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"NO INTENTIONS."

"NO INTENTIONS."

A NOVEL.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

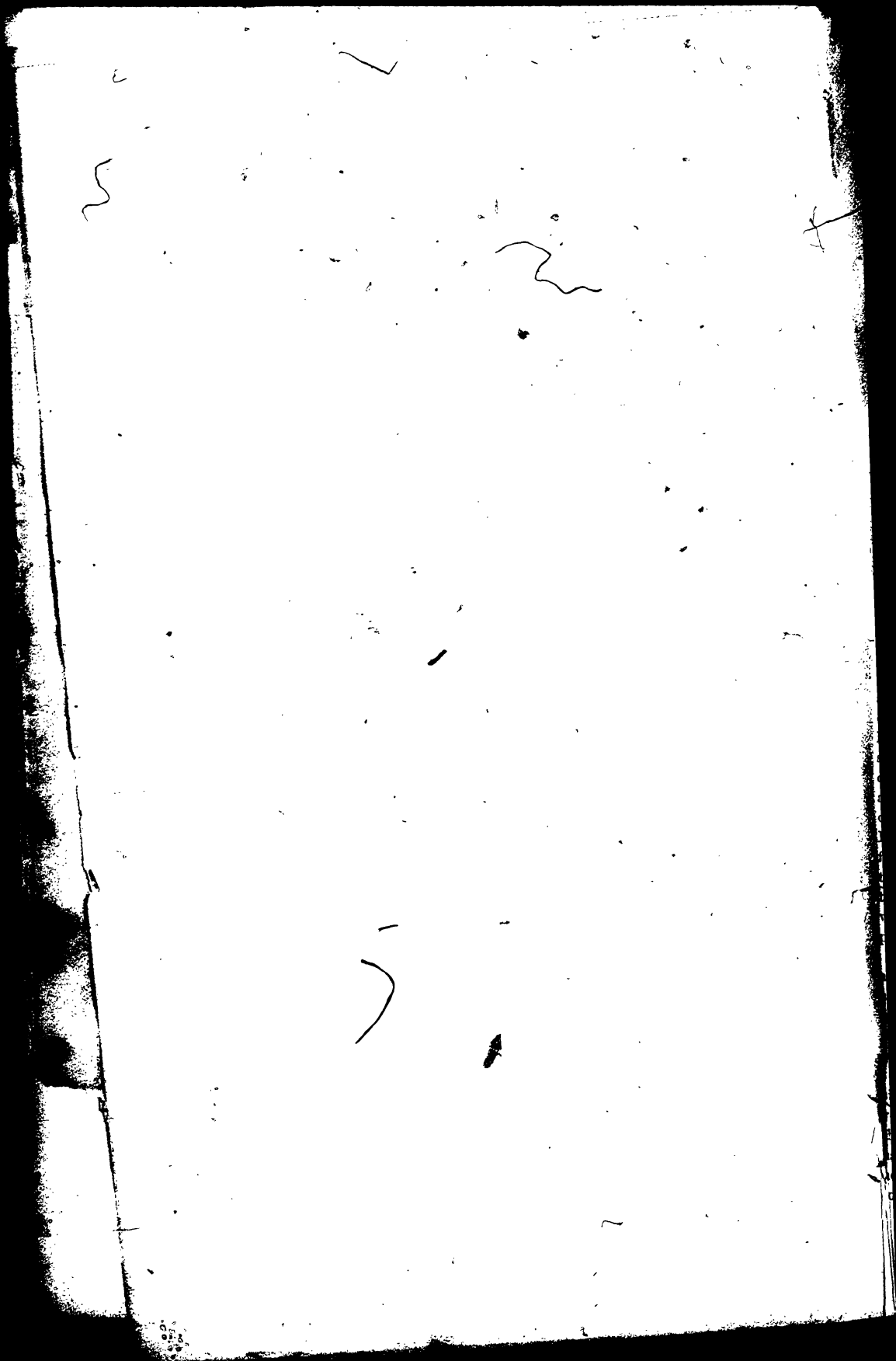
AUTHOR OF "THE POISON OF ASPES," ETC., ETC.

*I Lean, Mrs. Florence (Marryat) Church,
"Mrs. Francis Lesty" 1837-1899.*

Public Archives of Nova Scotia
HALIFAX, N. S.

NEW YORK:
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,
549 & 551 BROADWAY.
1875.

HALIFAX N. S.
M. A. BUCKLEY & CO



"NO INTENTIONS."

CHAPTER I.

It is toward the close of a long, bright day in June, that a young collegian enters, somewhat hastily, the court-yard of an inn on the outskirts of one of our university towns.

"Holloa there!" he calls sharply to a skulking ostler, who recognizes him with a touch of forelock; "bring my horse round, will you, be quick about it!"

As the ostler disappears to obey his orders, the young man leans lazily against the stable wall, and the traces of some secret care or annoyance are very visible upon his countenance. He ought to possess neither; for he is young, good-looking, affluent, and of high birth, being the second son of the Earl of Norham: but what charm is there to make even earls' sons invulnerable against the effects of the woes which they create for themselves? A few months back Eric Keir almost believed that the world was made for him and men in the same position as himself; to-day, he would give the world, were it his own, to be able to retrace his steps and undo that which is irremediable. And yet he has not completed his two-and-twentieth year!

As the ostler brings his horse—a fine bay animal of some value—up to his side, Eric Keir starts as though he had been dreaming, and, seizing the reins abruptly, is about to spring into the saddle. His foot, however, has but reached the stirrup, when he is accosted from the other side.

"Why, Keir, old fellow! what an age it is since we met! Where have you been hiding yourself? I seem to have seen scarcely any thing of you during the whole term." And the hand of Saville Moxon, a fellow-student, though not at the same college, is thrust forward eagerly to take his own.

At which Eric Keir descends to earth again, with an appearance of being less pleased than embarrassed at this encounter with his friend, who is, moreover, intimately acquainted with all the members of his family.

"If you have not seen me, Moxon, it is your own fault," he replies, moodily; "for you know where to find me when I am at home."

"Ah! exactly so, my dear fellow—when you are at home; but have you any distinct recollection of when you last practised that rather negative virtue? For my part, I can affirm that you have sported the oak on, at least, a dozen occasions during the last two months, when I have been desirous of palming my irreproachable company upon you. What do you do with yourself out of college-hours?"

At this question, innocent though it appears, Keir visibly reddens, and then tries to cover his confusion by a rough answer.

"Much the same as you do, I suppose; much the same as every man does who is condemned to be cooped up for three parts of the year in this musty old town—try to forget that there is such a place."

But Saville Moxon is not to be put out of temper so easily.

"By riding out of it, as you are going to do now," he says, with a light laugh, as he lays his hand upon the horse's mane. "Where are you bound to, Eric?"

"What business is that of yours?" is trembling upon the lips of Eric Keir; but he represses the inclination to utter it, and substitutes the answer, "Nowhere in particular."

"Then, don't let me detain you. I want to speak to you, but I can walk by your side a little way; or, stay: I dare say they have an animal in the stables they can let me have, and we'll take

a gallop together—as we used to do in the old days, Keir."

But to this proposal Eric Keir appears any thing but agreeable.

"By no means," he rejoins, hastily. "At least I know they have nothing you would care to mount; and I am quite at your service, Moxon, if you wish to speak to me.—Here, ostler! hold my horse."

"But, why should I keep you from your ride?"

"Because I prefer it; prefer, that is to say, speaking to a friend quietly to howling at him across the road. Let us turn out of this courtyard, where every wall has ears and every window a pair of eyes. And now what is your business with me?"

The young men have gained the road by this time, which is sufficiently removed from the town to be very dusty, and shaded by leafy trees.

"Who would ever have thought of meeting you out here, Keir?" is Moxon's first remark. "And how long is it since you developed a taste for country lanes and hedges?"

"I don't admire quickset hedges more than I ever did; but, when a man rides for exercise, one direction is as good as another."

"But what induced you to remove your horse from Turnhill's? Didn't they do justice to him?"

"Well—yes—" in a hesitating manner. "I had no particular fault to find with them; but these stables are more convenient."

"Less so, I should have imagined. Why, you have nearly a mile more to walk to them."

"Perhaps I like walking: any way, that's my business. What's yours?"

At this curt rejoinder, Saville Moxon turns round and regards him steadily in the face.

"What is the matter, Keir?" he says, kindly. "Are you ill? And, now I come to look at you, you have certainly grown much thinner since I saw you last; and, if you were not such a lazy fellow, I should say you had been overworking yourself."

To which Keir responds, with a harsh laugh:

"Yes, Moxon, that's it—too much study. It's an awfully bad thing for young fellows of our age—so trying to the constitution! Ha! ha! ha!"

"But you really don't look yourself, Keir, for all that. I am afraid you must have been living too fast. Don't do it, dear old fellow—for all our sakes."

The affectionate tone touches some chord in Eric Keir's heart, and he answers, almost humbly:

"Indeed, I have not been living fast, Moxon; on the contrary, I think I have been keeping better hours this term than usual. One comes so soon to the conviction that all that kind of thing is not only degrading, but wrong. Yet one may have troubles, nevertheless. How are all your people at home?"

"Very well indeed, thank you; and that brings me to the subject of my business with you. It is odd that I should have met you this afternoon, considering how much separated we have been of late; for, if I had not done so, I should have been obliged to write."

"What about?"

"I had a letter from your brother Muiraven this morning."

"Ah!—more than I had; it's seldom either of them honors me."

"Perhaps they despair of finding you—as I almost began to do. Any way, Lord Muiraven's letter concerns you as much as myself. He wants us to join him in a walking-tour."

"When?"

"During the vacation, of course."

"Where to?"

"Brittany, I believe."

"I can't go."

"Why not? it will be a jolly chance for you. And my brother Alick is most anxious to be of the party. Fancy what fun we four should have!—it would seem like the old school-days coming over again."

"When we were always together, and always in scrapes," Keir interrupts, eagerly. "I should like to go."

"What is there to prevent you?"

His face falls immediately.

"Oh, I don't know—nothing in particular—only, I don't fancy it will be such fun as you imagine; these tours turn out such awful failures sometimes; besides—"

"Besides—what?"

"It will be a great expense; and I'm rather out of pocket this term."

"That is no obstacle, for you are to go as Muiraven's guest. He says especially—let me see, where is the letter?"—producing it from his pocket as he speaks. "Ah! here it is: 'Tell Eric he is to be my guest, and so are you'—though, for the matter of that," continues Moxon, as he refolds the letter and puts it in the envelope, "my accepting his offer, and your accepting it, are two very different things."

"I can't go, nevertheless; and you may write and tell him so."

"You had better write yourself, Keir; you may be able to give your brother the reason, which you refuse to me."

After this, they pace up and down for a few minutes in silence; minutes which appear long to Eric Keir, for he pulls out his watch meanwhile to ascertain the hour.

"Keir, are you in debt?" says Moxon.

"Not a penny—or, at all events, not a penny that I shall be unable to pay up on demand. Has any one been informing you to the contrary?"

"No one—it was but a surmise. I hope, then—I hope there is no truth in the rumor that has reached me, that you find more charms in a certain little village, not twenty miles from Oxford, than in any thing the old town contains!"

Saville Moxon is hardly prepared for the effect which his words produce. For Eric Keir stops short upon the country-path which they are traversing, and the veins rise upon his forehead, and his whole face darkens and changes beneath the passion which he cannot help exhibiting, although he is too courteous to give vent to it without further cause.

"What village?" he demands, quickly.

"Fretterley!"

Then the knowledge that he is in the wrong, and gossip in the right, and that something he is very anxious to keep secret is on the verge of being discovered, gets the better of Eric Keir's discretion, and he flares out in an impetuous manner, very much in character with his quick, impulsive nature:

"And what the d—l do your confounded friends mean by meddling in my affairs?"

"Who said they were friends of mine?" retorts Moxon; and the laugh with which he says it is as oil cast on the flame of Eric Keir's wrath.

"I will allow of no interference with any thing I choose to do or say. I am not a child, to be followed, and gaped at, and cackled about, by a parcel of old women in breeches; and you may tell your informant so, from me, as soon as you please."

"Keir, this is folly, and you know it. Fretterley and its doings are too near at hand to escape all observation; and the fact of your visiting there, and the vicar of the parish having three very pretty daughters, is quite sufficient to set the gossips talking; but not to provoke such an ebullition of anger from yourself."

"I don't care a fig about the vicar, or his daughters either! But I do care to hear that I can't ride a mile in one direction or another with-

out all Oxford talking of it. I hate that style of feminine cackle which some of the fellows of the college have taken up; and I say again, that they are a set of confounded meddlers; and, if I catch any one of them prying into my concerns, I won't leave him a whole bone in his body!"

"You are childish!" exclaims Moxon. "As I repeated the report, Keir, I suppose I am one of the 'confounded meddlers' you allude to, and it may not be safe for me to remain longer in your company. And so, good-day to you, and a better spirit when we meet again." And, turning abruptly from him, he commences to walk in the direction of the town. But slowly, and somewhat sadly; for he has known Eric Keir from boyhood, and, imperious as he is with strangers, it is not often he exhibits the worst side of his character to his friends.

For a moment—while pride and justice are struggling for the mastery within him—Eric looks at the retreating figure, and then, with sudden impulse, he strides hastily after Moxon, and tenders him his hand.

"Forgive me, Saville! I was wrong—I hardly knew what I was saying."

"I was sure you would confess it, sooner or later, Eric; your faults are all upon the surface."

And then they shake hands heartily, and feel themselves again.

"But about this Fretterley business," says Eric, after a slight hesitation—"stop the gossip as much as lies in your power, there's a good fellow! For I swear to you I have no more intention of making love to the vicar's daughters, than I have to the vicar himself."

"I never supposed you had. But when young and fashionable men persist in frequenting one locality, the lookers-on will draw their inferences. We are not all earls' sons, remember, Eric; and you dwell in the light of an unenviable notoriety."

"Unenviable indeed, if even one's footsteps are to be dogged! And fancy what my father would say, if such a rumor reached his ears!"

"He would think nothing of it, Keir. He knows that you love him too well to dream of making a *mésalliance*."

"Who talks of a *mésalliance*?" interposes the other, hurriedly.

"Myself alone. The vicar's daughters, though exceedingly handsome, and, no doubt, very amiable girls, are not in the position of life from which Lord Norham expects you to chose a wife. He thinks a great deal of you, Eric."

"More's the pity; he had much better build his hopes on Muiraven or Cecil."

"Oh! Cecil will never marry. Young as he is, he is marked out for a bachelor. And as for Muiraven, he will, in all probability, have to sacrifice his private instincts to public interests. Besides"—in a lowered voice—"you should never forget that, were any thing to happen to Muiraven, the hopes of the family would be set upon you."

"Don't talk such nonsense, Moxon. Muiraven's life is worth ten of mine, thank God! and Cecil and I mean to preserve our liberty intact, and leave marriage for the young and the gay: yourself, *par exemple*."

"Call a poor devil who has nothing but his own brains to look to for a subsistence, young and gay? My dear boy, you'll be a grandfather before I have succeeded in inducing any woman to accept my name and nothing a year."

"Egh!"—with a shudder—"what an awful prospect! I'd as soon hang myself."

"Well it needn't worry you just yet," says Moxon, with a laugh. "But I must not keep you any longer from your ride. Shall you be in your rooms to-morrow evening, Keir?"

"Probably—that is, I will make a point of being there, if you will come and take supper with me. And bring over Summers and Charlton with you. And look here, Moxon—stop this confounded rumor about me, at all hazards, for Heaven's sake!"

"If there is no truth in it, why should you object to its circulation?" inquires Moxon, bluntly.

"There is no truth in it. I hardly know the man by sight, or his daughters; but you are aware of my father's peculiarities, and how the least idea of such a thing would worry him."

"We should have Lord Norham down here in no time, to find out the truth for himself. So it's lucky for you, old fellow"—observing Keir's knitted brows—"that there's nothing for him to find out."

"Yes—of course; but I hate every thing in the shape of town-talk, true or otherwise."

"There shall be no more, if I can prevent it, Keir. Good-by!"

"Good-by, till to-morrow evening; and don't be later than ten."

He remains on the spot where Saville Moxon left him for a moment, and then turns, musingly, toward the court-yard of the inn again.

"What on earth can have put Fretterley into their heads," he ponders, "when I have been so scrupulously careful, that even the ostler at the village inn doesn't know me by my right name? It's an awful nuisance, and will entail a move at

the very time when I can least afford it. My usual luck!" And, with a shrug of the shoulders, Eric Keir reënters the stable-yard. The man is still waiting there with his horse, and, when the gentleman is mounted, he touches his cap and asks when he may be expected to return.

"Impossible to say," is the unsatisfactory rejoinder; and in another minute Keir has driven his spurs into the animal's sides and is galloping, to make up for lost time, along the road which leads—to Fretterley.

As he rides hurriedly and carelessly along, his thoughts are conflicting and uneasy. His impulsive and unthinking nature has led him into the commission of an act which is more than rash—which is unpardonable, and of which he already bitterly repents; and he sees the effect of this youthful folly closing about him and hedging him in, and the trouble it will probably entail, stretching out over a long vista of coming years, to end perhaps only with his life.

