

Danube" mocked her agony, and her mother—her poor mother, who never recovered the shock which this man's insult caused her—came to her with the news that he had NO INTENTIONS!

No intentions! With the old hackneyed phrase comes back, in a flash, as it used to do in those past days, the remembrance of the looks, the words, the actions by which he had raised her hopes, and made her believe him to be false as themselves.

The looks, the words, the actions which were doubtless but a repetition of those by which he lured poor Myra to her doom!

"Oh! let me go!"

The words burst from her lips—not loudly, for even in our moments of worst agony, the stern conventionalities of society, which have been dinned into our ears from our youth upward, will make us remember where we are, — but with a ring in them of such unmistakable earnestness and entreaty, that he is forced to listen.

"Are you not well?"

"Yes!—no!—I cannot dance; we are all out of step!" she falters; and her pale face alarms him, so that he stops, and draws her arm within his own, and leads her, half blind with dizziness, to the sofa where she sat before.

Then he stands for a few moments by her side, looking awkward and fidgeting with the button of his glove, but making no further comment on her change of mind. She sits still, burning with contempt, ready to weep with indignation, and longing to be able to tell him to leave her presence and never enter it again—whilst he would give the world for courage to seek an explanation with her, or say one word in defence of his own conduct.

One word—one cry for forgiveness—the present opportunity is all his own, and he may never have another; and yet his tongue is glued to his mouth, and he cannot utter a syllable. They are in the midst of a crowd of strangers—the conventionalities of society surround them—and neither of them can speak, except conventionally. So much are we the slaves of custom.

"Are you really not going to dance again?" he says abruptly.

"I cannot—I do not wish to—"

"Then perhaps I had better—Colonel Mordaunt is so much in want of partners—perhaps I had better—join him."

"Yes!—do!"

"It is your wish, Mrs.—Mordaunt!"

"Yes!" And the next moment he has bowed and left her. They have yearned for, and mourned over one another for years; yet they can meet and part like other people, excepting that their words are characterised by more brusqueness than strangers would have dared to use. A sore heart often strives to hide itself by a short manner. It is only men who are indifferent to one another, and women who hate each other, that take the trouble to round their sentences and mind their periods. The two hearts are so flustered and so sore that they do not even observe the want of politeness with which they have questioned and answered one another.

"Why, Irene!—sitting down again, and Lord Mulraven gone!" exclaims the voice of Colonel Mordaunt, who is making the tour of the ball-room with another gentleman, unknown to her. She has been alone, she is hardly conscious for how long her thoughts have been so bitter and disturbed, but her equanimity is, in a great measure, restored, and she is enabled to answer her husband's inquiry with a smile which is not to be detected as untrue.

"Yes; I made him go, for my attempt at dancing was a failure—I am really not up to it, Philip."

"My poor girl! I am so sorry. We must talk to Dr. Robertson about this, Irene. By-the-way, let me introduce Mr. Holmes to you."

The stranger bows, and takes his station on the other side of her.

"And where is Lord Mulraven, then?" inquires Colonel Mordaunt; "dancing?"

"I suppose so: he went in search of you, I believe, to procure him a partner."

"There he is!" observes Mr. Holmes, "wandering about in an aimless manner at the end of the ball-room. He's the strangest fellow possible, Mulraven, and never does anything like another man. I shouldn't be in the least surprised to see him ask one of those girls to dance before he has had an introduction to her."

"He will scandalise her if he does. Glottonbury sticks up for the proprieties," says Irene quietly.

"I must go and save him from such a calamity as the scorn of Glottonbury!" exclaims her husband. "Besides, there are half-a-dozen pretty girls dying to be introduced to him in the other room." And off he hurries to the aid of his new acquaintance.

"Have you met Mulraven, Mrs. Mordaunt?"

"My husband brought him up to me just now."

"But before to-night, I mean."

"He used to visit at our house long ago, when my mother was alive; but he was not Lord Mulraven then."

"Ah! that was a sad thing, wasn't it? No one felt it more than he did."

"I don't know to what you allude."

"His elder brother's death. He was a jolly fellow; so much liked by all of us; and he was lost in an Alpine tour last summer. Surely you must have heard of it."

"Indeed I did not: I have been living very quietly down here for the last twelve months, and taking very little interest in what goes on

in the outside world. It must have been a very shocking death."

