"Why not? Hundreds of women do it."

"Hundreds of women sell themselves, you mean. Well, I am not for sale."

"You call it by too harsh a term, Irene. I did not intend that you should marry any one in order to obtain means of support; but that, if an eligible offer should present itself from some man whom you could respect, even if he does not exactly come up to the standard you may have erected in your imagination——"

She interrupts him quickly.

"What standard? What are you talking of?—what do you mean?"

"I was only talking generally, my dear. Young ladies always have an ideal."

"I am not a young lady, then; I have none."

"You have never yet known, perhaps, what it is to be what is called 'in love,'" he continues, searchingly.

She colors, and looks annoyed.

"Colonel Mordaunt, I thought you too old and wise to care to discuss such nonsense. Any way, I do not care to discuss it with you, especially to-day. Let me leave you for the present, and when Mr. Walmsley arrives, you will send and let me know."

She is going then, but he stops her.

"Don't be offended with me, my dear Irene."

"Offended? Oh, no!" returning to place her hands in his. "How could I be, after all your great kindness to me and—to her? I look upon you as a father, indeed I do, and could not feel offended at anything which you might please to say to me."

As she leaves him he sighs.

There is some little delay in the solicitor's appearance, during which time Colonel Mordaunt's attentions to his young cousin are as deferential as they are devoted. Then comes Mr. Walmsley and his bundle of papers, by which his worst fears for Irene's income are realised; for when the various debts are disposed of and the accounts made up, three or four thousand pounds is all the balance left in the banker's hands.

"You cannot live on it; it will be sheer beggary," says Colonel Mordaunt, as he discloses the fact to her.

"It will do very well. Many have less," is the indifferent answer.

"Irene! you do not know what you are talking about. You have always been clothed and fed and tended like a gentlewoman; and the interests of this money will barely suffice to provide you with the necessaries of life. It is madness to imagine that you will be able to live upon it."

"But what am I to do, then?" she says, innocently, as she lays her hand upon his arm, and looks up into his face. "If I have no more, it must be enough. No arguments can double it."

"What are you to do? Oh, Irene! if I might tell you—if I only dared to tell you the means by which, if you so will it, you may be placed at once in the position which befits your birth and station, and far above the paltry necessity of ever again considering how you are to do anything which money can do for you."

"Colonel Mordaunt!" she cries, shrinking from him.

She does not profess to misunderstand his meaning, for it is glowing in his eyes, and trembling in his accents, and lighting up his handsome, middle-aged face, until it looks ten years younger than it did before; and Irene is too true a woman to stoop to flatter her own vanity by playing on his feelings. There are many of her sex who pretend they cannot tell when a man is in love with them. They are either fools or hypocrites. Irene is neither. She sees too plainly, though for the first time, that the affection Colonel Mordaunt bears for her is not all cousinly, and her natural impulse is to shrink away. He perceives the action, and it goads him on.

"You shrink from me; you think, because I am old enough to be your father, that therefore I am too old to love you. Irene! no boy that you have ever met has it in his power to conceive so deep a passion as that with which you have inspired me. I am aware that I cannot expect an answering feeling on your part—that for you I am only a middle-aged, grey-haired man; but give me the right to cherish you, and I shall have all that I desire. You are alone; let me protect you: friendless; let me take my place by your side: poor; oh, my darling! with what pride and pleasure should I pour out my riches at your feet, if you will but accept them at my hands!"

"Oh, Colonel Mordaunt! you frighten me. I never dreamt of this. Pray, let me go."

"Not till I have told you all. Irene! I know your secret. I know that you have loved, and been disappointed."

She reddens now—reddens like a peony—and more from anger than from shame.

"What right have you to say so? Do you want to insult me?"

"Is it a sin, then, of which I accuse you? My dear child, when you have come to my age, you will have seen so much of this world's wickedness and trouble, that a girlish disappointment will appear a very ordinary affair to you."

"Will it?" she answers, thoughtfully, with her eyes cast on the ground. "And yet I feel as though no sorrow could touch me in this life again."

"But poverty and solitude, and all the minor evils arising from them, will aggravate your trouble, and make you feel it more. Irene, you have acknowledged that I am correct. Now that I know the worst, let me renew the offer I have just made you — let me save you from yourself."

"Oh no! you could not do it, Colonel Mordaunt. I feel your kindness—your generosity—indeed I do; but I could not marry you, even to escape worse misfortunes than those you have alluded to."