He knows that his father (a most loving and affectionate father, of whom he has no fear beyond that begotten by the dread of wounding his affection) cherishes high hopes for him and expects great things—greater things than Eric thinks he has the power of performing. For Lord Muiraven, though a young man of sterling merit—"the dearest fellow in the world," as his brothers will inform you—is not clever: he knows it himself, and all his friends know it, and that Eric has the advantage over him, not only in personal appearance, but in brains. And, though it would be too much to affirm that Lord Norham has ever wished his sons could change places, there is no doubt that, while he looks on Muiraven as the one who shall carry on his titles to a future generation, his pride is fixed on Eric; and the ease with which the young fellow has disposed of his university examinations, and the passport into society his agreeable manners have gained for him, are topics of unfailing interest to the earl.

And it is this knowledge, added to the remembrance of a motherless childhood sheltered by paternal care from every sorrow, that makes his own conduct smite so bitterly on the heart of Eric Keir. How could he have done it? Oh! what a fool—what an ungrateful, unpardonable fool he has made of himself! And there is no way out of the evil: he has destroyed that which will not bear patching—his self-respect! As the conviction presses home to him, tears, which do him no dishonor, rise to his eyes, yet are forced back again, as though to weep had been a sin.

How much the creatures suffer who cannot or who dare not cry! God gave ready tears to women, in consideration of their weakness—it is only strong hearts and stronger minds that can bear torture with dry eyes.

But there is little trace of weakness left on the face of Eric Keir, as, after an hour's hard riding, he draws rein before the village inn of Fretterley. The young collegian seems well known there; for before he has had time to summon the ostler, the landlord himself appears at the front-door, to ease him of his rein, and is shouting for some one to come and "old Mr. 'Amilton's 'orse" while he draws "Mr. 'Amilton's beer."

"Mr. 'Amilton" appears to respond but languidly to the exertions made on his behalf; for he drinks the beer which is handed him, mechanically, and, without further comment, turns on his heel, much to the disappointment of the landlord, who has learned to look regularly for the offer of one of those choice cigars of which the young gentleman is usually so lavish.

"Something up there, I bet," he remarks to the partner of his bosom; "getting tired of her, I shouldn't wonder: they all does it, sooner or later. Men will be men."

"Men will be men? men will be brutes, you mean!" she retorts in her shrill treble; and, from the sound of her voice, the landlord thinks it as well not to pursue the subject any further.

Not afraid of her—oh, dear no! What husband ever was afraid of any thing so insignificant as the weaker vessel?—only— Well, landlord, have it thine own way; it does us no harm!

Meanwhile Eric Keir has walked beyond the village, perhaps a quarter-of a mile, to where a small farm-cottage, surrounded by a garden of shrubs, stands back from the highway. He pushes open the painted wicket with his foot, more impetuously than he need have done, and advances to the hall-door. Before he can knock or ring, it is thrown open to him, and a woman flings herself upon his neck.

She is a girl still, though several years older than himself; but a woman is in the glow of youth at five-and-twenty: and this woman has not only youth but beauty.

"I wish you would remember, Myra, that I am standing at the front-door, and reserve these demonstrations of affection for a more private place. I have told you of it so often."

He disengages her arms from his throat as he speaks, and her countenance lowers and changes. It is easy to see that she is quick to take offense, and that the repulse has wounded her. So they

pass into the sitting-room in silence, and while Eric Keir, monarch of all he surveys, throws himself into an easy-chair, she stands by the table, somewhat sulkily, waiting for him to make the next advances.

"Is old Margaret at home, Myra?"

"I believe so."

"Tell her to bring me some claret. I seem to have swallowed all the dust between this and Oxford."

She does his bidding, bringing the wine with her own hands, and, when she has served him, she sits down by the window.

"Come here, child," he says presently, in a patronizing, yet authoritative voice that accords strangely with his boyish exterior. "What's the matter with you to-day? why won't you speak to me?"

"Because you don't care to hear me speak," she answers in a low tone, full of emotion, as she kneels beside his chair. She has large, lustrous, dark eyes, and soft brown hair that flows and curls about her neck, and a pair of passionate red lips that are on a dangerous level with his own. What man could resist them? But Eric Keir's mustached mouth bends down to press her upturned forehead only. It is evident that she has lost her power to charm him. Yet his reply is not only patient but kind.

"What has put that nonsense into your head? Don't make more worries than you need, Myra; we have enough already, Heaven knows!"

"But why haven't you been to see me for so many days, then? You don't know how long the time seems without you! Are you getting tired of me, Eric?"

"Tired!"—with a smile that is sadder than a sigh. "It is early days for you and me to talk of getting tired of each other, Myra. Haven't we made all kinds of vows to pass our lives together?"

"Then why have you been such a time away?"

"I have had business to detain me; it was impossible to come before."

"What sort of business?"

"Engagements—at college and among my friends."

"Friends whom you love more than me!" she retorts quickly, her jealous disposition immediately on the *qui vive*.

"It is not fair for you to say so, Myra. I can give you no greater proof of my attachment than I have already given."

"Ah! but I want more, Eric. I want to be

with you always: to leave you neither day nor night: to have the right to share in your pleasures and your pains."

He frowns visibly.

"More pains than pleasures, as you would find, Myra. But it is impossible; I have told you so already; the circumstances of the case forbid it."

"How can I tell, when you are absent, if you are always thinking of me?—if some other woman does not take my place in your heart?"

"You must trust me, Myra. I am a gentleman, and I tell you that it is not the case—and it never will be."

"Ah! but you cannot tell—you cannot tell!" And here she falls to weeping, and buries her face upon the arm of his chair.

"My poor girl!" says Keir, compassionately.

He does not love her—that is to say, he does not love as he thought he did three months ago, when he believed that he was doing a generous and chivalrous thing in raising her from her low estate to the position she now occupies, and swearing unalterable fidelity at her feet—but he feels the deepest pity, both for her and for himself—and he would wipe out the past with his blood, if it were possible.

"My poor girl—my poor Myra!" stroking the luxuriant hair which is flung across his knee—"we have much to forgive each other! Did ever man and woman drag each other more irreparably down than we have done?"

"You have ceased to love me—I know you have!" she continues, through her tears.

"Why should you torture me with such an accusation," he says, impatiently, as he shakes himself free of the clinging arms, and, rising, walks to the window, "when I have already assured you that it is not true? What have I done to make you imagine I am changed?"

"You do not come to see me—you do not caress me—you do not even look at me as you used to do."

"Good Heavens! for how long do you expect me to go on 'looking'—whatever that operation may consist of?"

"O Eric! you cannot deceive me: you know you are sorry that we ever met."

Sorry—ay, God knows that he is sorry; but he will not tell her so. Yet neither will he fly to her embrace, as three months back he would have done, to assure her that she does his love a cruel wrong by the suspicion. He only stands quietly by the open window, and, taking a cigar from his

case, lights it and commences smoking; while she continues to sob, in an angry, injured manner by the arm-chair where he left her.

"Myra! I have but a short time to stay here to-day; why shouldn't we pass it pleasantly together? Upon my word, if you go on like this every time we meet, you will make the place too hot to hold me. Come—dry your eyes, like a good girl, and tell me what you have been doing since I saw you last."

She dashes away her tears, and rises from her kneeling posture; but there is still a tone of sullenness or pride in the voice with which she answers him.

"What should I have been doing, but waiting for your arrival? I should have gone to Oxford, most probably, and tried to find your rooms, if you had not appeared this evening."

"You had better not attempt that," he says, decisively.

"But you neglect me, Eric: even old Margaret remarks it; and the vicar said—"

"The vicar!"—starting. "When did you see the vicar?"

"The day before yesterday, when he called here."

"Who let him in?"

"I did!"—rather defiantly. "Old Margaret was out."

"And what communication passed between you?"

"He asked if my name was Mrs. Hamilton?—and I said 'Yes.'"

"What on earth made you say so?"

"Well—haven't you always called me Mrs. Hamilton? Isn't it the name I go by in the village?"

"Not through my means, Myra. I have never mentioned you to anybody, in Fretterley or out of it. And pray, what had the vicar to say to 'Mrs. Hamilton?'"

"He asked if you were Mr. Hamilton; he has seen you riding through the village, and—"

"Don't tell me that you connected our names together before him!" interrupts Keir, with a look of anger.

"Well!—what was I to say?"

"What were you to say? You knew well enough what to say to get yourself or me out of a scrape, a few months back. But I see through your design, Myra—you want to force me to do that against which you know I am determined."

"I cannot bear this continual separation," she replies; "it is killing me. I cannot live without you."

"Listen to me, Myra," he says, approaching closer to enforce his argument. "You say you cannot bear this separation; but if you attempt to elude it by any devices of your own, you shall never see me again. You cannot say that I have deceived you; you threw in your lot with mine of your free consent; more than that—you urged me to the step which has brought, God knows, its retribution with it. But if you make our position public, you will do me an irremediable wrong, and injury your own cause. So I warn you!"

"Of what?"

"That suspicion has already fallen upon me for being foolish enough to visit you so openly: so much so, that I had decided, before coming here to-day, to move you as soon as possible from Fretterley; and, if the rumor is not stopped by that means, I shall go away till it is forgotten."

"Where?" she inquires, breathlessly.

"In the country, or abroad; anywhere to balk the gossips."

"And without me, Eric?"

"Without you? Of course. What good would it do if I took you with me? Why, if the least hint of such a thing were to reach my father's ears, he would ask me all about it, and I should tell him the truth. I have never told him any thing but the truth," adds the young fellow, simply; "and I believe it would kill him."

"And you would give me up for your father?" she says, quickly.

"A thousand times over! My father is every thing in the world to me; and I can't think how I ever could have permitted myself to do that which would so much grieve him."

A dark flush overspreads her handsome features as she hears the unpalatable truth, and her full breast heaves and her lips tremble with the deep pain it causes her. She is passing through the greatest agony a woman is capable of feeling; coming gradually, but surely, to the conviction that her reign is over, her empire overthrown—that she has lost her place in her lover's heart.

And she loves him so passionately; she has always cared for him far more than he has done for her, and his increasing coldness drives her mad.

"You said that I was every thing in the world to you, three months ago," she answers, with set teeth.

"I know I did; and at the time I believed it to be true. But I have told you, Myra, what a

proud, high family mine is, and how seldom their escutcheon has been tarnished with dishonor. And—forgive me for saying so—I know it is my own fault, but I cannot help being conscious of the fact that I have tarnished it now. And my poor father thinks so much—too much of me; I feel as though I should never be able to look him in the face again." And with that, Eric Keir buries his own face in his hands.

She taps the floor impatiently with her foot.

"You are ashamed of me, Eric."

"I am bitterly ashamed of myself, and of all that has passed between us."

"It would have been better if we had never met."

"Far better—both for you and for myself. Who could think otherwise?"

"It would be better, perhaps, if I were dead."

"It would be better if we were both dead," he exclaims, bitterly; "or had died before we saw each other. O Myra—Myra! why will you wring such cruel truths from my mouth? you have been the death of all good things in me."

He lifts his face to hers, and she is shocked to see the pain portrayed there. She is an illiterate, low-born woman, with nothing to recommend her beyond her beauty and her fierce love for him, which, yet, is like the love of an unreasoning animal, overpowering when encouraged, and apt to turn the first time it is thwarted. But she has one indomitable passion—pride, and it is stirring and working in her now.

"Would you be happy if you could undo the past?" she says in a low voice; "if there had been no such person as me in the world, and you had never fancied that you loved me?"

"Happy!" he answers, with a sad laugh. "I should be happy if I could wipe out the remembrance with my blood; if I could go about the world with a free conscience at the expense of every thing that I possess. But come, Myra, let us talk no more of impossibilities. The past is past, my child, and nothing you or I can say will ever undo it. Let us think of the present. It is necessary you should leave Fretterley—where would you like to go?"

"I don't care. You may choose for me."

"Very well, then; I will think the matter over, and let you know. I sha'n't be able to come here to-morrow, as I have an engagement in the town; but the day after you may depend on seeing me. Do you want any money?" taking out his purse.

But she shrinks from the note he offers her as though it had been a serpent.

"No—no! I am not in want of it; I have plenty to serve my need."

"All the better for me," he says, laughing. He has recovered his spirits again; clouds are not long in passing with the young.

"Well—good-by," he continues, as he takes the girl in his arms and kisses her, in a fraternal manner, on the cheek. "It's a shame of me to have made those pretty eyes so red! Don't think twice of what I have said, Myra; you urged me on to it with your cross-questioning, and you know I lament this business for both our sakes; but the dark mood will be gone to-morrow. It's nothing unusual after three months of honeymoon, my dear."

She clings to him frantically close, but she says nothing.

"Why, won't you say good-by? Then I must go without it, for I have no more time to lose."

He is moving toward the door, when she flies after him, and almost stifles him in her embrace.

"Oh, good-by, my love!—my darling!—my own, own, dearest love!"

She showers kisses, almost roughly, on his mouth, his eyes, his brow—kisses which he accepts rather philosophically than otherwise, and from which he frees himself with a sigh of relief.

Alas! for the love of one-and-twenty, when it begins to temper its enthusiasm with philosophy!

As, with a cheerful nod, he turns out of the wicket-gate, the woman stands gazing after him as though she had been turned to stone; and, when he has finally disappeared, she gropes her way back to the sitting-room, and casts herself headlong on the floor.

"Gone—gone!" she moans; "all gone, and my life gone with it! Oh, I wish that I was dead—I wish that I was buried—I wish that I could neither feel nor think—I am nothing to him now—"

She lies there for, perhaps, an hour, sobbing and moaning to herself; and is only roused by the entrance of the old woman she calls Margaret, with the preparations for her tea, and whose grunt at perceiving her attitude is half of compassion and half of contempt.

"Lord ha' mussy!" she exclaims, "and whatever are you a lying on the boards for?"

This woman, who is clothed and kept like one of gentle birth, and by whom she is fed and paid her wages, is yet not addressed by Margaret in terms befitting a servant to use toward her mistress. The poor are ever keenest at detecting a would-be lady from a real one.

The familiar tone affronts Myra; she reads in it, not sympathy, but rebellion against her newborn dignity, and she rises and sweeps out of the room, without deigning to notice the presence of her factotum.

But the bedroom is solitary and full of sad remembrance, and in a few minutes she emerges from it, dressed for walking, and saunters in the garden.

It is a queer little nest that Eric Keir has chosen for her; being originally intended for the game-keeper's cottage on an estate which has long since been parted with, acre by acre, and its very name sunk in the obscurity of three or four small farms; so that the cottage stands alone in the midst of wheat and barley fields; and it is through one of these, where the grain, young, and green, and tender, and not higher than a two years' child, springs up on each side of her, that Myra, still burning as under the sense of a deep outrage, takes her way. A resolution has been growing up in her heart during the last hour which, betwixt its pride and stubbornness, it will not easily relinquish—the resolution to part with Eric Keir.

It wrenches her very soul even to think of such a thing, and as she resolves impossible ways and means for its accomplishment, her breath is hardly drawn; but she has a will of iron, and he has wounded her in her most vulnerable part. As she paces slowly up and down the narrow field-path, the jealous, angry tears scarce dried upon her cheeks, she hears a rustle in the corn behind her, and the next moment some one touches her upon the shoulder.

Myra is not chicken-hearted, but she is quick to resent an insult.

"How dare you?" she commences, angrily; but, as she turns and faces the intruder, her tone is changed to one of consternation.

"Lord above!" she continues, faintly. "How did you ever find me, Joel?"

She is so taken by surprise that she has turned quite pale, and the hand she offers him is fluttering like a bird.

"Find you!" exclaims the new-comer (who, it may be as well at once to state, stands in the relationship of cousin to her), "I would have found you, Myra, if you had been at the farthest end of the whole world."

"Aunt's not here, is she?" inquires Myra, with the quick fear that a woman in her equivocal position has of encountering the reproaches of one of her own sex; "you're sure you're alone, Joel?"

"I'm all alone, Myra. Mother has enough to

do to get her living, without coming all the way from Leicestershire to look after you. But I couldn't rest till I'd seen you: I couldn't believe what I've heard, except from your own lips. You've most broke my heart, Myra."

He is an uncouth, countrified-looking fellow, without any beauty, except such as is conveyed by his love and his sorrow; but as he stands there, sheepishly enough, looking down upon the hand he still holds between his own, he commands all the respect due to the man who has done nothing for which he need blush.

His earnestness seems to touch the girl, for she is silent and hangs down her head.

"When we heard that you had left the situation in the hotel where father placed you, and without a word of warning, we couldn't credit it. But some words as the master wrote to mother, made us think as all wasn't right with you; and when weeks and months went by, and we didn't hear nothing, I began to fear it was true. So I traveled up from home, little by little, doing a job here, and a job there, till I got to Oxford, and could speak with the master myself; and, though he couldn't satisfy me as to your whereabouts, I came to it by constant inquiry, and reached Fretterley last night. And now, Myra, come home with me. I don't want to make no words about it: I don't want to hear nothing of what you've been doing—'twould only cut me up—but say you'll come back to the old place in Leicestershire, and then I sha'n't think my journey's been a look in vain."

He looks her in the eyes as he concludes, and she, unable to stand his scrutiny, drops her head upon his rough velveteen shoulder, and begins to cry.

"O Joel! if I could only tell you."

"Tell me, my poor lass! where's the use of your telling me: can't I read the signs you carry about you? What's the meaning of a purple silk gown with lace fripperies upon your back, and a pair of gold drops in your ears, if it don't mean *same*?"

"No! no! not that!" she cries, recoiling from him.

"I shall think less of you, Myra, if you call it by any other name. But the old home's open to you, my dear, all the same—open to receive and shelter you, whenever you choose to come back to it; though you can't never bring the joy to it now, that I once thought you would."