"Well, I am not so sure of that, you know. He was over the glacier and gone in a moment. I don't suppose he had even time for speculation on his coming fate. But Lord Norham felt the blow terribly; and this fellow, Eric—Keir he was called then, as of course you are aware—who was making a little tour in the United States with me—why, from the time we heard the news all our fun was over. I never saw a man more down in my life."

"I suppose he was very much attached to his brother."

"They are, without exception, the most attached family I ever knew. Mulraven has only one brother left now—Cecil, and he is to be married this season. I don't know what Lord Norham would do if my friend were to go in double harness also. Yet he ought to do it, you know—being heir to the title—oughtn't he?"

"Doubtless he will in time," she answers coolly.

"I'm afraid not—at least there seems no likelihood of it at present. We call him Banquo at our club: he always looks so gloomy in a ball-room. He is by no means what the Yankees call a 'gay and festive cuss,' Mrs. Mordaunt."

She makes no reply, but plucks the marabout trimming off the heading of her fan, and scatters it carelessly about the floor.

"But he's the best fellow in the world," continues Mr. Holmes, warming up at the sight of her apparent indifference; "the most kind-hearted, generous, and (when he chooses to come out of his shell) one of the cleverest men I ever met with."

"A paragon, in fact."

"How cynical you are! You are laughing at my enthusiasm. Now I shall not say another word about him; but should you ever happen to be thrown in his way, you will acknowledge that I am right. Here comes your husband again. I trust he is not going to drag me away from paradise to purgatory."

"Holmes, you must speak to your friend. He insists upon leaving the ball-room, and his departure will consign half the damsels of Glottonbury to despair."

"Just like Mulraven. No one has ever been able to keep him on duty for more than an hour. But I will go and reason with him. This is not pleasure, but business. He will ruin my reputation with my lady constituents."

"Philip, might I go home? I have such a dreadful headache," pleads Irene, as the new member disappears.

"Certainly, my darling, if you wish it. It must be stupid work looking on; but you are a good girl to have done as I asked you. I will go and tell Isabella you are ready."

"I shall be sorry to disturb her if she is enjoying herself."

"She is as tired as you are. Besides, she could hardly wait for me. I cannot leave until the very last." And he fetches his sister, and takes them down to the carriage together.

"You are very silent, Mrs. Mordaunt," observes Isabella, as they are driving homewards.

"What do you think of the entertainment?"

"Oh, don't ask me, please. I was in pain from the first moment to the last. I have no wish to think of it at all," she answers in a tone sufficient to make Miss Mordaunt hold her tongue until they stand in the lighted hall of Fen Court. There the ghastly pallor of her sister-in-law's face strikes her, and she cannot refrain from observing:

"Why, surely you must be ill. I never saw you look so white before."

"I am ill, Isabella. I have been so all the evening; and now the excitement is over, I suppose I look worse."

"Do let me get you something," urges her companion, with more interest than she is in the habit of expressing.

"No, thank you, dear. No medicine will do me any good. All that I want is rest—rest! And with a quiet 'good-night,' Irene drags herself wearily up the staircase, and enters her own room. Phoebe is waiting to disrobe her mistress, and she permits the girl to perform all the offices needful for her toilet without the exchange of a single syllable—a most unusual proceeding on her part—and appears barely capable of enunciating the word of dismissal which shall rid her of the servants' presence. But when she is at last alone, she finds an infinite relief in the mere fact, and, laying both her arms upon the dressing-table, bends down her tearless face upon them, and remains wrapt in silent thought.

Colonel Mordaunt, returning home at about four o'clock in the morning, scales the stairs without his boots, takes three minutes closing his dressing-room door, for fear that it should slam, and, finally, having extinguished the candle, creeps to bed like a mouse, lest he should rouse his wife, and for all his pains is saluted by the words, "Is that you, Philip? I am so glad you are come," in a voice that sounds dreadfully wide awake.

"Why, Irene; not asleep! How is this?"

"I cannot sleep, Philip. I have been listening for your footsteps: I wanted to see and speak to you. Oh, Philip, do tell me. Have I made you happy?"

She has turned round on her pillow, and sat up in bed, and is straining her eyes in expectation of his answer as though she could read his features, even in the dark.

Colonel Mordaunt feels his way round to her side of the bed, and folds her tenderly in his arms.

"My dearest Irene, what a question! Made me happy! Why, what had I in the wide world

before you came? You have glorified my life for me."

"Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad!" she murmurs, as she puts her head down on his shoulder, and begins to cry.

"My darling, what is the matter? Do let me send for Robertson. I am sure that you are ill."

"Oh, no. I am better now. If I were sure that I made you happy, Philip—quite, quite happy, I should have so—so—much peace."

"But you do make me happy, Irene. No one could make me happier. This is mere excitement, my dear. You must be feverish—or has any one been worrying you?"

"If I believed," she goes on, without noticing his question, "that I had always done my duty to you, even in thought, and that you knew it, and we were assured that, whatever happened, it could never be otherwise, and that, if I did fail, it would be unintentional—so very unintentional—"

"I am assured of it, my child; I only wish I were as sure that I had made you happy."

"Oh, Philip, you are so good; you are so good!"

"I am not good, Irene. What you call goodness is pure love for you. But I know that even love, however unselfish, is not always sufficient to fill up a woman's life, and that I have labored under heavy disadvantages, not only because I am so much older than yourself, and so little calculated to take your fancy, but also because you came to me with a heart not altogether free. But you were frank with me, my darling, and I loved you so much, I hoped, in time, that the old wound would be healed."

She gives two or three gasping little sobs at this allusion, but there is no other answer to it.

"But, if I see you subject to these fits of melancholy," he continues gravely, as he presses her still closer in his arms, "I shall begin to fear that my hopes were all in vain, and that I have no power to fill up the void that—"

"You have—indeed you have," she utters earnestly. "Philip, I never want any one but you."

"I hope not, dear. Then why these tears?"

"I don't know. I felt depressed; and you were away. Oh, don't leave me again. Always keep by my side—close, close to me; and let us stop at home together, and never go out anywhere. It is all so hollow and unsatisfactory."

"What a picture, my darling. Why, you are more upset than I thought for. Fancy an old fellow like me marrying such a pretty girl as this, and keeping her all to himself, shut up in his castle, like the ogres of old. What would the world say?"

"Oh, never mind the world. I love you, Philip, and I hate balls and parties. Promise me I shall never go to any of them again."

"It would be very silly of me to give you such a promise. But you shall not go if you don't wish it, and particularly if the excitement has such an effect upon you. Will that content you?"

She clings to him and thanks him; and he kisses and blesses her, and, imagining that the worst is over, lays her down upon her pillow (not quite unwillingly, be it said, for the poor old Colonel is very sleepy), and proceeds to occupy his own portion of the bed. But he has not been asleep long before he is roused by something audible, which in the confusion of his awakening sounds very like another sob.

"Irene, is that you? What is the matter?" he repeats almost irritably. It is provoking to be shaken out of slumber by the obstinacy of people who will not see the necessity of sleep in the same light as we do.

"What is the matter?" reiterates the Colonel; but all is silence. He stretches out his hand towards his wife's pillow, and, pacing it from her shoulder upwards, lights upon her hair. She is lying on her face.

"Irene," he whispers softly. There is no answer. She must be asleep. It is only his fancy that he heard her sob. And so the good Colonel turns round upon the other side, and is soon lost to all things visible.

But she lies there in the darkness, wide awake and silent, overcome by a trembling horror that she cannot quell. For all the shame and confusion and repentance that have overtaken her arise from but one cause—the fatal knowledge that she has deceived herself.

All the good fabric, built up of conviction and control, which for two long years has been reared upon her prayers and earnest desire to be cured, has crumbled before an interview that lasted fifteen minutes. She has never met Eric Keir since the fatal day on which she learnt he had deceived her till this night; and though she knows him still to be unworthy, believes him to be false—though she despises him and hates herself, she cannot shut her eyes to the stern truth—she loves him still!

Colonel Mordaunt comes downstairs next morning in the best of spirits. He seems to have forgotten the little episode that occurred between Irene and himself the night before, and can talk of nothing but the ball and the supper and the company, and the general success of the whole entertainment.

"It was certainly a very happy thought," he says, "and the prettiest compliment possible to Mr. Holmes. They tell me Sir Samuel originated the idea, and if so, I give him great credit. I don't think I ever saw so many of the county families assembled before, unless it was at the subscription ball we gave on the occasion of the Prince of Wales' marriage. There were several people there I had not shaken hands with for years: Sir John Cooze among the

number. Was Sir John introduced to you, Irene?"