"I am, then, odious to you?" he says, mournfully.

"On the contrary, I have an affection for you. No, do not misunderstand my meaning. I feel most kindly towards you for the sake of what you have done for my dear mother and myself—how could I do otherwise?—too kindly, indeed, to take advantage of the noble offer you have made me."

"Leave me to judge of that, Irene. You would cancel the debt a thousand times over by the present of yourself."

"No, it is impossible. You must not deceive yourself. Oh, Colonel Mordaunt! do not look so grieved about it. For your sake, I will tell you what I never told to any mortal yet; though, from what you say, my dear mother must have guessed the truth. I have loved, deeply, irretrievably, and in vain. This is a grief which would have well-nigh gone to break my heart, had not care for her prevented my indulging in it; and since the necessity for restraint has been withdrawn, I feel it press me down so hardly, that I have no strength left to cope with it—or myself."

As she finishes the confession Irene sinks down into the nearest chair, and covers her burning face with her hands. Colonel Mordaunt kneels beside her.

"My dear girl! have I not already said that this fact is no impediment? I did not expect to claim all your heart, Irene—at least, at first. Be my wife, and I will teach you to forget this sorrow."

"Oh, never! You do not know what you are speaking of. You would come to curse the day on which I took you at your word. Dear cousin," raising her eyes and placing her hands upon his shoulder, "be contented with such affection as I can give you. I love you now; in any other relation I might—hate you."

Colonel Mordaunt rises to his feet testily.

"Then you are determined to waste your youth dreaming of a man who rejected your hand; to let the world (himself includ d) see that you are wearing the willow for a fellow who is not worthy of your lightest thought; who had no consideration for you or your good name, and insulted your poor mother when she told him so?—a proper lover, indeed, for a woman like yourself to renounce the world for—a pitiful scoundrel, who is probably laughing in his sleeve at the mortification he has caused you."

He has stung her hardly there; and he meant so to sting her. She stands up and confronts him, tearless and majestic.

"I don't know why you should so wound me. I don't know what I have done to deserve it, unless it is the fit reward for my folly in confiding in you. I wish I had bitten out my tongue before I had told you anything; but, if you are a gentleman, do not make me more angry than I am, by alluding to it again."

"Oh, Irene! forgive me; it was the strength of my love that induced me to be cruel. Only give me hope—say that at some future time, when you have somewhat recovered this disappointment, perhaps, you will think of what I have told you, and I will try to be contented."

"It would be madness to give hope where there is none. Besides, such affairs as these, it is indelicate to discuss them so soon after my mother's death."

"She would not say so. She died happy in the belief that I should befriend you. Say that, by-and-by—in a few months' time—I may ask you again."

"If you do, my answer can only be the same; I have no heart left to give any one, Colonel Mordaunt."

"Never mind the heart! Give me yourself. Irene, say that I may ask you again, in a month's time."

"A month? oh no! A month can make no difference."

"In three months, then. It is a longer period than you anticipate. Give me my answer three months hence."

"Oh, why will you torture me so! I shall never change my mind!"

"Child, I know better! I know that at least there is a chance; and I cannot afford to throw the smallest chance away. I will speak to you again in three months."

"No—not in three; in six. If I must repeat what I have said to-day, I will repeat it after six months' deliberation. Then you will know that I am in earnest."

"You shall be in earnest before the time arrives. Irene! I am another man; you have given me hope!"

"A very slight one."

"It is enough to cling to. Ah, my darling! you must not think, because I am older than yourself, that I shall worry or fidget you. I am younger in heart than in years, Irene; and love for you has made me feel a boy again. Only be mine, and I will devote my life to making yours happy. And now let us talk of yourself. You have refused to come to Fen Court: what do you intend to do?"

There had been a proposal, after Mrs. St. John's death, that Irene should go and stay at Colonel Mordaunt's house, Fen Court, which is presided over by his sister, Miss Isabella Mordaunt; and the girl, before she guessed at the nature of her cousin's affection for her, had half agreed to do so; but now she shrinks from the idea as a lamb might shrink from going to picnic in a lion's den; and it has become necessary to think of some other residence for her.

"I shall accept the offer of my aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, to go and stay a few weeks at Norwood. Perhaps I may make some arrangement about living with her. I have thought of nothing yet."

"But why choose Mrs. Cavendish, with her heap of children, in that dull suburban house? It is so unlike what you have been accustomed to; you will be bored out of your life. I should have thought your other aunt, Mrs. Campbell, with that nice little place in Clarges Street, would have been a far more suitable chaperon for you."