The old home! how little she has thought of of late! yet she can see it in her mind's eye, as she stands pondering his words. It is not a

particularly happy home to her: the homes of the poor seldom are. She had known hunger, and thirst, and cold, and occasionally the sound of harsh words within its limits, yet the memory of the dull life she led there seems very peaceful now, compared to the excited and stormy scenes through which she has passed since leaving it.

The old home! It was not a paradise, but it was more like home to the low-born girl, than daily association with a companion who is as far above her in birth as in intellect, and has grown but too conscious of the gulf that lies between them.

Joel Cray takes her fit of musing for hesitation, and recommences his persuasion.

"I dare say *he*, whoever he may be—for I know there's a man at the bottom of all this, Myra (curse him!)," he adds *par parenthèse*—"I dare say he does all that he can to persuade you that he loves you better than himself, and will be constant to you till death, but—"

"He does not," she interrupts eagerly, in defense of the absent.

"What!" replies Joel, lost in astonishment, "he's sick of you already! He steals you away from an honest family and an honest employment to make a—"

"Stop!" cries Myra, in a voice of authority.

"What am I to stop for?"

"You shall not call me by that name: it is a lie."

"I wish to God you could prove it, Myra, what are you, then—*his wife*?"

"Of whom are you talking?" with passionate confusion. "How do you know that there is any one? What right have you to come and bully me in this manner?"

"Myra! we were brought up together from little children; my mother was like your mother, and my home was your home; and long before you saw this chap, you knew that I loved you and looked to wed you when the proper time came—that's my right! And now, as we stand in God's sight together, tell me the truth. Are you married to the man, or are you not?"

At this point-blank question, she trembles, and grows red and white by turns, shrinking from the stern glance he fixes on her.

"Joel! don't look at me after that fashion, for I can't bear it! O Joel! you used to love me. Take me back to aunt, and the old place, and the children, for there's no one wants me here."

"My poor lass! is it really as bad as that—only three months, and tired of you already?"

Well, well! you'd better have taken me, perhaps, after all—you've made a sorry bargain, Myra."

"O Joel! I love him—I love him beyond every thing in the world. He is so clever, and so handsome, and so good to me. But, I ain't fit for such as he is: I feel it at every turn. I can't talk, nor behave, nor look as he would wish me to do, and"—in a lower voice—"he is *ashamed* of me, Joel."

Poor Joel has been silently writhing under the mention of his rival's attributes, but the last clause is too much for him.

"Ashamed of you! the d—d villain! he ain't worthy to touch you. Oh, how I wish I had my fingers this moment at his wizen!"

"Hush, Joel! don't say such awful things, but—but—" with a choking sob, "I'm nothing but a worry to him now; he wishes we had never met: he wishes I was dead, and he was rid of me."

"Will you come home with me, or will you not?" shouts Joel, whose patience is thoroughly exhausted. "If you stand there, Myra, a-telling me any more of his insults, I swear I'll hunt him down like a dog, and set fire to every stick and stone that he possesses. Ah! you think, perhaps, that I don't know his name, and so he's safe from me; but it's *Amillon*—there's for you—and if you disappoint me, I'll soon be upon his track."

"O Joel! don't be hard on me: you can't tell how I feel the parting with him."

She turns her streaming eyes upon the cottage, while he, unable to bear the sight of her distress, paces up and down uneasily.

"Then you mean to come back with me, Myra?"

"Yes—yes—to-morrow."

"To-morrow you'll have changed your mind."

"What will there be to change it?" she answers, passionately. "How can any thing undo his words? He says I have been the death of all good things in him; that if it was possible he would wipe out even the memory of me with his blood; with his blood, Joel, think of that!"

"Well, them's insults, whatever they may mean, that you've no right to look over, Myra; and if you won't settle 'em, I shall."

"You would not harm him, Joel!" fearfully.

"I'd break every bone in his body, if I'd the chance to, and grateful for it. But if you'll promise to give him up without any more to-do, and come back home with me, I'll leave him to Providence. He'll catch it in the next world, if not in this."

"I have promised—I will do it—only give me

one more night in the place where I have been so happy."

He is not very willing to grant her this indulgence, but she exacts it from him, so that he is obliged to let her have her way, and passes the next twelve hours in a state of uninterrupted fear, lest *he* should appear to interpose his authority, or, after a night's reflection, *she* should play him false, and decide to remain where she is.

But Joel Cray need not have been afraid.

Myra spends the time indeed no less perplexedly than he does; but those who knew her innate pride and self-will would have had no difficulty in guessing that it would come off conqueror at last.

"He would give me up a thousand times over for his *father*," she keeps on repeating, when she finds her strength is on the point to fail; "he said so, and he means it, and sooner or later it would be my fate. And I will not stay to be given up: I will go before he has the chance to desert me. I will not be told again that I tarnish his honor, and that we had better both be dead than I live to disgrace him.

"I cannot bear it. I love him too much to be able to bear it. Perhaps, when he hears that I am gone, and comes to miss me (I am sure that he will miss me), he may be sorry for the cruel things he said, and travel England over till he finds me, and asks me to come back to him again."

The soft gleam which her dark eyes assume as the thought strikes her, is soon chased away by the old sore memory.

"But he will never come: he only longs to be quit of me that he may walk with a free conscience through the world, and I am the stumbling-block in his way. Oh! he shall never say so again: he shall know what it is to be free: he shall never have the opportunity to say such bitter truths to me again."

And so, with the morning light, the impetuous, unreasoning creature, without leaving sign or trace behind her to mark which way she goes, resigns herself into the hands of Joel Cray, and flies from Fretterley.

When, according to promise, Eric Keir pays another visit to the game-keeper's cottage, there is only old Margaret to open the door and stare at him as though she had been bewitched.

"Where is your mistress?" he says, curtly: the expression of old women's faces not possessing much interest for him.

"Lor, sir! she's gone."

"Gone! where—into the village?"

"Oh, deary me! I knows nothing about it; she never spoke to me. How could I tell but what she'd left by your orders?"

"What do you mean? Has Mrs. Hamilton left Fretterley?"

"Yes, sir—I suppose so. I haven't seen nothing of her since yesterday morning."

"Impossible!—without leaving a note or any explanation?"

"I don't know if you'll find a note among her things, sir! they're just as she left 'em; I haven't touched nothing; I knows my place better; and I'd rather you'd find out the truth for yourself, though I has my suspizzions, of course, which we're all liable to, rich and poor alike. But I haven't worried neither, knowing there's no call to fear but what my wages will be all right with an honorable gentleman like yourself."

He makes no effort to restrain her cackle, but passes through the door she has thrown open in silence, and enters the deserted sitting-room. He does not know if he is awake or asleep; he feels as if he were moving in a dream.

Gone! Left him! without the intention of returning! It is impossible; she must mean to come back again; she is playing a foolish trick, in hopes of frightening him into compliance with that which she has so often asked, and he refused. But neither in bed nor sitting-room can Eric Keir discover the least indication that Myra's absence is to be a temporary one; nor a written line of threatening or farewell. On the contrary, she has taken all the simplest articles of her attire with her, and left behind, strewed on the floor in proud neglect, the richer things with which he has provided her. Weary and utterly at a loss to account for this freak on the part of one who has appeared so entirely devoted to himself, Eric returns to the lower room, and summons old Margaret to his side.

"I can find nothing to account for Mrs. Hamilton's departure. What do you mean by having your suspizzions?" he inquires, in a determined voice.

"Well, sir—deary me! don't take offense at what I say; but truth is truth, and your lady didn't leave this house alone, as my own eyes is witness to."

His face flushes, and as he puts the next question he shades it with his hand.

"Whom did she leave it with, then? Speak out, woman, and don't keep me waiting here forever!"

"O lor, sir! don't take on so, there's a dear gentleman. I can't rightly tell you, sir, never having seen the young man before; but he was hanging about here the evening you left, and talking with your lady in the field, and he fetched away her box with his own 'ands, yesterday morning, as I watched 'im from the kitchen-winder. A country-looking young man he was, but not ill-favored; and, as they walked off together, I see him kiss the mistress's cheek, that I did, if my tongue was to be cut out, for saying so, the very next minute."

"There—there! that will do; go to your work, and hold your tongue, if such a thing is possible to you. You will remain on here, and, when I have decided what is to be done with these things, I will let you know."

And, so saying, Eric Keir strides from the house again, mounts his horse, and retakes his way to Oxford.

"A young man, country-looking but not ill-favored; some one of the friends from whom he has alienated her, perhaps. Certainly a person of her own class, and to whom she returns in preference to himself.

"How could he have ever been such a fool as to suppose that a woman taken from her station in life, accustomed to, and probably flattered by, the attentions of clodhoppers and tradesmen, could appreciate the niceties of such a sacred thing as honor, or the affection of an elevated and intellectual mind?"

So he says, in his first frenzy of wrath and jealousy and shame, but so does he not entirely believe. The old woman's gossip has left a miserable doubt to rankle in his heart; but has not accomplished the death of his trust in the girl who has left him, and whom, though he has ceased love, he feels bound to search after, and succor and protect. He makes all the investigations that are possible without betraying his secret to the world; but private inquiries and carefully-worded newspaper advertisements prove alike futile, and from the day on which she fled from Fretterley the fate of Myra to Eric Keir is wrapped in dark uncertainty,

CHAPTER II.

THIS abrupt and mysterious termination to a love-dream which he had once believed to be the key-stone of his life has a great effect upon the bodily and mental health of Eric Keir. He becomes morose, absorbed, and melancholy; re-

linquishes the pursuits of which he had been most fond, and avoids the society of his friends. His altered behavior excites much college-talk, and all his former companions, save one, are full of conjecture as to the cause of it. That one is Saville Moxon, who alone believes he knows the reason of the change. He thinks that Eric Keir (notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary) has really been smitten, or at least on the high-road to being smitten, by the charms of one or the other of the pretty daughters of the Vicar of Fretterley; has given up the pursuit of the expostulation of his friend, and is suffering, by a very natural reaction, for his voluntary sacrifice. Saville Moxon knows as much about it as any of the others.

After a month of silence and suspense, during which, strange to say, Eric Keir, in all his misery, finds a sense of relief at not being obliged to pay those secret visits to Fretterley, old Margaret is dismissed, the cottage given up, and its contents scattered by the hammer, but the memory of the days he has spent there does not pass so easily from the young man's mind. Rather it takes root and poisons his existence, like an unextracted barb, so that he looks five years older in as many months, and loses all the effervescence and hilarity of youth.

His brother and his friends persuade him, after all, to join their walking-tour in Brittany, and, when it is accomplished, Lord Muiraven and the Moxons return to England by themselves, having left Eric on the Continent.

"The boy has grown too fast and studied too hard," says Lord Norham, in answer to the inquiries of anxious relatives; "and a little relaxation will do him all the good in the world. I expect great things of Eric—great things—but I cannot permit his health to be sacrificed to my ambition." In consequence of which, the Honorable Eric Hamilton Keir is lost to his mother-country for two eventful years. Could he but have guessed how eventful!

At the expiration of that period we meet him again at a private ball in London.

It is the height of the season; the weather is warm, the room crowded, and every one not occupied in dancing attempts to find a refuge on the landing, or the stairs.

At the sides of the open door lean two young men, gazing into the ballroom, and passing their remarks on those they see there.

"Who is the girl that Keir's dancing with?"

"Keir! Where is he?"

"Coming down the left-hand side; the girl in black and gold."

"Why, Miss St. John, of course!"

"And why of course? Who may Miss St. John be?"

"My dear Orme, if you're so lamentably ignorant, pray speak a little lower. Not to know Miss St. John argues yourself unknown."

"Indeed! Well, she's uncommonly handsome. I should have no objection to number her among my acquaintances."

"I should think not; she's the belle of the season, and only daughter of old St. John the banker, deceased."

"Got any money?"

"Lots, I believe—anyway, her face is a fortune in itself. It ought to command a coroner, as faces go nowadays."

"And Keir, I suppose, is first in the field? Well! I am of a self-sacrificing disposition, and wish him good luck."

"He would not thank you for it: he is sublimely indifferent to every thing of the sort."

"It does not look like it: I have seen them dancing together several times this evening."

"Ah! that they always do; and I believe he is a constant visitor at the house. But if the St. John cherishes any fond hopes in consequence, I should advise her to relinquish them. Keir is not a marrying man."

"It's early in the day to arrive at that conclusion."

"My dear fellow! he makes no secret of his opinions—nor of his flirtations, for the matter of that. If he has one affair on hand, he has a dozen, and, should Miss St. John discard him to-morrow morning, he would replace her in the afternoon."

"You are not giving your friend a very enviable character," remarks Mr. Orme, who is a young man of a moral and sententious turn of mind, and takes every thing *au grand sérieux*.

"Can't possibly give him what he hasn't got," replies the other, laughing; "and he would be the first to tell you so. Keir's an excellent fellow with men, and a general favorite; but he is certainly heartless where women are concerned, or callous. I hardly know which to call it. He has been terribly spoiled, you see, both at home and abroad; he will view life and its responsibilities with clearer eyes ten years hence."

There is a general crush round the door-way, and the conversation of the young men has been overheard by many, but to one listener only has it proved of engrossing interest. That one is

Mrs. St. John, the widowed mother of the girl so freely spoken of.

Wedged in upon the landing, and forced to listen to the discussion against her will, she has drunk in with burning cheeks the truths so likely to affect her daughter's happiness; and, as soon as she finds it practicable, she creeps to a corner of the ballroom whence she can watch the conduct of Irene and Mr. Keir, and feverishly determine what course of action she is bound, in her capacity of guardian, to pursue respecting them.

Meanwhile the galop has ended, and Eric Keir leads his partner into an adjoining conservatory, which has been kept dim and cool, and provided with couches for the rest and refreshment of the dancers.

There, while Irene St. John, flushed and excited, throws herself upon a sofa, he leans against the back of a chair opposite and steadfastly regards her.

"I am afraid I have quite tired you, Miss St. John; that last galop was a very long one."

Eric Keir is greatly altered since the days when he paid those secret visits to Fretterley. Travel and time, and something more powerful than either, have traced lines across his forehead and made his face sharper than it should be at four-and-twenty. But he is very handsome—handsome with the hereditary beauty of the family; the large, sleepy, violet eyes and dark hair, and well-cut, noble features which the Norhams have possessed for centuries—of which the present Lord Norham is so proud; and the more so because they seem, in this instance, to have skipped over the heir to bestow themselves upon his younger brother.

And this handsome head is not set, as is too often the case, on an indifferent figure, but is carried upright and stately, as such a noble head should be. At least so thinks Irene St. John, if no other.

"I am not so tired of dancing, as of attempting to dance," she says, in answer to his remark. How cool and refreshing this little nook seems, after the crush and heat of the ballroom! Rest and quiet are worth all the glare and tumult of society, if one could believe it."

"That is just what I was going to observe; you have taken the sentence out of my mouth," says Eric Keir. "The pleasure of a few words exchanged with you alone, outweighs all the attractions of an evening's dancing."

"I did not expect to hear *you* say so," murmurs Miss St. John, with downcast eyes.

"Why not? Is the sentiment too high to come from a worldling's lips?"

"It is most likely to proceed from the lips of those who have encountered something to disgust them with the world. I hoped that your life had been all brightness, Mr. Keir."

"It is too good of you even to have hoped. But why should I be exempt from that of which, by your own argument, you must have had experience?"

"Ah! women are more liable to suffering, or they feel it more acutely—don't you think so? My poor father! it seems so short a time since he was here. Did I follow my own inclinations, I should not be mixing with the world, even now; and I often wish I had been firmer in standing out against the wishes of others."

"Don't say that," is the low-voiced rejoinder; "had you refused to enter society, we might not have met! and I was just beginning to be presumptuous enough to hope that our friendship possessed some interest for you."

"And so it does, Mr. Keir; pray don't think otherwise," with a hot, bright blush; "a few words of common-sense are the only things which make such a scene tolerable to me."

"Or to myself," he answers, as he takes a seat beside her; "the quickness with which we think and feel together, Miss St. John; the sympathy, in fact, which appears to animate us, is a source of unceasing gratification to me."

She does not answer him; but the strains of the "Blue Danube" waltz come floating in from the adjacent ballroom, and mingle with his words.

"I suppose the world considers me a happy man," he continues, presently. "I dare say that even my own people think the same, and will continue to do so to the end—what then? it makes no difference to me."

How quickly a woman's sympathy catches light when it is appealed to on behalf of a man's suffering! She seems to think it so much harder that the rougher sex should encounter trouble than her patient self! Irene's eyes are full of tender, silent questioning.

"And you are not, then, happy?" they inquire.

"Can you ask the question?" his reply.

"You must have guessed my secret," his tongue says; "you are not an ordinary woman; you look below the surface."

"I confess that I have sometimes thought—"

"Of course you have," he interrupts her, eagerly. "I have had trouble enough, Góð knows, and it will end only with my life."

"O Mr. Keir! you are too young to say that."

"I am too old to think otherwise," he rejoins, moodily; "your trouble was not of your own seeking, Miss St. John—mine is; that makes all the difference."

"It makes it harder to forget, perhaps," she answers, "but not impossible. And you have so much to make life pleasant to you—so many friends—"

"Friends! what do I care for them, excepting one? O Miss St. John! if you will not think me too bold in saying so, it is only since I met you that I have felt as if I really had a friend. The few months we have known each other seem like years in retrospect, though they have flown like days in making your acquaintance."

