

of the children are so continuous that Irene has difficulty at first in making herself heard. But the child who took the message up to the Court has been on the look-out for her, and soon brings Mrs. Cray into the front kitchen, full of apologies for having kept her waiting.

"I'm sure it's vastly good of you, mum, to come down a second time to-day; and I hope you don't think I make too free in sending up the gal's message to you; but she has been that restless and uneasy since you left her this morning, that I haven't been able to do nothing with her, and the first words she say, as I could understand, was, 'Send for the lady!'"

"Poor thing!" is Irene's answer. "I am afraid the doctor thinks very badly of her, Mrs. Cray."

"Badly of her! Lor', my dear lady, she's marked for death before the week's over, as sure as you stand there. Why she's bin a fighting for her breath all day, and got the rattle in her throat as plain as ever I heard it."

"Oh, hush! your voice will reach her," remonstrates Irene; for the laundress is speaking, if anything, rather louder than usual.

"It can't make much difference if it do, mum, and it'll come upon her all the harder for not knowing it beforehand. It's my Joel I think of most, for his heart's just wrap up in his cousin; and what he'll do when she's took, I can't think. And I haven't had the courage to tell him it's so near, neither. But you'll be wanting to go up to Myra. She's ready for you, I'll be bound." And Mrs. Cray stands on one side to let Irene mount the rickety narrow staircase that leads to the second story, and up which her feet had passed many times during the last few weeks. She traverses it now, silently and solemnly, as though a silent unseen Presence trod every step with her: it is so strange to the young to think the young lie dying!

Myra is laid on a small bed close by the open lattice and in the full light of the setting sun. Her face has lost the deathlike ghastliness it wore in the morning: it is flushed now, and her eyes are bright and staring; to Irene's inexperience she looks better; but there is a fearful anxiety pictured on her countenance that was not there before.

"Is it true?" she says in a hoarse whisper, as her visitor appears.

"What, Myra?" Irene answers, to gain time; but she knows what the girl must mean, for the door of her bedroom at the top of the little staircase stood wide open.

"What aunt said just now, that I am marked for death within the week. A week! Oh, it's a horribly short time!" And she begins to cry, weakly, but with short gasps for breath that are very distressing to behold. Irene forgets the difference of station between them: she forgets everything excepting that here is a weak, suffering spirit trembling before the Great Inevitable! And she does just what she would have done had Myra been a sister of her own—she throws her hat and mantle on a chair, and kneels down and takes the poor dying creature in her arms and presses her lips upon her forehead.

"Dear Myra, don't cry—don't be frightened. Remember who is waiting on the other side to welcome you!"

The sweet sympathetic tones, the pressure—above all the kiss, rouse Myra from the contemplation of herself.

"Did—did—you do that?"

"Do what, dear?—kiss you?"

"Yes, did I fancy it—or were your lips here?" touching her forehead.

"My lips were there—why not? I kissed you, that you might know how truly I sympathise with your present trouble."

"You mustn't do it again. Ah! you don't guess. You would not do it if you knew—My God! my God! and I am going!" and here Myra relapses into her former grief.

For a moment Irene is silent. She is as pure a woman as this world has ever seen; but she is not ignorant that impurity exists, and, like all honorable and high-minded creatures, is disposed to deal leniently with the fallen. She has suspected more than once during her intercourse with Myra, that the girl carries some unhappy secret about with her, and can well imagine how, in the prospect of death, the burden may become too heavy to be borne alone. So she considers for a little before she answers, and then she takes the white, wasted hand in hers.

"Myra! I am sure you are not happy; I am sure you have had some great trouble in your life which you have shared with no one; and now that you are so ill, the weight of it oppresses you. I don't want to force your confidence, but if it would comfort you to speak to a friend, remember that I am one. I will hear your secret (if you have a secret), and I will keep it (if you wish me to keep it) until my own life's end. Only, do now what will make you happier and more comfortable."

"Oh! I can't—I can't—I daren't."

"I daresay it will be hard to tell; but Myra, poor girl! you are soon going where no secrets can be hid, and I may be able to comfort you a little before you go."

"If you knew all, you wouldn't speak to me, nor look at me again."

"Try me."

"I daren't risk it. You're the only comfort that has come to me in this place, and yet—and yet," she says, panting, as she raises herself on one elbow and stares hungrily into Irene's compassionate face—"how I wish I dared to tell you everything!"