"Chaperon! what do I want with a chaperon? Do you suppose I am going to run about to theatres and parties before I have changed my first mourning? Besides, I hate London. I shall not mind the dulness of Norwood; it will be in accordance with my feelings."

"Ah, my dear; you're very young. Ten more years in this world will teach you to try all you can to disperse a grief, instead of sitting down to nurse it. But I suppose you must have your own way—at least, for six months," with a sly glance that has no power to make Irene smile. "When will you start?"

"As soon as possible. I want to get out of this miserable city as quickly as I can. Can we go to-morrow?"

"Well——with a little energy, I daresay we can. But you are not fit for much exertion. I must pack your things for you."

"Oh no! I could not let you do so. Besides, you have your own."

"I shall do my own, and yours too. If you persist in refusing, the only thing is—we can't go."

"But I thought you had a particular engagement this afternoon with your old friend Comte de Marigny?"

"My old friend must give way to my young friend."

"How good you are to me. I do not deserve it."

"You deserve it all, and far more, if I could give it. But it is not all disinterestedness, you know, Irene. I want a heavy price for my devotion."

She colors, sighs, and turns away. I another couple of days she is installed as temporary inmate of her aunt's house at Norwood.

How am I to describe Fen Court, in Leicestershire? And yet I must try to bring the place, which will be the scene of so many of the events in this history, clearly before the mind's eye of my reader. The house itself, which stands in the village of Priestly, about ten miles from one of the principal county towns, is neither old nor modern; but may have been built in the early part of the present century. It is a substantial white manor, not picturesque or romantic looking, but eminently comfortable—at least, from the outside. It has a bold porch, and large windows, some of which open to the ground: a conservatory on one side, leading to a billiard-room, and a library upon the other. It is fronted by a thick shrubbery, a noble grass-plot, above which droop cedar trees, and a broad drive, kept hard as iron. To the left are the stables and the kennel, planted out by shrubs, but close at hand; the right leads, by a dark, winding path, to the back of the house, where a fine lawn, surrounded by flower-beds, slopes down towards a lake with an artificial island on it, which is reached by a rustic bridge; beyond which lie the farm buildings, and their ungainly accessories.

So far, Fen Court appears to be all that could be desired; and had been purchased eagerly by Colonel Mordaunt on his coming into his money, resigning the service and settling at home.

But the inside of the Court has one great fault—it is, notwithstanding the sums which have been spent on its equipment, irremediably ugly and dull. The house contains every comfort, having a long, well-stocked library, a vast dining-room, cheerful breakfast-parlor, and marvellously-furnished drawing-room. When I say marvellously, I do not mean in marvellous good taste. Colonel Mordaunt has never indulged in personal hobbies (except in the stables and hunting-field). There are pictures on the walls of Fen Court, but he seldom looks at them, and hardly knows their painters' names. He ridicules the idea of any one caring for old china and glass; has never heard of bric-à-brac; and calls a love for worm-eaten oak or ebony sheer folly. Give him a well-built house, free from draughts and smoky chimneys; let Druce or Maple furnish it according to his own taste, and the best of his ability, and he could wish for nothing more.

And up to a certain point Colonel Mordaunt is right. Home comforts—good beds and lots of blankets, spotless table-linen, and very hot plates—are worth all the Venetian glass and marqueterie in the world, if we cannot combine the two. But he never tries, and never has tried to combine them; and his sister Isabella takes no more trouble than he does. The stables of Fen Court are perfect in all their fittings and arrangements; so are the kennels; so are the sleeping, and eating, and sitting apartments of the human part of the establishment; only men and women (some men and women, that is to say) occasionally feel the want of more than bodily comfort.

Yet no one in Fen Court seems to miss sweet sounds, and all the pretty graceful nothings that throw a nameless charm on the apartments presided over by a woman of taste.

Miss Mordaunt is decidedly not a woman of taste. She is only a poor weak-spirited dependent on her brother's will and pleasure, and the tyranny of Mrs. Quekett, the housekeeper. Mrs. Quekett is an awful woman; it is she that clothes those unhappy chairs and sofas in the drawing-room in brown-holland covers, so that no one has ever seen their blue satin glories exposed to daylight, and drapes the chandeliers in gauzy petticoats, like gold-beaters' skin, and pins yellow muslin round the picture-frames, until the room looks like the back parlor of a public-house, or the state apartment set aside for the reception of new customers in a young ladies' school.