"We have seen so much of one another in the time," she murmurs, softly.

"Yes! and learned more. Sometimes I can scarcely believe but that I have known you all my life. To feel you really were my friend would be to experience the greatest pleasure that this world still holds for me."

"Why should you not feel so?"

The sweet strains of the "Blue Danube" are being repeated again and again, but above the loudest of them she hears the fluttering of her own heart as she puts the question.

"May I?" laying his hand upon the one which lies upon her lap: "is it possible that you can take sufficient interest in such an insignificant person as myself as to promise to befriend him? Do you know all that is implicated in that promise—the long account of follies and shortcomings you will have to listen to, the many occasions on which you will be asked for counsel or advice, the numerous times that you will feel utterly tired of or impatient with me?"

"I am not afraid of that, Mr. Keir."

"Why do you call me Mr. Keir? Can we be real friends while we address each other so formally? Surely you are above all such prudery, or I am much mistaken in your character."

"I am not a prude, or I think so; yet the name by which I call you can make no difference in my friendship."

"But cannot you guess that I am longing to have the right to speak to you familiarly? Irene—it fits you perfectly. I never knew an Irene in my life before, yet I could not fancy you by any other name, for I learned to love its sound long before I had the hardihood to hope that its possessor would admit me to her intimacy. I shall be very jealous of our friendship, Irene."

"But why should you be jealous?" she de-

mands, in a low voice. Her speaking eyes are cast upon the ground. He can only see the long, dark lashes that lie upon her cheeks, and the golden glory of her head, while the sweet, soft notes of the music still steal in to fill up the broken pauses of the conversation.

"Because it is a sacred bond between us which no third person must intrude upon; and if it is a secret, so much the better; it will be so sweet to feel that we have any thing in common. But if you admit another to your friendship, Irene—if I hear any man *daring* to call you by your Christian name, if I see that you have other confidants whom you trust as much or more than myself, I—I"—waxing fierce over the supposition—"I don't know what I *should* do!"

His violence amuses her.

"You need not be afraid—indeed, you need not; no one of my acquaintance would presume to act in the manner you describe."

"Then I am the first, Irene?"

"Quite the first."

"So much the happier for me! But I wonder—I wonder—"

"What?"

"Whether you can be content with such a friendship as I offer you; whether it will be sufficient for your happiness."

"How *exigante* you must consider me!"

"Not so; it is I that deserve the name. Yet if—if, when we have grown necessary to each other—or, rather, when you have grown necessary to me—you should see some one whom you prefer—some one more attractive—more desirable than myself, and desert me in consequence, marry him, in fact, what shall I do?"

She is about indignantly to disclaim the possibility of such a thing, when she is interrupted by the entrance of her mother.

"Irene! what are you thinking of? Captain Clevedon has been looking for you the last half-hour. You know you were engaged to him for this waltz."

The voice of Mrs. St. John, usually so sweet and low, especially when she is speaking to her daughter, has become too highly pitched in her anxiety, and sounds discordant. As she hears it, Irene, blushing all over, rises quickly from her seat.

"Have I been here long, mother? I have been talking, and did not think of it."

"Then you should think of it," retorts Mrs. St. John; "or Mr. Keir"—with a dart of indignation in his direction—"should think of it for you. It is not customary with you to offend your partners, Irene."

"Is Captain Clevedon offended? I am so sorry! Take me to him, mother, and I will make the *amende honorable*."

"I don't think you will have the opportunity. I believe he has gone home, where, indeed, it is high time we went also. Come, Irene!"

"I am ready, mother! Mr. Keir offers you his arm. No!"—as Eric Keir extends the other for her benefit—"take care of mamma, and I will follow; thank you!"

So they pass through the ballroom and descend the staircase, Mrs. St. John in dignified silence, and the young people with some amount of repidation. Yet, as he puts Irene into the carriage, Eric Keir summons up sufficient courage to say—

"Shall I find you at home to-morrow afternoon, Miss St. John?"

She is about to answer timidly that she is not sure, when she is again interrupted by her mother.

"Yes, we shall be at home, and glad to see you, Mr. Keir;" at which unexpected rejoinder, Mr. Keir expresses his grateful thanks, and Irene, grasping Mrs. St. John's hand between both her own, lies back upon the cushions, and indulges in a rose-colored dream of coming happiness.

At an early hour on the following afternoon, Eric Keir's horse stands at the door of Mrs. St. John's house in Brook Street. He enters hurriedly, with a bright look of expectation on his countenance, and, without ceremony, turns into a sitting-room on the ground-floor.

The servant who admitted him had scarcely time to close the hall-door again, before the visitor had vanished from his view, and left him standing there, with the message that was evidently fluttering on his lips, still undelivered. It is Irene's sitting-room, and Eric Keir is disappointed in his hope of finding her in it—alone.

"What will you say to me for so abrupt an entrance?" he exclaims, as she rises to welcome him. "Does it come within the privileges of a friend to introduce himself, or must I wait, like any other man, until your flunky formally announces me? O Irene! I have scarcely slept a wink all night."

"What a lamentable confession!" she answers, gayly. "If this is the effects of too much dancing, I must begin to assert my prerogative as chief counselor, and order you to be more discreet in future."

"Of too much *dancing*!" indignantly; "you

know, without my telling you, if my restlessness was due to that. O Irene! I feel so happy!"

"And last night you felt so miserable."

A cloud passes over the brightness of his face.

"I did. I felt wretched in looking back upon my past life: the remembrance of the trouble it has caused me, and the follies to which it has been witness, unnerves me. And my happiness to-day (if it can be called such), my light-heartedness, rather, proceeds only from the knowledge that you promised to help me to forget it."

She has reseated herself by this time, and he takes a chair beside her.

"As far as it lies in my power," she answers; "but is it always necessary to *forget* in order to be happy?"

"In my case it is so: there is nothing left for me but forgetfulness—and your affection."

"Was it a *very* great trouble, then?" she says, softly.

"So great, that it has destroyed all the pleasure of my youth, and threatens to do the same by the comfort of my age."

"And a woman was the cause of it, I suppose."

"Is not a woman at the bottom of all our troubles? Women are the ulterior causes of all pain and pleasure in this world—at least, for us. You have not lived nineteen years in it without discovering that, Irene?"

"No!"

"And so I look to a woman to cure me of the wound that a woman's hand inflicted; to restore to me, as far as possible, through the treasure of her friendship and her sympathy, the happiness which, except for my own mad folly, I might have aspired to—"

"If you please, sir, Mrs. St. John is in the library, and will be glad to speak to you as soon as you can make it convenient to see her."

"Say I will come at once."

On the entrance of the servant they have sprung apart as guiltily as though they had been lovers, instead of only friends, and, as he disappears again, they look at one another consciously and laugh.

"What a mysterious message!" exclaims Irene; "is this leap-year? Can mamma have any designs on you?"

"In the shape of commissions—what ladies have not? I am a perfect martyr to the cause. Whether owing to the respectability of my connections, or myself, I cannot say; but the number of notes I am asked to deliver, and Berlin wools to match, is perfectly incredible. But is

this dear interview ended? Shall I not find you here on my return?"

"Perhaps you may; but perhaps, also, my mother will be with you. So you had better consider it at an end, lest you should be disappointed."

"If it is at an end, you must bid me farewell."

"Farewell," she echoes, smilingly, as she extends her hand.

"Is that the best way you know how to do it?" he demands, as he retains her hand between his own. "What a thorough English-woman you are, Irene; you would not relinquish one of the cold forms of society, even where your feelings are most interested. Custom first, and friendship afterward. Ah, you do not regard our compact in the sacred light that I do!"

He has drawn her closer to him as he speaks, and their faces are nearly on a level.

"O Eric! how little you know me!"

The liquid eyes upraised to his, the parted lips, the trembling hand—which he still holds—appeal to him until he loses sight of self and the bitter consequences of indulgence, and remembers only that they are man and woman, and they stand alone.

"Darling!" he whispers, as he bends down and kisses her.

By the crimson flush that mounts to her forehead, and the abrupt manner in which she disengages herself from him and turns away, so that he cannot see her face, he fears that he has seriously offended her.

"Forgive me! I know that it was wrong, but I could not help it. Irene, say that you are not angry!"

"Oh, pray go to mamma! she will think it so strange—she has been waiting for you all this time."

"I cannot go until you have said that you forgive me."

"I do forgive you then; but—but—it must never be again."

"Is that your *heart* speaking to mine, Irene? Well, I will not press you for an answer now; but grant me one favor—one token that you are not really angry with me: be here when I return."

And with these words he leaves her.

He finds Mrs. St. John restlessly pacing up and down the library, and appearing even more nervous than usual.

She is a frail, timid-looking woman, the very opposite of her high-spirited daughter; and, as

she turns at his approach, her very lips are trembling.

"How do you do, Mrs. St. John? I believe you wish to speak to me. A commission, of course. Well, I am quite at your service, from barley-sugar up to bank-notes. What a lovely morning we have had! I hope you are not much fatigued after last night's dissipation."

His frank and unrestrained address makes the task which she has set herself more difficult; but she takes a chair, and waves him to another, while she is vainly trying to find words in which to open the conversation naturally.

"I am quite well, thank you, Mr. Keir. Pray be seated. Yes, I asked to speak to you; it is rather a delicate business, and, had I not great faith in you, it would be a very painful one; but—are you sure that you are comfortable?"

"Quite so, thank you, Mrs. St. John," he answers, puzzled to imagine what possible connection his present comfort can have with the subject she is about to introduce.

"I am glad of it. It is much more satisfactory to enter on a discussion when both parties are perfectly at their ease. I asked to see you, Mr. Keir, because—I suppose you know that I am the sole guardian of my daughter?"

"I believe I have heard Miss St. John mention the fact."

"Yes, her poor father wished it, and, though I am very unfit for such a position, I knew he must be the best judge; and so—but, of course, it leaves me without counselors. Irene has no near relation but myself, and I have no male friends in England to whom I can apply for advice in any matters of difficulty."

"If I can be of any use," he interrupts, eagerly, "or could procure you the information you require, Mrs. St. John, you must know that it would give me the greatest pleasure to do so."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Keir—yes, you can help me—I am coming to that presently. But being, as I said before, the sole guardian of Irene's interests, you must perceive that it is my duty to be very careful of her—that I cannot be too careful—"

"Who could doubt it?" he answers, warmly.

"And you are very often in her company; you have been here a great deal lately, Mr. Keir—you are at our house almost every day."

"I beg your pardon."

"I say that you are very intimate with Irene—rather too intimate, I think; though, of course, we have always been pleased to see you; but the world *will* talk, and young people's

names soon get connected; and so I consider it my duty to ascertain"—here Mrs. St. John coughs twice, and swallows some fearful obstacle in her throat—"to ask you, in short, *what are your intentions respecting her?*"

The murder is out, and poor Mrs. St. John sinks back in her chair, pale and exhausted, as though her own fate depended on his answer.

"Intentions! my intentions!" cries Eric Keir, starting from his seat.

The tone of surprise and incredulity in which he utters the words seems to put new courage into his listener; it arouses her maternal fears, and with her fears her indignation, and she answers, quickly:

"You cannot pretend to misunderstand my meaning, Mr. Keir; young as you are, you are too much a man of the world for that, and must know that if you are so constantly seen in the company of a young lady, people will begin to inquire if you are engaged to be married to her—or not."

"I—I—know that I have trespassed very much upon your hospitality," he commences, stammering, "and taken the greatest pleasure in coming here, but I have never addressed Miss St. John except in the character of a friend, and supposed that you entirely understood the footing on which I visited her."

"And you mean to tell me," exclaims the poor mother, who is shaking from head to foot with nervous excitement—"you intend me to understand, Mr. Keir, that all your attentions have meant nothing, and that my daughter is no more to you than any other girl?"

The whole truth flashes on him now; he sees the fraud of which he has been guilty, both to his own heart and to hers; he *knows* that he loves Irene St. John as his soul; and yet he is forced to stammer on:

"I never said that, Mrs. St. John. I hold your daughter too highly—much too highly, in my admiration and—esteem, and value her friendship too much, to be guilty of so false a sentiment. But, as to marriage: deeply as I may—as I *do* regret the necessity for saying so, I must tell you that it is not in my power, at present, to marry any one!"

"Not in your power! what do you mean?"

"I mean that, being but a younger son, I am not, unfortunately, in a position to take such a responsibility upon myself so early. If you knew my circumstances, Mrs. St. John, you would be the first person to refuse your daughter's hand to me."

"What! as the younger son of the Earl of Norham? Mr. Keir, you are having recourse to a miserable subterfuge; you have been trifling with my child—you would not have dared to make so paltry an excuse to Irene's father."

"O Mrs. St. John! you do me wrong. I should have spoken just the same (I could have spoken in no other way) even to your husband. Yet had I pleaded a disinclination for marriage, you would have been no better pleased."

"I have been foolish," exclaims Mrs. St. John, trying hard to keep back the tears which she would consider it beneath her dignity to shed; "I have been blind to allow your intimacy to go on so long—but I could not believe you would act so unworthy a part. My poor Irene!"

"Good God! Mrs. St. John"—with terrible emphasis—"you do not mean to tell me that Irene shares your suspicions—that she has learned to regard me with any feeling warmer than the friendship we have pledged each other?"

"What right have you to ask, sir? What right have you to call her by her Christian name? I have not been accustomed to hear my daughter spoken of so familiarly by the gentlemen of her acquaintance."

"O Mrs. St. John! don't be hard upon me. Believe me when I say that in seeking the friendship of Miss St. John I had no intention beyond that of deriving great pleasure and profit from our intercourse. I never dreamed that my actions would be misconstrued either by the world or yourself. I have never breathed a word to her concerning love or marriage—I *could* not have done it, knowing how impossible it is for me to redeem such a pledge, at present."

"I hear your words, Mr. Keir, but I do not understand them. I only feel that you have been acting a very thoughtless, if not a dishonorable part, and that it becomes my duty to see an immediate stop put to it. And, therefore, from the moment you quit this room, you must consider that our intimacy is at an end."

At this intimation Eric Keir becomes visibly agitated.

"At an end! Do you mean to say that I am to see her no more—that my visits here are to cease once and forever?"

"Of course they are! Would you go on deceiving my poor girl, only to break her heart at the last?" cries Mrs. St. John, thrown off her guard by the vehemence of his manner. "You little guess my love for her, Mr. Keir, if you think I would permit the happiness of her life to be wrecked in this manner."

The timid, shrinking woman, who hardly speaks above a whisper in society, becomes quite grand and tragic in defense of her child. She reminds one of a dove-eyed, innocent ewe, advancing to the front of the flock to shake its hornless head and stamp its impotent feet because some passing stranger has dared to cast a glance in the direction of its lamb.

"Then she loves me, and you know it," exclaims the young man, his eyes roused from their usual languor by the excitement of the suspicion; "Mrs. St. John, tell me the truth; does Irene love me?"

"Do you intend to marry her?" demands the mother, fixedly. His eyes droop; silence is his only answer.

"O Mr. Keir! I could hardly have believed it of you."

"I ought not to have put the question. I have only tortured you and myself. But if you have any pity left for me, try to pity the necessity which forbids my answering you."

"I think that our interview should end here, Mr. Keir. No good can be gained by my detaining you longer, and a further discussion of this very painful subject is only likely to lead to further estrangement. I must beg you, therefore, to leave this house, and without seeing my daughter again."

"But who then will tell her of the proposed alteration in our intercourse?"

"I take that upon myself, and you may rest assured that Irene will be quite satisfied to abide by my decision. Meanwhile, Mr. Keir, if you have any gentlemanly feeling left, you will quit London, or take means to prevent our meeting you again."

"Is it to be a total separation, then, between us? Must I have *nothing*, because I cannot take all?"

"I have already given you my opinion. Do not compel me to repeat it in stronger terms."

Her voice and manner have become so cold that they arouse his pride.

"There is nothing, then, left for me to do but to bow to your decision. Mrs. St. John, I wish you a very good-morning."

He is going then, but his heartstrings pull him backward.

"Oh! make the best of it to her, for God's sake! Tell her that—that— But no! there is nothing to tell her; I have no excuse—I can only go!"

He suits the action to the word as he speaks, and she follows him into the hall, and sees him

safely out of the house before she turns the door-handle of her daughter's room.

Irene is sitting in an attitude of expectation, her hands idly folded on her lap, and fitful blushes chasing each other over her face as she listens to the footsteps in the hall. When her mother enters, she starts up suddenly, and then sits down again, as though she scarcely knew what she was doing.

"Is he gone?" she says, in a tone of disappointment, as Mrs. St. John advances to take her tenderly in her arms.

"And who may *he* be?" inquires the mother, with a ghastly attempt at playfulness, not knowing how to broach the intelligence she bears.

"Mr. Keir—Eric!—has he not been speaking to you? 'O mother!' hiding her face with a sudden burst of shame on Mrs. St. John's bosom; "I am not quite sure, but I think—I *think* he loves me!"

Mrs. St. John does not know what to answer. For a minute she holds her daughter in her arms and says nothing. Then Irene feels the trembling of her mother's figure, and looks up alarmed.

"Mother! is there any thing the matter? Are you not well?"

"There is nothing the matter, my darling—at least, not much. But you were speaking of Mr. Keir—he is gone!"

"Gone—why?"

"Because he is not a gentleman, Irene."

"Mother!"