At this juncture, the sound of "thwacking" is audible from below, and immediately followed

by the raising of Tommy's infantine voice in discordant cries.

"She's at it again!" exclaims Myra suddenly and fiercely, as the din breaks on their conversation; and then, as though conscious of her impotency to interfere, she falls back on her pillows with a little feeble wail of despair. Irene flies downstairs to the rescue—more for the sake of the sick girl than the child—and finds Tommy howling loudly in a corner of the kitchen, whilst Mrs. Cray is just replacing a thick stick, which she keeps for the education of her family, on the chimney-piece.

"Has Tommy been naughty?" demands Irene, deferentially—for it is not always safe to interfere with Mrs. Cray's discipline.

"Lor! yes, mum, he always be. The most troublesome child as ever was—up everywhere and over everything, directly my back's turned. And here he's bin upsetting the dripping all over the place, and taking my clean apron to wipe up his muck. I'm sure hundreds would never pay me for the mischief that boy does in as many days. And he not three till Janniverry!"

"Let me have him. I'll keep him quiet for you, upstairs," says Irene; and carries off the whimpering Tommy before the laundress has time to remonstrate.

"He's not much the worse, Myra," she says cheerfully, as she resumes her seat by the bedside with the child upon her knee. "I daresay he does try your aunt's temper; but give him one of your grapes, and he'll forget all about it."

But, instead of doing as Irene proposes, Myra starts up suddenly, and, seizing the boy in her arms, strains him closely to her heart, and rocks backwards and forwards, crying over him.

"Oh, my darling! my darling—my poor darling! how I wish I could take you with me!"

Tommy, frightened at Myra's distress, joins his tears with hers; while Irene sits by, silently astonished. But a light has broken in upon her—she understands it all now.

"Myra!" she says, after a while, "so, this is the secret that you would not tell me? My poor girl, there is no need for you to speak."

"I couldn't help it!" bursts forth from Myra. "No—not if you never looked at me again. I've borne it in silence for years, but it's been like a knife working in my heart the while. And he's got no one but me in the wide world—and now I must leave him. Oh! my heart will break!"

The child has struggled out of his mother's embrace again by this time (children, as a rule, do not take kindly to the exhibition of any violent emotion), and stands, with his curly head lowered, as though he were the offending party while his dirty little knuckles are crammed into his wet eyes.

Irene takes a bunch of grapes from her own offering of the morning, and holds them towards him.

"Tommy, go and eat these in the corner," she says, with a smile.

The tear-stained face is raised to hers—the blue eyes sparkle, the chubby fingers are outstretched. Tommy is himself again, and Irene's attention is once more directed to his mother.

"Dear Myra!" she says, consolingly.

"Don't touch me!" cries the other, shrinking from her. "Don't speak to me—I ain't fit you should do either! But I couldn't have deceived you if it hadn't been for aunt. You're so good, I didn't like that you should show me kindness under false pretences; but when I spoke of telling you, and letting you go your own way, aunt was so violent—she said, the child should suffer for every word I said. And so, for his sake, I've let it go on till now. But 'twill be soon over."

Irene is silent, and Myra takes her silence for displeasure.

"Don't think harshly of me!" she continues in a low tone of deprecation. "I know I'm unworthy; but if I could tell what your kindness has been to me—like the cold water to a thirsty soul—you wouldn't blame me so much, perhaps, for the dread of losing it. And aunt frightened me. She's beat that poor child—with a gasping sob—"till he's been black and blue; and I knew, when I was gone he'd have no one but her to look to, and she'll beat him then—I know she will—when his poor mother's cold, and can't befriend him. But if she does!" cries Myra, with fierce energy, as she clutches Irene by the arm and looks straight through her—"if she does, I'll come back, as there's a God in heaven, and bring it home to her!"

"She never can illtreat him when you are gone, Myra!"

"She will—she will! She has a hard heart, aunt has, and a hard hand, and she hates the child—she always has. And he'll be thrown on her for bed and board, and, if she can, she'll kill him!"

The thought is too terrible for contemplation. Myra is roused from the partial stupor that succeeds her violence by the feel of Irene's soft lips again upon her forehead.

"You did it again!" she exclaims, with simple wonder. "You know all—and yet, you did it again. Oh! God bless you!" and falls herself to kissing and weeping over Irene's hand.

