mordaunt turns the key, and, leaning in his chair, delivers himself over to thought. Painful thought, apparently; for more than once he takes out his handkerchief, and passes it over his brow. He sits thus for more than an hour, and when he rises to seek his own apartment his countenance is still uneasy and perturbed.

"Poor Oliver!" he thinks, as he does so. "Poor unhappy boy! what can I do to rectify the errors of his life, or put hope in the future for him? Never have I so much felt my responsibility. If it were not for Irene, I could almost—but, no, I cannot give up that hope yet, not until she crushes it without a chance of revival; and then, perhaps—well, then I shall feel unhappy and desperate enough to defy Old Nick himself."

Colonel Mordaunt does not say all this rhodomontade: he only thinks it; and if all our thoughts were written down, the world would be surprised to find how dramatically it talks to itself. It is only when we are called upon to clothe our thoughts with language that vanity steps in to make us halt and stammer. If we thought less of what others think of us, and more of what we desire to say, we should all speak more elegantly, if not grammatically. O vanity! curse of mankind—extinguisher to so many noble purposes: how many really brilliant minds stop short of excellency, stifled out of all desire for improvement, or idea of its possibility, by your suffocating breath! Why, even here is a platitude into which my vanity has betrayed me: but for the sake of its moral I will leave it.

"But why choose Mrs. Cavendish, with her heap of children, in that dull suburban house? You will be bored out of your life."

How often have those words of Colonel Mordaunt returned during the last six months, upon Irene St. John's mind!

How intolerable have the children, the governess, the suburban society (the very worst of all society!), the squabbles, the tittle-tattle, the eternal platitudes, become to her! Acquaintances who "drop in" whenever they feel so disposed, and hear nothing new between the occasions of their "dropping in," are the most terrible of all domestic scourges; the celebrated dropping of a drop of water on the victim's head, or King Solomon's "droppings" on the window-pane, are metaphors which grow feeble in comparison! Irritating to a strong mind, what do they not become to what which has been enfeebled by suffering? And Irene's mind at this juncture, is at its lowest ebb. From having gone as a visitor to her aunt's house, she has come to look upon it as her home; for after the first few weeks, Mrs. Cavendish, pleased with her niece's society, proposed she should take up her residence at Norwood, paying her share of the household expenses. What else had the girl to do? What better prospect was there in store for her? Friendless, alone, and half-heart broken, it had seemed at first as though in this widowed house, where the most discordant sound that broke the air was the babble of the children's voices, she had found the refuge from the outer world she longed for. Her father and mother were gone. Emie Keir was gone; everything she cared for in this life was gone. She had but one desire—to be left in peace with memory—so Irene believed on first returning from Brussels to England. But such a state of mind is unnatural to the young, and cannot last for ever. By the time we meet her again, she is intolerant of the solitude and quiet. It does not soothe—it makes her restless and unhappy—that is because she has ceased to bewail the natural grief. Heaven takes care of its own, and with each poison sends an antidote; and the unnatural pain—the pain that this world's injustice has forced upon her, is once more in the ascendant, crushing what is best and softest in her nature.

There is no more difficult task for the pen than to describe, faithfully and credibly, the interior working of a fellow-creature's mind; for it is only those who have passed through the phase of feeling written of, that will believe in it. And yet it is necessary to draw from one's experience for life pictures. An artist desirous to illustrate a scene of suffering and sorrow, need not have suffered and have sorrowed, but goes boldly amongst the haunts where such things are (it is not far to go) until he finds them: so must the author, to be realistic, possess the power to read men's hearts and characters, to work out the mysterious problem of the lives and actions that often lie so widely severed—to account for the strange union of smiling lips and aching hearts—of the light morning jest and the bitter midnight sobbing.

There is no more curious study than that of psychology. O! the wonderful contradictions; the painful inconsistencies; the wide, wide gulf that is fixed between our souls and the world. It is enough to make one believe in M. Rowel's theory that hell consists in being made transparent. One can scarcely determine which would be worse—to have one's own thoughts laid bare, or to see through one's friends.

Irene St. John's soul is a puzzle, even to herself. The first dead weight of oppression that followed her mother's burial lifted from