"He is not worthy of you, child; he has been playing with your feelings, amusing himself at your expense. O Irene, my darling, you are so brave, so good. You will bear this like a woman, and despise him as he deserves."

"Bear this! bear *what*?" says the girl, standing suddenly upright; "I do not comprehend you, mother—I do not know what you are talking of."

"I am talking of Mr. Keir, Irene; I am telling you that he is utterly unworthy of another thought from you—that he has dangled about you until the world has connected your names together, and that he has no intentions concerning you; he has just told me so."

"No intentions!" repeats her daughter, vacantly; "no intentions!"

"He has no intention of proposing to you, Irene—of marrying you; he has meant nothing by it all."

"Nothing!" repeats Irene, in the same dreamy way.

The lace-shrouded windows of the room are open, and the faint, rich odor from the boxes of stockings and mignonette that adorn its sills floats into the chamber, bringing with it a memory of hot-house plants, while band music from an adjoining square commences to make itself indistinctly heard.

"Yes, *nothing*," continues Mrs. St. John, rendered bolder by her daughter's passiveness and her own indignation. "I have just put the question to him—it was my duty to do so, seeing that marked attention he has paid you lately, and—I couldn't have believed it of Mr. Keir; I thought so much more highly of him—he told me to my face that he had never even thought of you as any thing but a friend. A friend, indeed! Oh, my dearest girl! that any man should dare to speak of you in such terms of indifference—it will break my heart!" and Mrs. St. John attempts to cast herself into her daughter's arms again. But Irene puts her from her—repulses her—almost roughly."

"Mother! how *dared* you do it?"

The words are such as she has never presumed to use to her mother before; the tone even is not her own. Mrs. St. John looks up frightedly.

"Irene!"

"How dared you subject me to such an insult—expose me in so cruel a manner; make me despicable to myself?"

"My child, what *do* you mean?"

"Cannot a man be friendly and agreeable without being called upon to undergo so humiliating an examination? Is a girl never to speak to one of the other sex without being suspected of a desire to marry him? Is there to be no friendship, no cordiality, no confidence in this world, but the parties are immediately required to bind themselves down to a union which would be repugnant to both? It is this style of thing which makes me hate society and all its shams—which will go far now to make me hate myself!"

"Irene! my dear!" cries Mrs. St. John, trembling all over; "you do not consider that I am your guardian, and this precaution, which appears so unnecessary to you, became a duty for me to take. Would you have had me receive his visits here until he had entangled your affections more inextricably, perhaps, than he has done at present?"

"Who says he has done so—who *dares* to say it?"

The girl's pride is raging and warring within

her. She has been roused from her tender love-dream by a stern reality, she is quivering under the shock even as she speaks, but her first thought is to save her wounded honor.

"My Irene! I thought—I never dreamed but that you liked him—judging from the manner in which you received and spoke of him."

"Liked him! Is liking, love? You judged me too quickly, mother. You have not read down to the depths of my heart."

"You do not love him, then, my darling—this business will not make you miserable? O Irene—speak! you cannot think what suspense costs me."

The girl hesitates for a moment, turns to see the frail figure before her, the thin clasped hands, the anxious, sorrow-laden eyes waiting her verdict, and hesitates no longer.

"I would not marry Eric Keir, mother, tomorrow for all this world could give me."

"Oh! thank God! thank God!" cries Mrs. St. John, hysterically, as she sinks upon a sofa. In another moment Irene is kneeling by her side.

"Dearest mother! did I speak unkindly to you? Oh! forgive me! You know how proud I am, and it hurts me, just for the time being. But it is over now. Forget it, dear mother—we will both forget it, and every thing concerning it—and go on as before. Oh! what a wretch I am to have made you weep!"

"I did it for the best, Irene. I only did what I considered my duty—it is a very common thing: it takes place every day. But so long as his conduct does not affect your happiness, there is no harm done."

"There is no harm done," echoes the girl, with parched lips, and eyes that are determined not to cry.

"It will put a stop to his coming here, and I dare say you will miss him at first, Irene. Young people like to be together; but you must remember how detrimental such an intimacy would be to your future prospects; no one else would presume to come forward while a man like Eric Keir is hanging about the house; and I should never forgive myself if I permitted him to amuse himself at the expense of your settlement in life. He ought to know better than to wish such a thing."

"He knows better now," replied her daughter, soothingly.

"Yes—yes! if only he has not wounded you, O Irene!" with a sudden burst of passion most foreign to her disposition, "you are my only hope

→my only consolation. Look me in the face, and tell me that you do not love him."

"Mother, darling, you are ill and agitated; this wretched business has been too much for you. Go and lie down, dear mother, and try to sleep; and when we meet again we will agree to drop the subject altogether."

"We will—we will. Heaven knows I am only anxious that it should be forgotten—only tell me, Irene, that you do not love him."

She clings to her daughter—she will not be gainsaid; her eyes are fixed searchingly upon Irene's—the girl feels like a stag at bay; one moment she longs to pour out the truth—the next death would not tear it from her.

"*I do not love him!*" she answers, with closed teeth.

"Say it again!" exclaims Mrs. St. John, with a feverish burst of joy.

"*I do not love him!* Mother, is not that enough?" she goes on rapidly. "Why should you doubt my word? Go, dear mother; pray go and take the rest you need, and leave me to—myself!"

She pushes Mrs. St. John gently but forcibly from the apartment, and locks the door. Then she staggers to the table, blindly, gropingly, and leans her back against it, grasping the edges with her hands.

"The first lie that I have ever told her," she whispers to herself; "the first lie—and yet, is it a lie? do I love him—or do I hate him?"

She stands for a minute hard as stone, her nervous hands grasping the table, her firm teeth pressed upon her lower lip, as though defying it to quiver, while all that Eric Keir has ever said to her comes rushing back upon her mind.

The scent of the stocks and mignonette is wafted past her with every breath that stirs the curtains: the band in the adjacent square has altered its position; it draws nearer—changes its air—the notes of the "Blue Danube" waltz come floating through the open window. It is the last memory—all her determination fades before it.

"God help me!" she cries, as she sinks, sobbing, on the sofa.

Mrs. St. John is bound to believe what her daughter tells her; but she is not satisfied about her daughter's health. The season goes on—Irene does not fail to fulfill one engagement—she dresses and dances and talks gayly as before, and yet there is a something—undistinguishable, perhaps, except to the eye of affection—that makes her unlike her former self.

She is harder than she used to be—more cynical—less open to belief in truth and virtue.

Added to which, her appetite is variable, and she drinks wine feverishly—almost eagerly—and at odd intervals of time. Mrs. St. John calls in her favorite doctor, Mr. Pettingall. Mr. Pettingall is not a fashionable physician, he is an old family doctor; he has known Irene since her birth, and is as well acquainted with her constitution as with that of his own wife. He settles the question on the first interview.

"Depression of the vital powers, Mrs. St. John, caused by undue excitement and fatigue. Your young lady has been going a little too fast this season. She has been sitting up too late, and dancing too much; perhaps, also, flirting too much. Nothing the matter with *the heart*, I suppose, eh?"

"Oh, dear no, doctor! at least, Irene assures me it is not the case, though her spirits are certainly very variable."

"No sign at all! A life of dissipation is sure to make the spirits variable. Take her away, and she'll be well in a month."

"Away, doctor! what, before the season is over?"

"Certainly; unless you wish her health to be over with the season. And a change will do you no harm either, Mrs. St. John. Why, you want twice as much doctoring as your daughter."

"That's what I tell mamma," exclaims Irene, who has entered during the last sentence; "but she will not believe me. Let us join cause against her, Mr. Pettingall, and get her out of this hateful London."

"Why, my dear! would you really like to go?" says Mrs. St. John.

"I would like to go anywhere, to see you strong again, mother."

"That's right! a good daughter is the best medicine a mother can have. You hear what Miss St. John says, madam. She will go *anywhere* to do you good—and herself too!"

"She has always been my comfort!" murmurs Mrs. St. John.

"And I, as your medical adviser, recommend a trip abroad."

"Abroad!"

"Certainly. Three or four months' run in the Austrian Tyrol, for instance—or^d the Pyrenees. Please yourselves, however, and you'll please me—only get out of London. It is quite as necessary for your health, Mrs. St. John, as for your daughter's."

"Mother! we will go at once. We will not

delay a day longer than is necessary. Thank you, Mr. Pettingall, for speaking out your mind so frankly. I have been blind not to see before that my mother wanted change."

From that moment Irene comes out of herself, and takes all necessary cares and arrangements on her own hands. She forgets her trouble—her haunting regret; her only wish is to see her mother's health restored.

"I have been selfish," she thinks, as she moves about from room to room, giving the final orders for their departure. "I have been so anxious to forget my own misery that I have dragged my poor mother out much more than is good for her—and this is the end of it. Oh! if I should have really upset her health—if this change should even prove too late! Good God! how shall I ever forgive myself—or him!"

She has not seen *him* since the interview he had with Mrs. St. John: she has gone out each evening feverishly expectant of his presence; longing, yet dreading, to encounter him: and she has dragged out the weary time with a heart of lead in her bosom, because he has never come—being, in point of fact, hundreds of miles away at his father's seat in Scotland, though no one tells her so.

"Afraid to meet me!" she has thought bitterly. "Yes, fear was about the last ingredient wanting in his cup of dishonor. How could I ever have been so mad as to think he loved me?"

The first place they try for change of air is Rochefort, in the Ardennes.

A lovely fertile valley, surrounded by heather-covered hills, the slopes of which are alive with wild blossoms, and the feet watered by clear streams, repose and peace seem to be the natural characteristics, the inevitable consequences, of a life in Rochefort.

But does peace come to the broken spirit more readily in quiet than in bustle? I doubt it.

What do we fly from, if not from memory? and can it come so closely to us in a crowd, where alien faces push between us and the semblance of the face we loved, and alien voices, clamoring for money or for interest, drown the sweet, false tones that poisoned our existence, as when we walk alone and weary on the footpath of life, too weary, it may be, even to have strength to push aside that which we dread to look on?

Irene finds it so. In London, amid the whirl and turmoil of the season, she thought that she was strong enough to bear all things, even the knowledge—the bitterest knowledge to a woman

—that she had given Eric Keir love in exchange for liking—fine gold for dross that tarnished at the first touch.

But here, in peaceful, slumbering Rochefort, she is fain to confess herself defeated. Here, where she can wander for miles without meeting a soul to break her solitude, his memory walks beside her like a haunting ghost from which she prays to be delivered.

Not mockingly nor coldly, not with a gesture or a look that can awake her pride, but as her heart remembers him—as it had hoped he *would be*, until her over-burdened spirit can bear the strain no longer, and sinks down upon the grass, dappled with flowers and murmuring with insects, and prays God she may die.

Only to rise, when her moan is over, burning with indignation against herself and him; hating herself, perhaps, even more than him, for having sunk so low as to regret him. Mrs. St. John knows nothing of all this; she is too feeble to walk beyond a short distance, and Irene never appears before her except in good spirits and with a beaming countenance.

The mother is deceived—she feels her own health is failing, but she believes in the restoration of her child. Irene reads her belief, and is satisfied.

Nevertheless, as soon as the weather will permit them, she persuades Mrs. St. John to move on to Brussels. She knows that, in order to keep up her *role*, she must be moving; one more month of Rochefort and the ghost of Eric Keir, and she should break down entirely.

Brussels is full and gay; the September *fêtes* are going on, and the town is crowded. Mrs. St. John and her daughter take up their abode at one of the principal hotels, and prepare to enjoy life to the uttermost.

Enjoy life to the uttermost! I wonder which of us ever believes that he or she has reached the "uttermost"—or, having reached it, how long we believe it to be such?

The "uttermost," if ever we attain it (how few do!) usually makes us so giddy, we are not aware, until we touch the bottom of the ladder again, how quickly we have descended.

Irene's uttermost at this juncture consists of running about to see all there is to be seen; and that is very soon brought to a close by Mrs. St. John's increasing weakness. She longs to accompany her daughter, but she cannot accomplish it, and the girl's solitary rambles through picture-galleries and museums begin only too soon to assume the same character as her walks

in Rochefort. She comes to understand that the companionship she needs is something more than is to be found in a strange crowd: it must be an active conversational presence—something that shall barter bright thoughts for her dull ones, and force her to exert her intellectual powers. A real wholesome want seldom arises in this world without the possibility of gratifying it. In a few days Irene finds the companion ready to hand.

She returns one afternoon to the hotel, after having permitted her feverish imagination to hold converse for hours with the fantastic horrors of Wiertz, and disturbs her mother in the midst of a conversation with a stranger—a gentleman of about fifty, or perhaps a few years older—whom Irene has never seen before.

She stands at the door for a moment irresolute, uncertain whether to enter or retreat; but Mrs. St. John catches sight of her.

"Irene, my darling!" she exclaims. "I am so glad you are come home! Only think: this gentleman is your nearest relation on your dear father's side—his cousin, Colonel Mordaunt; isn't it wonderful that we should have met each other here?"

CHAPTER III.

COLONEL MORDAUNT is the best specimen of a fine old English gentleman that Irene has ever come across. She sees that at the first glance. Of middle height, with a well-knit figure, florid complexion, good features, and hair with the lustre of gray satin on it, he presents all the outward qualifications that go to make up the picture of a man of birth and breeding, and she takes a fancy to her new relative at once. Mrs. St. John, too, who is in an unusual state of flush and flutter, seems to have been quite overcome by the unexpected encounter.

"Is it not strange," she keeps on repeating, "that we should have met here—in Brussels—after so many years?—Irene, my dear! you will welcome Colonel Mordaunt, I am sure, if only for your poor father's sake."

The girl comes forward with her hand extended, and the stranger, with old-fashioned politeness, and dead-and-gone chivalry, raises it respectfully to his lips.

"Poor Tom!" he murmurs as he does so; "poor Tom! I can trace a slight likeness to him as he was, even in your blooming face, my fair young cousin."

"She was always thought to have a look of him," sighs the mother, "but I scarcely imagined it was so apparent.—O Irene! you cannot think what a comfort it is for me to have stumbled on your cousin in this way—so weak and good-for-nothing as I am. You will never need to stay at home now for want of an escort—Colonel Mordaunt says he will be charmed to take you anywhere."

"With your own kind permission," interposes Colonel Mordaunt.

"You are very good," replies Irene. "Are you, then, staying in Brussels?"

"I am here for a few days, on my way back to England. I have been spending the summer at the Baths."

"Not remedially, I trust?" says Mrs. St. John, with a sudden, anxious glance of interest at the robust-looking man who stands before her.

"Well, I cannot quite say no: though precautionary would be the better word. You remember our family tendency to gout, Mrs. St. John? Poor Tom used to have a twinge of it occasionally, and it was the complaint that carried off my grandfather. I have had one or two warnings during the last four years, and so I took advantage of the hot weather to put myself to rights for the season."

"The season!" echoes Mrs. St. John, to whom there is no season but one.

"The hunting-season!" It sounds very dreadful, does it not? but I fear there is no other season that conveys any interest to my ears. I am master of the hounds down in my part of Leicestershire, and spend my days between the stables and the kennel. It is a fine sport, Mrs. St. John, and a man must have something to do."

"Then, I suppose you are very anxious to get home again," remarks Irene.

"I *was* anxious to do so, I confess, but I have no intention of stirring now, so long as I can be of any use to you or to your mother."

"How kind!" murmurs Mrs. St. John; and her daughter adds, "I am afraid you will find shopping and sight-seeing very tame work for which to exchange the pleasures of the field, Colonel Mordaunt."

"Without their motive, perhaps—yes. *With* their motive, they can admit of no rivalry in my eyes!"

"What an extremely polite old gentleman!" exclaims Irene, as soon as the colonel has disappeared. However did you find him out, mother?"

"By the simplest accident in the world. He opened the door of my sitting-room in mistake for his own. I never was so surprised in my life. I nearly screamed!"

"Then you have met him before?"

"Yes—oh yes!—of course—many years ago."

"But why have I never seen him, then? He says he lives in Leicestershire: why did he never come to my father's house?"

Mrs. St. John looks uneasy. She shifts about in her chair, and rolls up her satin cap-strings till they are ruined, and talks rapidly with a faint, guilty color coming and going in her faded cheeks.

"Well, to tell you the truth, dear, your father and Colonel Mordaunt, although cousins, were not the best of friends; that is to say, they once had a quarrel about something, and after that they ceased to visit each other."

"It must have been a serious quarrel to cause such a complete separation. Are you sure that Colonel Mordaunt was not the one in the wrong, mother? Would my father have liked us to become intimate with him again?"

Irene has a great reverence for the memory of her father; she is always questioning what he would or would not have wished them to do, sometimes to the ruffling of her mother's placid temper.

"Dear me, Irene! I should think you might trust me to judge of such matters! Do you think I would have introduced him to you otherwise? The disagreement had nothing to do with Colonel Mordaunt's conduct. He behaved extremely well throughout the whole affair. Only your father would not choose that the intimacy should be renewed."

"And yet he was his nearest relative?"

"Quite the nearest. You know what a small family ours is—ridiculously small, in fact. Your great-grandfather was a Baddenall, and his two daughters, co-heiresses, became respectively Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. St. John; and each left an only son—your father and this cousin. You see how absurdly it makes the family dwindle! There are the females, of course, but they don't count—your own married aunts, you know; but Colonel Mordaunt's sister is still single. So you see, if you were to have any family at all on your father's side, it would be quite wrong not to make friends with his man, now that we have so happily fallen in with him again. And, indeed, the quarrel was about nothing that need concern you, Irene; nothing at all."