"If you mean that I know this child belongs to you, Myra, you are right: I suspected it long ago; but further than this I know nothing. My poor girl, if you can bring yourself to confide in me, perhaps I may be able to befriend this little one when you are gone."

"Would you—really?"

"To the utmost of my power."

"Then I will tell you everything—everything! But let me drink first."

Irene holds a glass of water to her lips, which

she drains feverishly. A clumping foot comes up the staircase, and Jenny's dishevelled head is thrust sleepily into the doorway.

"Mother says it's hard upon seven, and Tommy must go to bed."

"Nearly seven!" cries Irene, consulting her watch. "So it is; and we dine at seven. I had no idea it was so late!"

"Oh! don't leave me!" whispers Myra, turning imploring eyes upon her face.

Irene stands irresolute; she fears that Colonel Mordaunt will be vexed at her absence from the dinner-table, but she cannot permit anything to come between her and a dying fellow-creature's peace of mind. So in another moment she has scribbled a few lines on a leaf torn from her pocket-book, and despatched them to the Court. Tommy is removed by main force to his own apartment, and Myra and she are comparatively alone.

"No one can hear us now," says Irene, as she closes the door and supports the dying woman on her breast.

"It's three years ago last Christmas," commences Myra feebly, "that I took a situation at Oxford. Uncle was alive then, and he thought a deal of me, and took ever so much trouble to get me the situation. I was at an hotel—I wasn't barmaid: I used to keep the books and an account of all the wine that was given out; but I was often in and out of the bar; and I saw a good many young gentlemen that way—mostly from the colleges, or their friends."

Here she pauses, and faintly flushes.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," comes the gentle voice above her; "I have not been tempted in the same way, Myra; if I had, perhaps I should have fallen too!"

"It wasn't quite so bad as that," interposes the sick girl eagerly, "at least I didn't think so. It's no use my telling you what he was like, nor how we came to know each other; but after a while he began to speak to me and hang about me, and then I knew that he was all the world to me—that I didn't care for anything in it nor out of it, except he was there. You know, don't you, what I mean?"

"Yes; I know!"

"He was handsome and clever and had plenty of money; but it would have been all the same to me if he had been poor, and mean, and ugly. I loved him! Oh, God, how I loved him! If it hadn't been for that, worlds wouldn't have made me do as I did do. For I thought more of him all through than I did of being made a lady."

"But he could not have made you that, even in name, without marrying you, Myra."

"But he did—at least—oh! it's a bitter story from beginning to end; why did I ever try to repeat it?"

"It is very bitter, but it is very common, Myra. I am feeling for you with every word you utter."

"He persuaded me to leave the hotel with him. I thought at the time that he meant to act fairly by me, but I've come to believe that he deceived me from the very first. Yet he did love me; oh, I am sure he loved me almost as much as I loved him, until he wearied of me, and told me so."

"You found it out, you mean. He could not be so cruel as to tell you."

"Oh, yes, he did. Do you think I would have left him else? He told me that he should go abroad and leave me; that he was bitterly ashamed of himself; that it would be better if we were both dead, and that if he could, he would wipe out the remembrance of me with his blood. All that, and a great deal more; and I have never forgotten it, and I never shall forget it. I believe his words will haunt me wherever I may go—even into the other world!"

She has become so excited, and her excitement is followed by so much exhaustion, that Irene is alarmed, and begs her to delay telling the remainder of her story until she shall be more composed.

"No! no! I must finish it now; I shall not be quiet until I have told you all. When he said that, my blood got up, and I left him. My cousin Joel had been hanging about the place after me, and I left straight off and came back home with him."

"Without saying a word to—to—the person you have been speaking of?"

"He wanted to get red of me; why should I say a word to him? But I grieved afterwards—I grieved terribly; and when the child was born, I would have given the world to find him again."

"Did you ever try?"

"Try! I've travelled miles and miles, and walked myself off my feet to find him. I've been to Oxford and Fetterley (that was the village we lived at), and all over London, and I can hear nothing. I've taken situations in both those towns, and used his name right and left and got no news of him. There are plenty that bear the same name, I don't doubt, but I've never come upon any trace of him under it; and I've good reason to believe that it was not his right one."

"What is the name you knew him by, then, Myra?"

"Hamilton."

"Hamilton!" repeats Irene. "That is not a common name!"

"But it's not his. I've found that out since, for I know he belonged to the college, and there wasn't a gentleman with that name there all through the term. His love was false, and his name was false, and everything that took place between us was false. He deceived me from first to last, and I'm dying before I can bring him to book for it!"