"No. What is he like?"

"An elderly man, my dear, rather bald, but with a fine upright figure. Was one of the stewards, you know: had a rosette in his buttonhole, the same as myself. Holmes is staying with him; so is Lord Mulraven. Sir John thinks very highly of Holmes; says he's quite the right man for the borough, and intends to lay that vexed question of the railway monopolisation before Parliament at the earliest opportunity. By-the-way, I introduced Holmes to you. What do you think of him? Was he pleasant?"

"Very much so. He talks well, too: a *sting* *quod non* in his profession."

"What did he talk about?"

"I forget," commences Irene; and then, blushing hastily, "Oh, no, I don't. He talked chiefly of his friend Lord Mulraven, and of his brother being lost whilst on an Alpine tour last summer."

"Ah, a sad catastrophe. Sir John mentioned it to me. By-the-way, I was greatly taken by Lord Mulraven's face. Very thoughtful for so young a man. Is he what the women call good-looking, Irene?"

"I should imagine so. What do you think, Isabella?"

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt, I never looked—that is to say, how could I be any judge—but then, of course—and if you consider him handsome—"

"I never said so," she answers wearily, and turns towards Tommy as a distraction. The child's violet eyes meet hers sympathetically.

"Mamma got bad head?" he inquires in a little, piping voice.

"He has very remarkable eyes," continues the Colonel, still harping on Mulraven's attributes, "and finely-cut features. By-the-way, Irene, that child has blue eyes. I never noticed them before."

"Oh, all children have big eyes," she says confusedly; "and so have kittens and puppies. He won't have large eyes when he grows up—You have finished your breakfast, Tommy. Say your grace, and run away into the garden."

"But I want more," urges Tommy.

"Then take it with you. You'd spend a couple of hours over each meal, if I allowed you to do so."

"My dear, we have not been seated here more than twenty minutes."

"Never mind—Let him go—he can take another roll with him."

"Does he worry you, Irene?"

"I am very tired, and when one is tired the prattle of a child is apt to worry. Besides, he is happier in the garden than here."

"He has certainly beautiful eyes," repeats the Colonel, as the child runs away, "and has much improved in appearance lately. Talking of Lord Mulraven, Irene, reminds me that Sir John asked me to go over to Shrublands to luncheon to-day. Very kind of him, wasn't it? He saw I was taken with his guests."

"Sir John Cooze owes you a debt of gratitude for the manner in which you keep up the county pack: I don't think a luncheon is anything out of the way for him to give you. Doubtless he is only too glad to have an opportunity of showing you any politeness."

"That is a wife's view to take of the invitation, Irene. Now I, on the contrary, was not only pleased, but surprised; for Cooze and I have not been the friendliest of neighbors hitherto, and it had vexed me."

"Then I suppose you are going?"

"Certainly—unless there is any reason that I should remain at home. I wish they had asked you too. I tried to get near Lady Cooze for the purpose, towards the end of the evening; but it was an impossibility. She was hemmed in all round, six feet deep, by a phalanx of dowagers."

"I am so glad you failed, Philip. I could not have accompanied you. I am far too tired."

"Then it's all right, my darling; and I will leave you to recover yourself during my absence."

He comes back just half an hour before dinner-time, if possible more enthusiastic than before.

"Never met with a more amiable young man than Mr. Holmes in the whole course of my existence. And so sensible, too. Enters as clearly and readily into the question of the Glottonbury drainage as though he had spent his life in a sewer. We shall get on with such an advocate as that. Having been settled for so many years in the county, he was pleased to ask my advice upon several evils he desires to see remedied; and I gave him all the information I could in so limited a time. I am vexed that, in consequence of his being obliged to leave the day after to-morrow, he was unable to spare us a few days at Fen Court."

"Did you ask him?" says Irene. She is lying on the couch in her bedroom whilst her husband talks to her, and as she puts the question she raises herself to a sitting posture.

"I did—urged it upon him, in fact; but he was quite unable to accept the invitation. Mulraven will, though."

"Who?"

"Lord Mulraven. His time is his own, and he seems very glad of an opportunity to see a little more of the country."

"You have asked him here?"

"Where else could I ask him? I am sure you will like him immensely—you have no idea how well he can talk—and his company will enliven us. I invited him to stay as long as he chose; but he limits his visits to a few days. Let him have the best bedroom, Irene. I