"I will take your word for it, mother. Colonel Mordaunt does not look like a man who

would do a mean or dishonorable thing. And at all events, it is not necessary to quarrel forever."

"It would be very wrong and senseless to do so. You will find him a most interesting companion; full of life and conversation, and with that charming deference in his manner toward women which one so seldom meets with in young men nowadays. They have not improved since the time when I was young."

"I suppose not," says her daughter, with a sigh; and then she laughs, quite unnecessarily, except to hide that sigh. "I really like Colonel Mordaunt, mother, and should be sorry not to be able to take advantage of his overtures of friendship. I think he is one of the handsomest old men I ever saw, and his manners are quite courtier-like."

"You should have seen him when he was young!" replies her mother, with an echo of the sigh that Irene was keen enough to check.

Colonel Mordaunt fully bears out the promise of his introduction. He is with them every day—almost every hour; he is at the beck and call of Irene St. John from morning until night.

If she desires to attend the *Marché aux Fleurs* at five o'clock A. M., to lay in flowers and fruit for the day's consumption, Colonel Mordaunt, faultlessly attired for the occasion, is waiting to attend her footsteps, even though it has cost him half his night's rest in order to be up and dressed in time.

Does she express a wish to visit the *Quinconce*, and push her way among a mob of *Bruxellois* at eight o'clock at night, or to attend opera or *file*, still is the faithful gentleman ready to accompany his young cousin wherever she may choose to go, only anxious to be made use of in any way, so long as the way accords with her own desires. And he is really no less desirable than pertinaacious a chaperon, this Colonel Mordaunt; so highly respectable, as Irene laughingly declares; so thorough a gentleman, as sighs her mother, who has to be content to hear of his gallantry and not to share in it.

Set almost free by the companionship of Colonel Mordaunt, Irene St. John rushes about at this period far more than she desires. She is feverishly anxious to conceal from her mother the real pain that is gnawing at her heart, and poisoning every enjoyment in which she attempts to take a share: and she is madly bent on destroying for herself a remembrance that threatens to quench all that is worth calling life in her. So she makes plans, and Colonel Mordaunt backs

them, until the two are constant companions. In a few days he seems to have no aim or desire except to please her; while she goes blindly on, expressing genuine surprise at each fresh token of his generosity.

One day she buys a huge bouquet, which he has to carry home, and tells him that she dotes on flowers.

The next, a basket of the rarest specimens that Brussels can produce lies on her table, with her cousin's kind regards.

"What exquisite flowers!" exclaims Mrs. St. John. "What a lot he must have paid for them!" remarks her daughter, quite indifferent as to the motive of the offering.

But the next day the offering is repeated.

"More flowers!" says Irene: "what am I to do with them? There are no more vases, and the last are too fresh to throw away."

On the third day, a bouquet more beautiful than either of the others lies before her.

"Oh! this is too bad!" she exclaims, vexedly. "This is sheer waste! I shall speak to Colonel Mordaunt."

What does the speaking result in? An adjuration that no blossoms can be too fresh for one who is fresher herself than any blossom that ever grew in hot-house or in field, etc., etc., etc.

"Stupid old fool!" is Irene's grateful though unexpressed rejoinder. "The idea of taking every thing I say as gospel! I declare I will never tell him I like any thing again."

Yet she is pleased by the man's attention, though she hardly knows why. It soothes the pride which has been so sorely wounded: it makes her better satisfied, not with the world, but with herself. Colonel Mordaunt is not a brilliant conversationalist nor a deep thinker; he is quite content to follow her lead, and to echo her sentiments; but though he gives her no new ideas, he does not disturb the old ones, and she is not in a mood to receive new impressions. He is thoughtful, and generous, and anxious to please. He attends her, in fact, as a servant attends his mistress, a subject his queen: and all women, however broken-hearted they may be, dearly love to keep a retinue of slaves. Irene likes it: she is a woman born to govern, who takes submission to her as a right. It never strikes her that slaves may dare to adore.

Mrs. St. John receives Colonel Mordaunt's attentions to her daughter and herself with very different feelings. She is more than gratified by them—she is flattered. And if she can secure

his undivided attention for an hour or two, she makes the most of it by thanks and confidences. One day Irene is lying down upon her bed with a headache, as she says—with a heartache, as she might more correctly have expressed it—and Mrs. St. John has the colonel to herself. It is a warm afternoon, and the heat and the agitation of the interview have brought a roseate hue into the old lady's face which makes her look quite handsome.

"Colonel Mordaunt—Philip—if I may still call you so—I have a great anxiety upon my mind."

"A great anxiety, my dear Mrs. St. John! if it is any thing in which I can assist you—"

"I was sure you would say so! Yes: I think you can help me, or, at all events, it will be a comfort to consult you on the matter. I have so few friends in whom I can confide."

"Let me know what distresses you at once."

"It is about money. Oh! what a hateful subject it is. I believe money, either the want of it or the excess of it, to be at the bottom of almost every trouble in this world; and, though poor dear Tom left me very comfortably off, yet—"

"You are in want of it? My dear friend, every penny I have is at your disposal!"

"How like you to say so! No; that would not help me. The fact is I have been spending more than my income since my husband's death—intrenching largely on my principal—much more largely than I had any idea of till I received my banker's book a few weeks back."

"But I thought my cousin left you so well off!"

"Not nearly so well as the world imagines. He had indulged in several private speculations of late, and the loss of them preyed on his mind—sometimes I think it hastened his death; I know that at the last he was greatly troubled to think he could not leave us in better circumstances."

"But, my dear Mrs. St. John, excuse my saying so—considering it was the case, how could you be so foolish as to touch your principal, the only thing you and your daughter had to depend on?"

"Ah! it was foolish, wasn't it? but don't reproach me; you can't think how bitterly I am repenting of it now."

She lies back in her chair, quite overcome by the idea, while Colonel Mordaunt sits by her side, silent and absorbed.

Suddenly Mrs. St. John starts up and clutches his hand.

"Philip! Philip! I am dying; and my girl will be left all but penniless."

"Good God! it cannot be as bad as that! You must be mistaken, Mrs. St. John! You are weak and ill, and matters look worse to you than they really are. Put the management of your affairs into my hands, and I will see that they are set right again."

"It is beyond your power. You cannot think how mad I have been. When Tom died, and I found it would be impossible for us to live in the style to which we had been accustomed, I thought it would be better to give Irene a season or two in town—to let her be seen, in fact. She is so pretty she ought to have made a good marriage; and I never thought the money could run away so fast until I found it was nearly all gone."

"But who are your trustees? What have they been about to permit you to draw upon your principal in this manner?"

"There are no trustees. I am sole legatee and executrix. The money was left absolutely to me. I wish now it had not been so."

"And—and—Irene," says Colonel Mordaunt, presently, "she is not then in a position to make a good match you speak of?"

"Ah! there's my worst trouble, Philip! I was so sure she was going to be married—such an excellent connection, too. I looked upon the matter as settled, and then it came to nothing."

Colonel Mordaunt's brow lowers, and he commences to play with the ornaments on the table.

"And who may the gentleman have been?"

"Well, I mustn't tell you, for my child's sake, she behaved in the most dishonourable manner to her, Philip; dangled after her all the season, paying her everywhere, and paying her the most disguised attention, and then, when I felt bound to ask him what he intended by it all, he turned round and said he had never considered her as any thing more than a friend."

"The scoundrel!" cries Colonel Mordaunt, jumping up from his chair and pacing the room, "the unmitigated scoundrel! Mrs. St. John, let me have his name and bring him to book, as he deserves."

"Ah! not for worlds. Irene would never forgive me! You cannot think how angry she was even at my asking him the question."

"And I suppose she—she—felt the business very much?"

"I cannot tell you. She assured me at the time that she was utterly indifferent to him; but I have had my suspicions since. Anyway, it has broken my heart! To hear my child refused in

marriage by a man who had caused her name to be so openly connected with his own that it was quite unlikely any one else would come forward, and when I had been risking her dependence in order to further her prospects in life. I shall never recover it, Philip: that blow has been the death of me."

"Why should you say so? You are not really ill."

"I am sinking fast, my dear friend; I am growing weaker every day; and very soon I shall be gone, and my Irene will have to suffer for my imprudence. O Philip! for the sake of old times, promise me you will befriend my girl."

"For the sake of both past and present," he replies warmly, "trust to me. I will do every thing in my power to assist her. I am rich, as doubtless you know; the income which poor Tom and I equally inherited from our mothers has, in my case, never been fully used, for I have had no one to spend it on, and so long as I have a pound Irene shall never want one."

"Generous as of old. Ah, Philip! if I had only known what you were; if I had only had the sense—"

"My dear lady, what is the use of reverting to the past? You acted as you thought right. It has all been for the best."

"For the best that I should have deceived one of the noblest and most honorable of men?"

"Hush, hush! not deceived; you must not call it by so harsh a term," replies the colonel, with the ready forgiveness which we find it so easy to accord to an injury for which we have long ceased to grieve; "you are too hard upon yourself. Remember how young you were."

"I should have been old enough to recognize your worth," replies the poor lady, who, like many of her fellow-creatures, has committed a great error on setting out in life, and never discovered her mistake until it was past remedy; "but it is something to know that I leave you Irene's friend."

"You may rest on that assurance with the greatest confidence," he replies, soothingly, and tells himself that the past, when the poor faded wreck of a woman who lies before him took back the hand she had promised to himself to bestow it on his cousin, will indeed be amply atoned for if he can only claim the friendship of the bright creature who has sprung from the union which went far to make his life a solitary one.

He really believes that he shall be satisfied with her friendship. So we deceive ourselves.

Mrs. St. John's conversation appears to be

almost prophetic; at least, the state of mind which induced it naturally predisposes her to succumb to illness; and when, a few days after, she is seized with a low fever that is decimating the city, her weakness greatly aggravates the danger.

A foreign doctor is called in; he immediately proposes to bleed the patient; Irene flies in her distress to Colonel Mordaunt.

"He will kill my mother; what can I do to prevent it? Pray help me."

She is so lovely in her distress, with all thought of self vanished, and the tears standing in her great gray eyes, that it is as much as he can do to answer her appeal rationally.

"Be calm; I will not allow this Belgian rascal to touch her. I have already telegraphed to London. Mr. Pettingall will be here to-morrow."

"How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

Mr. Pettingall arrives to time, and remains as long as his professional duties will permit, but he can do nothing. Mrs. St. John becomes unconscious, and sinks rapidly. It takes but a few days to accomplish that in her which a robust body would have been fighting against for weeks. In a very short time Irene is awakened to a sense of her mother's danger, and in a very short time after that the danger is past—the illness is past—every thing is past; indeed, except the cold, still figure lying on the bed where she had watched life fade out of it, and which will be the last thing of all (save the memory of a most indulgent mother) to pass away forever.

Mr. Pettingall has returned to London by this time, and Irene and Colonel Mordaunt are alone. What would she have done without him.

Mrs. St. John had left no near relatives who would care to incur the expense of attending her funeral or personally consoling her orphaned daughter; two or three of them receive letters with an intimation of the event, to which they reply (after having made more than one copy of their answer) in stereotyped terms, interlarded with texts of Scripture and the places where they may be found and "made a note of." But not one pair of arms is held out across the British Channel (metaphorically speaking) to enfold Irene; not one pair of eyes weep with her; pens go and tongues wag, yet the girl remains, save for the knowledge of Colonel Mordaunt's help and presence, alone in her sorrow.

During the remainder of that sad week she sits almost entirely in her mother's room; confident, though he has not told her so, that every

thing that should be done is being done by the man who has expressed himself so kindly toward her; and when, on the day of the funeral, she meets him again, she feels as though he were her only friend.

When the interment is over and they have returned to the hotel, Colonel Mordaunt remarks how pale and worn the girl has become, and ventures to ask what care she has been taking of her own health.

"My health! oh, what does that signify?" says Irene, as the tears well up freshly to her swollen eyelids. "There is nothing left for me to live for now."

She has borne up bravely until to-day, for she is no weak creature to render herself sodden by tears that cannot undo the past; she is a woman made for action rather than regret; but the hardest moment in life for self-control is that in which we return to an emptied home, having left all that remains of what we loved beneath the ground. The voice that made our hearts rejoice was silent; the loving eyes beamed on us no longer; the warm, firm hand was cold and clasplless; yet, we could see and touch them. God only knows what joy and strength there comes from contact—and how hard faith is without sight. We look on what we love, and though we have had evidence of its estrangement, still delude ourselves with the sweet falsehood that it is as it ever was: we lose sight of it, and, though it be strong as death and faithful as the grave, cold doubts will rise between it and ourselves to torture us until we meet again.

It is well the dead are buried out of sight; else would they never be forgotten. Human love cannot live forever, unless it sees and touches. So Irene feels for the first time that she has really lost her mother.

But Colonel Mordaunt has lived longer in this world than she has, and his "all" still stands before him, more engaging than ever, in her deep mourning and distress.

"You must not say so," he answers, gently. "You must let me take care of you now; it was a promise made to your poor mother."

"Ah! Mother, mother!"

"My dear girl, I feel for you more than I can express, but I entreat you not to give way. Think how distressed she would be to see you neglecting the health she was always so anxious to preserve. I hear that you have made no regular meals for a week past. This must continue no longer; you must permit me to alter it."

"I will permit you to do any thing that you

"Think right, Colonel Mordaunt. I have no friend but yourself."

"Then I shall order dinner to be served for you in your sitting-room, and expect you to do the honors of the table."

"Since you wish it, I will try to do so."

"I do wish it, my dear cousin, for more reasons than one. Mr. Walmsley, your mother's solicitor, will be here to-morrow; and it is quite necessary that I should have a little conversation with you before you meet him."

"When the dinner is ready I shall be there."

And in another hour Colonel Mordaunt and the St. John are seated opposite to one another at the table. Her eyes are still red, her cheeks pale, and she neither eats nor talks much; but she is quiet and composed, and listens to all her cousin has to say with interest and attention. He does not broach the subject of money, however, until the dinner has been cleared away again, and they are safe from the waiters' supervision.

Then Irene draws her chair nearer to the open fire, for November has set in bright and cold; and Colonel Mordaunt, still playing with his fruit and wine, commences the unwelcome topic.

"I have something to say to you, my dear Irene, less pleasant than important; but money considerations are generally so. Have you any idea of the amount of your mother's income?"

"My mother's income? Not the least. But it was a large one, was it not? We always lived well in London."

"Too well, I am afraid, my dear. Women are generally ignorant about the management of money."

"Yes; I am sure I am," she replies, indifferently. "In fact, it never entered my head to make any inquiries on the subject. We had a house in Brook Street, you know, and pur our marriage, and every thing we could desire. I never remember poor mamma refusing me money for my life, or expressing the slightest anxiety on the subject."

"It would have been better if she had done so, my dear. I had a long talk with her about her affairs a week or two before her death; and she was anxious that I should look into and arrange them for her. Your father did not leave much behind him as the world thinks; and our poor mother was improvident of the little she received. I am afraid, from what she told me, that a large portion of her principal was sunk during those two seasons in town."

"Was it? Well, it will signify little now. Whatever remains, there is sure to be enough for me."

"My dear child, I am not so sure of that. You have been brought up in every luxury; you have never known, as you said just now, what it is to be denied."

"I can learn it: Others have done the same before me."

"But supposing the very worst—that you have actually not enough to live on. What then?"

"That is scarcely probable, is it? But if so, I can work."

"Work, child! You work to earn your living? No, no; it would never come to that; you are far too beautiful. You must marry first."

"What! marry for a home? Colonel Mordaunt, you do not know me, if you think me capable of doing such a thing."

"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. Anyway, 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 any thing 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 realized; 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 interest 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? O 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 any thing 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, gray-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!"

"O Colonel Mordaunt! you frighten me. I never dreamed 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 toward 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. O 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 wellnigh 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.”

And 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 hand 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 all the world (himself included) 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 any thing; but, if you are a gentleman, do not make me more angry than I am, by alluding to it again.”

“O 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 from 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 dullness 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 dare say 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. In 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 Priestley, 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 toward 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 marvelously-furnished drawing-room. When I say marvelously, I do not mean in marvelous 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 tenanted; and it is to Rebecca Quekett, and not to Miss Mordaunt, that every one refers for every thing that may be required for the household, from a clean duster up to a new Brussels carpet.

Colonel Mordaunt even, paramount among 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 overfed 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 graveled 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 fascinat-

ing. 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. Everybody knows what it is to wish 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 house-keeper's room?"

"I believe Mrs. Quekett is not down-stairs at all yet, miss."

"Oh, very well! it is no matter, James: it does not in the least signify. Thank you, James!" and Miss Mordaunt revanishes.

She does not pass into the garden nor enter her own apartment: she goes straight up-stairs 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 nightcap, 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 toward 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 mantel-piece. 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. And on either side the mirror are displayed photographs in frames: young men and maidens; old men and children: "Dear Lord X——, and the Hon. Richard A——, and Lady Viola." To set Mrs. Quekett off on the subject of her photographs, is to hear her talk *Court Circular* for at least an hour, and finish with the intelligence that, with the exception of his poor dear father, she has never "bemeaned" herself by living in an untitled family before Colonel Mordaunt's.

Miss Mordaunt addresses her timidly:

"How are you this morning, Quekett?—is your head better?"

"Well, miss, I can hardly say before I get up and move about a bit. It's very cold—isn't it?"

"Bitterly cold; the wind is due north."