"You shouldn't think of that now, Myra. You should try to forgive him, as you hope that your own sins will be forgiven."

"I could have forgiven him if it hadn't been for Tommy. But to think of that poor child left worse than alone in this wretched world—his mother dead and his father not owning him—is enough to turn me bitter, if I hadn't been so before. Aunt will ill-use him; she's barely decent to him now, when I pay for his keep, and what she'll do when he's thrown upon her for everything, I daren't think—and I shall never lie quiet in my grave!"

"Myra, don't let that thought distress you. I will look after Tommy when you are gone."

"I know you're very good. You'll be down here every now and then with a plaything or a copper for him—but that won't prevent her beating him between whites. He's a high-spirited child, but she's nearly taken his spirit out of him already, and he's dreadfully frightened of her, poor lamb! He'll cry himself to sleep every night when I'm in the churchyard!" and the tears steal meekly from beneath Myra's half-closed eyelids, and roll slowly down her hollow cheeks.

"He shall not, Myra," says Irene, energetically. "Give the child into my charge, and I'll take him away from the cottage and see that he is properly provided for."

"You will take him up to the Court and keep him like your own child! He is the son of a gentleman!" says poor Myra, with a faint spark of pride. Irene hesitates. Has she been promising more than she will be able to perform? Yet she knows Colonel Mordaunt's easy nature, and can almost answer for his compliance with any of her wishes.

"Oh, if you could!" exclaims the dying mother, with clasped hands. "If I thought that my poor darling would live with you, I could die this moment and be thankful!"

"He shall live with me, or under my care," cries Irene. "I promise you."

"Will you swear it. Oh! forgive me! I am dying."

"I swear it."

"Oh! thank God, who put it in your heart to say so! Thank God! Thank God!"

She lies back on her pillow, exhausted by her own emotion, whilst her hands are feebly clasped above those of her benefactress, and her pale lips keep murmuring at intervals, "Thank God."

"If you please, mum, the Colonel's sent the pony chaise to fetch you home, and he hopes as you'll go immediate."

"The carriage!" says Irene, starting, "then I must go."

"Oh! I had something more to tell you," exclaims Myra; "I was only waiting for the strength. You ought to know all; I—I—"

"I cannot wait to hear it now, dear Myra. I am afraid my husband will be angry; but I will come again to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning I may not be here."

"No! no! don't think it. We shall meet again. Meanwhile, be comforted. Remember, I have promised;" and with a farewell pressure to the sick girl's hand, Irene resumes her walking things, and drives back to the Court as quickly as her ponies will carry her. Her husband is waiting to receive her on the doorstep.

Colonel Mordaunt is not in the best of tempers, at least for him. The little episode which took place between Irene and himself relative to her predilection for Mrs. Cray's nurse-child, has made him rather sensitive on the subject of everything connected with the laundress's cottage, and he is vexed to-night that she should have neglected her guests and her dinner-table, to attend the deathbed of what, in his vexation, he calls a "consumptive pauper."

And so, when he put out his hand to help his wife down from her pony chaise, he is most decidedly in that condition domestically known as "grumpy."

"Take them round to the stable at once," he says sharply, looking at the ponies and addressing the groom; "why, they've scarcely a hair unturned; they must have been driven home at a most unusual rate."

"You sent word you wanted me at once, so I thought it was for something particular," interposes Irene, standing beside him in the porch.

"Do you hear what I say to you?" he repeats to the servant, and not noticing her. "What are you standing dawdling there for?"

The groom touches his hat, and drives away.

"What is the matter, Philip?"

"There's nothing the matter, that I know of."

"Why did you send the pony chaise for me, then? Why didn't you come and fetch me yourself? I would much rather have walked home through the fields with you."

"We cannot both neglect our guests, Irene. If you desert them, it becomes my duty to try and supply your place."

"Why! Aunt Cavendish is not affronted, is she? She must know that it's only once in a way. Did you get my note, Philip?"

"I received a dirty piece of paper with a notice that you would not be back to dinner."

"I thought it would be sufficient," says Irene, sighing softly; "and I really couldn't leave poor Myra, Philip. She is dying as fast as it is possible, and she had something very particular to tell me. You are not angry with me?"

"Angry! oh, dear no; why should I be angry? Only, I think it would be advisable, another time, if these paupers' confidences were