It is Rebecca Quekett who decides how much butter shall be consumed per week at the Court breakfast table, and how much cream in the coffee after dinner; which servants shall be retained, and which discharged; which bedrooms shall be used, and which left tenantless; and it is to Rebecca Quekett, and not to Miss Mordaunt, that every one refers for everything that may be required for the household, from a clean duster up to a new Brussels carpet.

Colonel Mordaunt even, paramount amongst his dogs and horses and hunting friends, is nothing inside Fen Court; and his sister is less than nothing—she is but an instrument in the hands of the most despotic of mistresses. For what tyranny can exceed the tyranny of an over-fed and indulged menial; of the inferior who, for some reason best known to ourselves, we have permitted to climb above us; of the servant who, being master of our family secrets, we seem in greater than bodily fear, lest he or she should take advantage of the situation, by wielding illegal influence above our unhappy heads with a satisfaction that knows no remorse?

But let Mrs. Quekett speak for herself.

It is January. Colonel Mordaunt has been home from his continental trip for more than two months, and the hunting-season still engrosses most of his time and thought—at least, to all appearances.

Ten o'clock in the morning; the breakfast, at which several gentlemen in pink have dropped in accidentally, is over; and the master of the hounds, surrounded by his pack of friends and dogs and retainers, has ridden away down the broad gravelled drive, out into the open country, and Miss Mordaunt has Fen Court to herself.

She is a woman of about five-and-forty; not ill-favored, but with a contracted and attenuated figure, and a constant look of deprecatory fear upon her countenance, which go far to make her so. Indeed, she is worse than ill-favored, for she is uninteresting. Some of the plainest women in the world have been the most fascinating. Miss Mordaunt fascinates no one, except with a desire to know why she should pass through life with an expression as though she were silently entreating every one she meets not to kick her. The world has not dealt harder with her than with most, but whenever she has been smitten on the right cheek, she has so pertinaciously turned the left, that her fellow-creatures have smitten her again, out of sheer vice. Every body knows what it is to wish to to kick a dog who puts his tail between his legs before he has been spoken to. Humility is Christian; but, in a world of business, it doesn't "pay"

Miss Mordaunt being left alone, looks anxiously about the room, locks up the tea and sugar as though she were committing a theft, pulls the bell—with the faintest of tinkles at first, but afterwards, finding it is not answered, somewhat more boldly—and as the servant enters, says, apologetically—

"I think, James—as your master is gone, and the breakfast is over—I think perhaps you had better clear away."

"Very well, miss," replies James, with stolid indifference, as he puts the chairs back against the wall, and proceeds to business.

Miss Mordaunt glances about her, once or twice, uncertainly, and then, with a nervous grin at James, who takes no notice of the proceeding, glides from the room.

In another second she is back again.

"Is Quekett—do you know, James—in the kitchen, or the housekeeper's room?"

"I believe, Mrs. Quekett is not downstairs at at all yet, miss."

"Oh, very well! it is no matter, James: it doest not in the least signify. Thank you, James!" and Miss Mordaunt re-vanishes.

She does not pass into the garden or enter her own apartment: she goes straight upstairs and knocks at the door of one of the best bedrooms.

"Come in!" says a voice that has been so used to lay down the law that it cannot speak except authoritatively; but as Miss Mordaunt appears, it attempts to modify its tone. "Oh! is it you, miss? Pray come in. Past ten o'clock! Well, I'm sure I had no idea it was so late."

Mrs. Quekett, clothed in a stuff dressing-gown and laced night-cap, is seated by the fire: her breakfast-tray is by her side and a footstool under her feet; nor does she make the least pretence of rising from her chair as her so-called mistress advances towards her.

The room (as I have said before) is one of the most comfortable in Fen Court, and is furnished with mahogany and French chintz and Kidderminster: so much of it belongs to Druce, or Maple, but it is further decorated in a fashion of which those gentlemen have been quite guiltless; for pictures hang about the walls; carved oaken brackets, holding statuettes in china, fill up the recesses; and a French clock and candelabra adorn the mantelpiece. Presents from her numerous employers—slight testimonies of her worth from the Duchess of B———, and my Lady C———: so Mrs. Quekett is wont to describe these ornaments: spoils from the various battle-fields through which she has fought her way in life—so an unprejudiced observer would say.

(To be continued.)