"Ah! I thought so. I don't think I shall be down just yet. Will you give the cook directions about the luncheon, Miss Mordaunt?—I shall be in time to see to the dinner."

"But the tradesmen will want their orders, Quekett."

"Well, the cook can come up to me for that. I suppose the colonel won't be home to luncheon."

"I don't know—I can't say. I didn't ask him—but perhaps—I should think—"

"Oh, it's no good thinking, miss. If he hasn't left directions, he must put up with the inconvenience. Were there any gentlemen to breakfast this morning?"

"Well, Quekett, there were one or two—three or four, perhaps; but no one could help it—at least, I am sure Philip didn't ask them; for Mr. Rogers rode up just as we sat down, and—"

"It could be helped well enough, if the colonel had a grain of sense. A pack of fellows to eat him out of house and home, and nothing to show for it. I warrant they've cut my new ham down to the bone. And which of 'em would give

the colonel a breakfast before he sets out hunting I should like to know?"

"O Quekett! Philip does dine with them sometimes: it was only last week he received invitations from the Capels and the Stewarts."

"And what's the good of that? Gives every thing, and takes nothing in return. And, by-the-way, is it true, miss, that there's talk about Master Oliver spending his Easter here again?"

"I'm sure I don't know. You had better ask Philip, Quekett. I have nothing to do with Master Oliver. I dare say it's a mistake. Who told you about it?"

"That don't in the least signify; but things can't go on like this, and so I shall tell the colonel. There are some people I can't live in the same house with, and Master Oliver's one. And it won't be the better for him, I expect, if I have to leave through his means."

Miss Mordaunt is trembling all over.

"D Quekett! it will never come to that. You know how anxious Philip is to make you comfortable, or to do any thing to please you, that—that—is reasonable."

"Reasonable, Miss Mordaunt! Well, I'm not likely to ask any thing as is not reasonable. I was fifteen years in the service of the colonel's father, and I came to Fen Court, as every one knows, much against my own interests, and only to please those as had a sort of claim on me. And then to be told that Mr. Philip will do any thing to please me as is reasonable, is rather too much to put up with." And here Mrs. Quekett shows symptoms of boiling.

"Oh, pray don't say that, Quekett! I dare say my brother never thought of having Master Oliver here; and, if he did, that he will put off his visit to a more convenient opportunity."

"Well, I hope so, I'm sure; for I've no wish to see him hanging about here for a month. And I think, miss, that if this is all you have to say to me, perhaps I'd better be getting up and looking after the house-matters myself; for I don't suppose there'll be a bit left in the larder, now that the colonel has been feeding a pack of wolves at breakfast."

Miss Mordaunt, making no pretence of resentment, flies as though she had been ordered to disappear.

At noon, Mrs. Quekett descends to the house-keeper's room, which—by means of furniture cribbed from other apartments, hot luncheons and suppers, and friends to partake of them whenever she feels disposed to issue her invitations—is as comfortable and convivial a retreat as any to be

found in Fen Court. Mrs. Quekett, too, presents an appearance quite in accordance with the presiding deity of a servants' feast. Tall, well-formed, and well-dressed, with a face that has been handsome and a complexion that is not entirely guiltless of aid, she looks fitted to hold a high position among menials—and she holds it, a trifle too highly. Her dominant, overbearing temper makes her at once feared and hated in the servants' hall, and each domestic is ready to abuse her behind her back, and to rake up old dead scandals which might well be permitted to lie forgotten among the ashes of the past. As she enters her sanctum, 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 "cats' meat" without delay. Somebody else in the kitchen hears the remark, however, and laughs—not loudly but discordantly—and the harsh sound reaches the house-keeper'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 house-keeper'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 am is 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 house-keeper, with her mouth full of toast 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 defense 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 sha'n'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? Do 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 up-stairs at once and fetch me the washing-book that lies on the side-table in my bedroom."

"Oh, yes, your bedroom, 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 durs'n'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 house-keeper's ears by Mrs. Cray's least dulcet tones, while Mrs. Cray's hard-working 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, anyway, 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! besides the Court's; and, as for your own rags, 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 house-keeper, who leaves more than half her luncheon on the table, and goes up-stairs 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 house-keeper being that of detestation.

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 up-stairs for more than an hour; and when she descends again she has changed her dress; for, in a black-satin gown, with a blond lace cap ornamented with pink flowers, who among 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 any thing to say to me? Time to settle the house-keeping bills again, eh?"

"No, colonel. If I remember rightly, we settled those only last week," replies Mrs. 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—l 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 while he's hanging about it, with his bad manners, and his tobaccer, 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 fun!"

"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, besides me."

Colonel Mordaunt starts with surprise, and colors. The house-keeper'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 do not understand you."

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

"Really, Quekett, you are so—"

"Lord alive, man!" exclaims the house-keeper, 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 every thing 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 erent 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, why, you know, Quekett, for my father's sake, and—and various other reasons, how highly we all esteem your services; and I should be most concerned if I thought any thing would part us. Even if I do marry, I shall take care that every thing 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 house-keeper 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 any thing 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 back 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 that 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. Eric Keir was gone; every thing 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 forever. 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 not necessary to draw from one's own 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 among 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. Oh 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 her mind, the blank sense of nothingness dispersed, she wakes to find the necessity for restraint withdrawn, and (as she told Colonel Mordaunt) the old grief pressing her down so hardly, that she has no strength to cope with it.

Mistress of herself, free to think, and act, and look as her heart dictates, she has leisure to contemplate and dissect and analyze the haunting query, "Why?" Why did Eric Keir seek her company—why ask her friendship—why intimate, if not assert, that he loved her?

Was the fault on her side? Had she given him too much encouragement—been too pleased to meet him—talk to him, answer the tender questioning of his eyes? Or had he a design against her? Was he really so cold-hearted, so shallow, so deceitful, as to affect a part to insure the empty triumph of winning her—for nothing. In fancy, with glowing cheek and bright feverish eyes, she traces again and again each scene in that sad episode of her existence, until she reaches the culminating point, and hears once more her mother's words, "He means nothing by it all;" and the glow dies out to be replaced by pallor.

And then comes the last question of the anguished spirit—the question that rises to so many white lips every day, "Why does Heaven permit such unnecessary pain? Is there really a Father-heart up there above, beating for and with our own?" I have said that this woman is no weak creature, ready to sink to the earth beneath the first blow from Fate's mallet.

Does this phase of her character belie the assertion? I think not. Strong bodies fight and struggle with the disease under which weak frames succumb, and muscular souls wrestle with and writhe under an affliction which feeble souls may suffer but not feel.

When Irene St. John had her mother to sup-

port as well as herself, she stood upright and smiled; now that the incentive for action is withdrawn, she bends before the tempest. Then she suffered more acutely; now she suffers more continuously; but acute suffering, with intervals of numbness, is more tolerable than continuous pain borne in monotony. There is nothing now to stir Irene up—to deaden the echo of the question reverberating against the walls of her empty heart; to blind her eyes mercifully to the fact that she has delivered herself over to a love that is not mutual; and that, do all she will, she cannot stamp the accursed remembrance from her mind.

She knows all this; it is in black and white upon her soul; she is lowered, degraded, contemptible in her own eyes, and life becomes more intolerable with each rising sun.

It is May before Colonel Mordaunt dares to revert to the proposal he made Irene St. John in Brussels. He has written frequently to her; he has seen her more than once, but there has been a quiet dignity about the girl which forbids him to break the compact entered on. He felt, without being told, that to do so would be to mar all his chances of success; so he has only paid Mrs. Cavendish two or three ordinary visits, offered Irene two or three ordinary presents (which she has quietly rejected), and tried to wait patiently until the six months' probation agreed upon should be completed. When it is, Colonel Mordaunt feels as free to speak as he had felt bound before to hold his tongue; now he knows that he will be listened to and answered. For Irene, among many other virtues, has no young-lady mannerisms about her, but is, in the best sense of the word, a Woman.

It is a warm, soft afternoon in the latter part of May; the little garden at Norwood is full of syringa and laburnum and lilac blossoms; and the voices of the children playing at hide-and-seek among the bushes come pleasantly in at the opened windows. Mrs. Cavendish has left the house to call upon some friend, and Irene and Colonel Mordaunt are alone.

"I hope you received your dividends all right this quarter," he commenced by saying; for since her orphanhood he has taken sole charge of her small income.

"Oh, yes! thank you. I sent your check to the bank, and there was no difficulty about the matter. You are most punctual in your payments."

"Will you be as punctual, Irene? You have

not forgotten, have you—what you promised to give me in May?"

The color mounts to her pure pale face, but she does not turn it from him.

"Your answer! Oh, no! how could I forget it? Only I wish—I wish you could have guessed it, Colonel Mordaunt, without giving me the pain of repeating what I said before."

His countenance falls.

"Are your feelings, then, quite uncharged? Have you no kindlier thoughts of me than you had then?"

"How could any thoughts be kindlier than they have been, or more grateful? But kindly thoughts and gratitude are—are not *love*, Colonel Mordaunt."

"Then you are not yet cured of the old wound, Irene?"

The girl leans her cheek against the window-sill, and gazes with languid, heavy eyes into the open space beyond.

"For God's sake, don't speak of it!"

But he continues:

"Six months' reflection has not had the power to convince you that the most mortifying of all enterprises is the attempt to regain our influence over an errant heart."

"I have never attempted to regain it," she exclaims, indignantly. "I would not take it were it offered me. I have done with the name and the thought of the thing, *forever!*"

She looks so beautiful—so strangely as she did of old, with the hot, angry color rising and falling in her face, that he is more than ever eager to win her for himself.

"Then, Irene! what are you waiting for? My home is open to you: why not accept it? I am sure you are not happy here."

"Oh, I am well enough! The children bored me at first; but I am getting used to them, as I am to every thing else," with a deep sigh.

"I cannot believe you, Irene. You who have been accustomed both during your father's and mother's lifetime, to be fêted and amused, and carried hither and thither; you cannot be contented to spend your days in this small, dull cottage, with no better company than your aunt and her governess, and her overgrown boys. It cannot go on, my child; it will kill you!"

"I am tougher than you think. I wish that I were not."

"You are bearing up wonderfully, but you will break down at last. Come, Irene! let me reason with you! You acknowledged just now that all you desire is to forget this disappointment.

Why not try to forget it in my house as well as in this?"

She shudders—slightly—but he sees it.

"Colonel Mordaunt! it is impossible!"

"I cannot see the impossibility. I know that you are not in love with me, but I am content to be in love with you. I am content to make you mistress of my fortune and my house, and every thing I possess, in return for yourself. It is a fair bargain—if you will but subscribe to it."

"Oh! it is not fair. You do not know what you are agreeing to—how terribly you might feel it afterward."

"I am willing to take the risk."

She hesitates a moment; it is very sweet to a woman to feel she is loved so entirely, and recklessly, and devotedly, that her possession is the only one thing in this world that her lover acknowledges worth living for. It is sweet to be loved, even when we can give nothing in return. A selfish satisfaction that has no part nor lot in the first requirement of the divine passion—self-abnegation; but still it falls soothingly upon the wounded spirit that has been rudely thrust from its legitimate resting-place. It is not so sweet as loving, but it is the next best thing, and Irene feels gratitude and hesitation. After all—can any change make her position worse than it is now?

Colonel Mordaunt sees the hesitation and—forgets the shudder which preceded it!

"Irene! my dearest girl! think of what I say.

You imagine that life is over for you; that it can never have any charm again; that it will be all the same if you pass the remainder of it here, or anywhere! Then come to me! Fen Court, at the least, is as comfortable a home as Laburnum Cottage; here you are but a guest, there you will be a mistress: and have—may I not say it?—as devoted a friend as any you will find in Norwood? Will you not come?"

He pleads with as much earnestness as though he had been young; his fine face lighted up as only love can light up a man's countenance, and his firm hands closed upon her own. The day is nearly won. It is on her very lips to answer 'yes,' when, from behind the garden-gates, comes the sound of that most irrepresible of acclimatizations, the Italian organ, and the air it murders is that of the "Blue Danube" waltzes.

"No!—no!" cries Irene, as both hands wrench themselves away from his, and go up with startling energy to shut out the maddening strains; "you *must* not—you *shall* not ask me that again. I have told you that it is *impossible!*" and with that she leaves him to himself.

Colonel Mordaunt is bitterly disappointed: he had made so sure, he can hardly say why, that this final appeal would be crowned with success, that the girl's determinate refusal comes on him like a great blow. He can hardly believe that he will really lose her—that she will not return and tell him it was a mistake; and in that belief he still lingers about the cottage—futilely.

Mrs. Cavendish returns and begs him to remain to tea, but he declines, with thanks. The opportunity for speaking to Irene by herself is over, and he is not likely to derive any further benefit from seeing her in the presence of the governess and children. So he returns to his hotel for the night, not having quite made up his mind whether he shall bid the inmates of the cottage a formal farewell upon the morrow, or slip back to Leicestershire as he had come from it—unnoticed. With the morning, however he finds his courage has evaporated, and that he cannot leave Norwood without at least looking in her fair face again.

So, after having made a pretence of eating breakfast, the poor old gentleman (all the poorer for being old, and feeling his age at this moment more acutely than any youngster can imagine for him) strolls up to Laburnum Cottage, and enters at the wicket-gate.

The lawn is covered with children, playing croquet with their governess and mother, who nods to him as he enters, with an inclination of her head toward the open door.

"Irene is in the school-room," she says, gayly. But Irene is not in the school-room; she has seen him enter, and comes to meet him in the narrow passage, clad in a soft muslin robe of white and black: the shape and folds and general appearance of which he ever afterward remembers.

"Colonel Mordaunt," she says, hurriedly, with heightened color, and trembling, parted lips, "were you sincere in what you told me yesterday, that you would take me for your wife, just as I am, without one particle of love in me, except for a shameful memory?"

"Irene, you know I was!"

"Then, *take me!*" she answers, as she submits to the arms that are thrown about her, and the lips that are laid upon her own.

Women are problems: *cela va sans dire*; though why the problems should remain insoluble is, perhaps, less due to their intricacy than the muddle-heads who strive to fathom them by beginning at the wrong end. I don't know what reason Colonel Mordaunt may assign to this ap-

parently sudden change in Irene St. John's sentiments; perhaps he attributes it to the effect of deliberation—more likely to the irresistibility of his own pleading; but anyway he is quite satisfied with the result.

Mrs. Cavendish is not in the least surprised, but thinks it the very best thing her niece could do; and the governess and children become quite excited at the prospect of a wedding. No one is surprised, indeed, after the lapse of half an hour, unless it be Irene herself; and even she, once reconciled to the idea, tells her own heart that it is fate, and she might have guessed that it would end so, all along.

Perhaps I have even failed in surprising my reader! Yet there had been an impetus, and a very strong one, given to Irene St. John's will that day.

The impetus came in a letter bearing the the post-mark of Berwick, where Mrs. Cavendish's daughter Mary was staying with some friends, and which letter her mother had read aloud for the benefit of the breakfast-table:

"We were at such a grand party last week" (so part of Mary's innocent communication ran) "at Lord Norham's. I wore my blue silk, with the pearl ornaments you lent me, and they were so much admired. Lord Muiraven (Lord Norham's eldest son) was there, and Mr. Keir. Lord M. danced twice with me, but his brother never even spoke to me, which I thought rather rude. However, he is engaged to be married to a Miss Robertson, such a pretty girl, and had no eyes for any one else. They danced together all the evening. Mr. Keir is considered handsome, but I like Lord Muiraven best."

"Very complimentary to Mary, I'm sure," remarked the gratified mother, as she refolded the letter.—"My dear Irene, I wish you would just reach me down the 'Peerage.' What a thing it would be if Lord Muiraven took a fancy to the girl!"

Voilà tout.

Irene St. John having once made up her mind to accept Colonel Mordaunt's offer, puts no obstacle in the way of an early marriage; on the contrary, she appears almost feverishly anxious that the matter should be settled and done with as soon as possible; and, as they have none to consult but themselves, and her will is law, the wedding is fixed to take place during the succeeding month. All that she stipulates for is that it shall be perfectly private. She believes she has strength to go through all that is before her, but

she would prefer not testing that strength in public; and her first consideration now is for the feelings of her future husband, that they may never be hurt by some weak betrayal of her own. So all the necessary preparations are expeditiously but quietly made, and when the morning itself arrives (a lovely morning in June, just twelve months after poor Mrs. St. John held that trying interview with Eric Keir, in Brook Street), there are not above a dozen urchins, two nursery-maids with perambulators, and a stray baker-boy, hanging about the wicket of Laburnum Cottage to see the bride step into her carriage. The paucity of Irene's male relations has made it rather difficult to find any one to stand in the position of a father to her on this occasion; but her uncle, Mr. Campbell, takes that responsibility on himself, and has the honor of sharing her equipage. Mr. Campbell is accompanied to Norwood by his wife and two eldest daughters, who, with Mary and Emily Cavendish, form Irene's modest troupe of bridesmaids; and Miss Mordaunt (to whom her brother, finding all persuasion unavailing, was forced to send a peremptory order to put in an appearance at the wedding) is also present.

She arrived the day before, and up to the moment of going to church has resisted all Irene's endeavors to make acquaintance with her, by treaties that she will not trouble herself on her account—that she will take no notice of her—that she will leave her to do as best she can by herself, until the girl inclines to believe that her new sister-in-law is most antagonistic both to the marriage and herself; and little dreams that Isabella Mordaunt's eyes have opened on a new world at the sight of her beauty, and are ready to shed tears at the slightest demonstration of interest on her part. Yet she is too miserably shy and reserved to show it.

There is little time, however, for Irene to think of that just now, or of any thing except the matters in hand, through all of which she conducts herself with great dignity and sweetness.

Colonel Mordaunt naturally thinks there never was a lovelier or more graceful bride, and most of those who see her think the same; but Irene's outward comportment is the least noble thing about her that day. It cannot but be a day of bitter recollection to her; but she will not show it. She will not mar the value of the gift which she has freely given by letting the receiver see how little worth it is to herself. She goes through the religious ceremony in simple faith that she will be enabled to keep the promises she makes; and then she mixes in the little fes-

tivity that follows with as much gayety as is consistent with the occasion.

Colonel Mordaunt is enchanted with her every look and word and action; the old man hardly knows whether he is standing on his head or his heels; he is wrapped up in the present, and has quite forgotten all that went before it. Even when he finds himself alone with his young wife in the railway-carriage, speeding fast to Weymouth, where they are to spend their honey-moon, the vision is not dispelled. It is true that he throws his arm rather awkwardly about her slender figure, and kisses her for the first time as a husband, with more timidity than he would have shown had he been twenty-five years younger. But Irene's quiet, affectionate manners reassure him. She appears to take such an interest in all that is going on around them, and talks so naturally of what they shall do and see at Weymouth, and of the pleasant autumn they shall spend together at Fen Court, that his passing trepidation lest the girl should after all regret the decision she had made is soon dispelled; and, what is better, the days that follow bring no cloud with them to lessen his tranquillity. For Irene is not a woman to marry a man and then worry him to the grave by her sentimental grief for another; she has chosen her present lot, and she intends to make it as happy a lot as lies in her power. She is of too honorable and upright a nature to make a fellow-creature pay the debt of her own misfortune, and especially a fellow-creature who is doing every thing in his power to make her happy. And, added to this, she is too wise to call in a doctor and not follow his prescriptions. She has married Colonel Mordaunt as a refuge from herself; she never denies the truth even to her own heart; and if she is still to sit down and pine to death for love of Eric Keir, where was the necessity for action which her strong will brought to bear upon her feebler nature? She may break down hereafter; but Irene Mordaunt commences her march upon the path of married life bravely.

She not only strives to be pleased—she is pleased with all that her husband does for her—with the numerous presents he lays at her feet, the pleasant excursions he devises, the thoughtful care he shows for her comfort. She repays it all with gratitude and affection. Yes—Colonel Mordaunt has done well in confiding his honor and happiness to Irene's keeping!

About the same date, in that same month of June, a jolly, genial-hearted old man, commonly

known as the Earl of Norham, is seated in the library of Berwick Castle, in her majesty's "loyal and worshipful borough of Berwick." Lord Norham does not carry out in the faintest degree the idea of a lord, as usually depicted by the heated imaginations of the young and the uninitiated. His appearance alone would be sufficient to put to flight all the dreams of "sweet seventeen," or the ambitious cravings of a maturer age. He is a tall, stout man, of about five-and-sixty, with a smiling red face, a bushy head of gray hair, and "mutton-chop" whiskers just one shade darker; and he is dressed in black-and-white checked trousers, of decidedly country make; a white waistcoat, with the old-fashioned stock surmounting it; and a brown holland coat. The windows of the library are all open to the air, and Lord Norham is not warmly attired, yet he seems much oppressed by the weather; and to see him lay down his pen every two minutes (he is writing letters for the mid-day post) and mop his heated face round and round with a yellow-and-red silk handkerchief until it shines again, you would be ready to swear he was a jolly, well-to-do farmer, who had every reason to be satisfied with his crops and his dinner-table. In effect, Lord Norham is all you would imagine him to be; for agriculture is his hobby, and he allows no accidents to disturb his peace. But he is something much better into the bargain—a true nobleman, and the fondest father in the United Kingdom. He lost his wife at a very early stage of their married life, and he has never thought of marrying again, but devoted his life to the children she left behind her. There are only those three, Robert, Lord Muiraven, and his brothers Eric and Cecil; and when their mother died the eldest was just four years old. Then it was that all the latent worth and nobility of Lord Norham's character came forth. His friends had rated him before at a very ordinary standard, knowing him to be an excellent landlord and an indulgent husband, and crediting him with as much good sense as his position in life required; and a strict belief in the Thirty-nine Articles. But from that date they saw the man as he really was—from that moment, when he knew himself to be widowed and desolate, and his unfortunate little ones left without a mother at the very time they wanted her most, he took a solemn oath never to place the happiness of her children at the mercy of another woman's caprice, but to be to them, as far as in him lay, father and mother both. The man must have had a heart as wide as a woman's to arrive at such a conclusion, and

stick to it; for the temptations to change his state again must have been manifold. But as in some mothers' breasts the feelings of maternity, once developed, can never be rivaled by a meaner passion, so, though far more rarely, it occasionally happens with a father; and from that day to this, when we see him mopping his dear old face with his silk handkerchief, Lord Norham has never staggered in his purpose—more, he has never repented it. Lord Muiraven and his brothers do not know what it is to regret their mother. She died so early, that they have no recollection of her; and Lord Norham's care and indulgence have been so close and unremitting, that the knowledge that other young men have mothers who love them, and are their best friends, has no power to do more than make them think what a glorious old fellow their father must be, never to have let them feel the want of theirs. Indeed, love for their father is a religion with these young men, who even go to the length of being jealous of each other in vying for his affection in return. And with Lord Norham, the boys are every thing. His earldom might be wrested from him, Berwick Castle burned to the ground, his money sunk in a West End theatre, the *Saturday Review* might even stoop to take an interest in his proceedings—yet give him his "boys," and he would be happy. For their sakes, he sows and reaps and thrashes out the corn, has horse-boxes added to his stables, and a racquet-court built upon his grounds; the bedrooms heated by hot-air pipes, and the drawing-room turned into a smoking divan. They are his one thought and interest and pleasure—the theme that is forever on his tongue, with which he wearies everybody but himself. He lives upon "the boys," and sleeps upon "the boys," and eats and drinks "the boys;" and when he dies, those cabalistic words, "the boys," will be found engraved on his honest, loving heart.

He has just raised his handkerchief to wipe his face for about the twentieth time, when the door is thrown open, and a "boy" enters. There is no need for Lord Norham to turn round. He knows the step—trust him for that—and the beam that illuminates his countenance makes it look redder and shinier than before.

"Well, my dear boy!" he commences, before the prodigy can reach his side.

"Have you seen this, dad?" replies Cecil, as he places the *Times* advertisement sheet upon the table.

He is a fine young fellow, just one year younger than Eric, and, as his father puts on his

glasses to read the paragraph to which he points, he stands by his side and throws his arm right round the old man's neck in the most charming and natural manner possible.

"Where, my dear boy, where?" demands Lord Norham, running his eyes up and down the page.

"There, dad—the top marriage. 'At St. John's Church, Norwood, Philip Mordaunt, Esq., of Fen Court, Leicestershire, lieutenant-colonel in H. M. Regt. 155th Royal Greens, to Irene, only child of the late Thomas St. John, Esq., of Brook Street, W.'" Don't you know who that is? Eric's spoon, that he was so hot after last season. He'll be awfully cut up when he reads this, I know."

"Eric's spoon, dear boy!" exclaims Lord Norham, who is quite at a loss to understand the mysterious allusion.

"Yes!—the woman he was spooney on, I mean. Why, every one thought it was a settled thing, for he was always at the house. But I suppose she wouldn't have him—which quite accounts for the poor fellow's dumps all last autumn. Eric was awfully slow last autumn, you know, father—he didn't seem to care for hunting or shooting, or doing any thing in company. I said at the time I was sure the girl had jilted him: and so she has, plain enough!"

"My dear boy, this is a perfect revelation to me!" exclaims Lord Norham, pushing his glasses on to his forehead, and wheeling round his chair to confront his son. "Eric in love! I had not the least idea of it."

"Hadn't you? He was close enough with us, of course: but I made sure he would have told you. Oh, these things must happen, you know, dad; there's no help for them."

"And this girl—this Miss St. John, or whoever she is—refused your brother, you say?"

"No, I didn't say that, father. I know nothing for certain—it was only supposition on my part; but, putting this and that together, it looks like it—doesn't it, now?"

Cecil is smiling with the carelessness of youth to pain; but Lord Norham is looking grave—his heart wretched at the idea of one of his cherished "boys" having been so slighted. It is true that he had heard nothing of this little episode in Eric's life; for when he goes up to town, a very rare occurrence, he seldom stays for more than a few weeks at a time, and never mixes in any lighter dissipation than an evening in the House to hear some of his old friends speak (Lord Norham was for many years a member of Parliament himself,

or a heavy political dinner where no ladies are admitted.

It is all news to him, and very unpleasant news. It enables him to account for several things in Eric's behavior which have puzzled him before; but it shocks him to think that his boy should have been suffering, and suffering alone—shocks him almost as much as though he had been his mother instead of his father—and all his thoughts go out immediately to the best means of conveying him comfort.

"Cecil, my dear!" (the old man constantly makes strangers smile to hear him address these stalwart young men, with beards upon their chins, as though they were still children), "don't say any thing about this to your brother, will you? He will hear it fast enough; ill news travels apace."

"Oh! he's seen it, father; at least, I suspect he's seen it, for he was studying the paper for an hour before I got it. I only took it up when he laid it down."

"And where is he now?" demands Lord Norham, quickly. It would be exaggeration perhaps to assert that he has immediate visions of his beloved Eric sticking head downward in the muddiest part of the lake, but, had his imagination thus run riot, he could scarcely have asked the question with more anxiety.

"In his room, I think; I haven't seen him since. By-the-way, dad, I shall run up to town again to-morrow. Eric says he has had enough of it; but Muiraven and I have engagements three weeks deep. You can't be up again this season, I suppose?"

"I don't think so, dear boy, unless it should be for a week before the House breaks up. And so Eric is not going back again, though it must be very dull for him here, I am afraid."

"Precious slow, isn't it, now the Robertsons are gone?"

"You'll stay with them, I suppose, Cecil?"

"Well, I don't think so. They've asked me, but I'd rather put up with Bob. It's all very well being engaged, you know, father, when you are sitting on a sofa together in a room by yourselves; but it takes all the gilt off the gingerbread for me to be trotted out before a few friends as Harriet's 'young man.' Bliss is only procurable in solitude or a crowd. Besides, a nine o'clock breakfast, and no latch-key, doesn't agree with my notions of the season."

"It ought to agree with your notions of being engaged, you young rip!" says his father, laughing.

"No, it doesn't! No woman shall ever keep me in leading-strings, married or single. I mean to have my liberty all my life. And if Harriet doesn't like it, why, she may lump it, or take up with some one else; that's what I tell her!"

"The principles of the nineteenth century!" cries Lord Norham. "Well! I think she'd be a fool to change you, Cecil, whatever conditions you may choose to make."

"Of course you think so, dad. However, if my lady wants to keep me in town this weather, she'll have to make herself very agreeable. Perfect sin to leave this place for bricks and mortar, isn't it?"

"It seems a pity; just as the hay is coming on, too. I shall persuade Eric to ride over to the moors with me, and see what the grouse prospects are looking like this year."

"Yes! do, father. That'll stir up the poor old boy. Hallo! there's Muiraven beckoning to me across the lawn. We're going to blood the bay filly. She's been looking very queer the last few days. Hope it's not glanders.—All right!" with a shout; "I'll come!" and, leaping through the open window, Lord Norham's youngest hope joins his brother, while the old man gazes after his sons until they disappear, with eyes overbrimming with proud affection.

Then he rises and goes in search of his stricken Eric, with much the same sort of feeling with which a woman rushes to the side of a beloved daughter as soon as she hears she is in trouble.

Eric is in his bedroom—a large, handsome apartment, facing the park—and he is sitting at the toilet-table without any apparent design, gazing at the thick foliage below, and the fallow-deer that are clustered on the grass beneath it.

He jumps up as soon as his father enters, however, and begins to whistle loudly, and to run his fingers through his hair before the glass, as though his sole object in going there had been to beautify himself.

"Well, dad!" he says, cheerfully.

"Well, my dear boy!" replies Lord Norham, with a vain attempt to conceal his anxiety; "what are you going to do with yourself this fine morning?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Ride, I suppose, or read, or yawn the time away. Where are the others?"

"Gone to the stables to physic the bay filly. Have you seen the papers, Eric?"

A slight change passes over his countenance—just a quiver of the muscles, nothing more: but the father's eye detects it.

"Yes, thanks!—oh, yes! I've seen them! No news, as usual. There never is any news nowadays."

"Have you seen the *Times*, my dear boy?"

"Yes."

"What! the advertisement sheet—the marriages?"

"Yes! why do you ask me?"

"Because I thought—I imagined—there was an announcement there that would interest you—that would be news: in fact, bad news."

"Who said so?" demands Eric Keir, turning round to confront his father. He is very pale, and there is a hard look about the lines of his face which was not there yesterday; otherwise, he seems himself and quite collected.

But Lord Norham will not betray Cecil: he never sets one child against the other by letting him suppose that his brothers speak of him behind his back; that is one reason why the young men are mutually so fond of one another and of him.

"I imagined so, my dear boy, that's all. Your little *perigiant* of last season was no secret, you know, and, reading what I do to-day, I naturally thought—"

"You are speaking of Miss St. John's marriage, father, I suppose. But why should that cut me up? We were very good friends before her mother died, and all that sort of thing, but—"

"But nothing more! You didn't care for her, Eric?"

"My dear old dad, you are not going to advocate my caring for another man's wife, are you? Of course I liked her—every one liked her: she was awfully pretty and jolly, and *distinguée*-looking; and if she's only half as nice as Mrs. Mordaunt as she was as Miss St. John, I shall say that—that—Mordaunt, whoever he may be, is a very lucky fellow." And here Eric whistles more ferociously than before.

"It is such a relief to hear you speak in this strain about it, my dear boy," replies Lord Norham, who has seated himself in an arm-chair by the open window; "do you know, Eric, from the rumors that have reached me, I was almost afraid—almost afraid, you know, my dear, that you might have been led on to propose in that quarter. You didn't propose to her, did you, Eric?"

"No, dad! I didn't propose to her!" replies the young man, stoutly.

"Then why did you break off the intimacy so suddenly? You used to be very intimate indeed with the St. Johns last season."

"What a jolly old inquisitor you would have

made, father, and how you would have enjoyed putting the thumb-screw on a fellow! Why did I break off the intimacy so suddenly?—well, I didn't break it off. Mrs. St. John thought I was there too often, and told me so, and I sheered off in consequence. Afterward they went abroad, and the poor old lady died, and I have not seen the young one since. That's the whole truth."

"And you didn't like the girl well enough to marry her, then?"

A cloud, palpable to the dullest eye, obscures for a moment all the forced gayety of his expression.

"My dear father! I don't want to marry any one."

"That is what puzzles me, Eric. Why shouldn't you want it?"

"There's a lot of time, isn't there? You don't expect a fellow to tie himself down for life at five-and-twenty?"

"No; but it is unnatural for a young man to avoid female society as you do. It can't be because you dislike it, my dear boy."

"I have no particular taste for it."

"But why? they don't snub you, do they? I should think you could do pretty much as you like with the women, eh, Eric?" with a glance of pride that speaks volumes.

"I never try, dad. I am very happy as I am."

"My dear boy! that is what convinces me that there is something more the matter than you choose to confess. If every thing was right, you wouldn't be happy as you are. Look at your brothers! Here's Cecil engaged already."

"Poor devil!" interpolates Eric.

"And Muiraven doing his best to be so; although I don't think he's quite such a favorite with the girls as his brother. I'm sure I don't know why, or what they can possibly want more, for you would scarcely meet a finer young man from here to John O'Groat's than Muiraven is."

Eric, recalling Muiraven's thick-set figure, round, rosy face (he takes after the earl), and reddish hair, cannot forbear smiling.

"He's an out-and-out good fellow, dad, but he's no beauty."

"He's a different style to yourself, I allow; but he's a very good-looking young man. However, that doesn't alter circumstances. If he doesn't marry, it is all the more incumbent on you to think of doing so."

"I shall never marry, father," says Eric, easily; "you must put that idea out of your head at once."

"There, again, that's unnatural, and there must be a reason for it. You are graver, too, than your years, Eric, and you often have fits of despondency; and I have thought, my dear (you'll forgive your old father for mentioning it), that you must have encountered some little disappointment early in life, say in your college-days, which has had a great effect upon your character. Am I right?"

"How closely you must have watched me!" replies the son, evasively.

"Whom have I in the world to interest me except you and your brothers? You are part of myself, my dear boy. Your pleasures are my pleasures, and your griefs become my griefs. I have passed many a restless night thinking of you, Eric!"

"Dear old dad!" says Eric, laying his hand on his father's shoulder, and looking him affectionately in the face, "I am not worth so much trouble on your part—indeed I am not."

"Oh! now I feel inclined to quarrel with you," says Lord Norham; "the idea of your talking such nonsense! Why, child, if it were for no other reason, it would be for this, that every time you look at me as you did just now, your sweet mother seems to rise from her grave and gaze at me through your eyes. Ah! my poor Grace! if she had lived, her boys would have had some one to whom they felt they could open their heart, instead of closing them up and bearing their troubles by themselves."

"Father don't say that!" exclaims Eric, earnestly. "If I had had twenty mothers, I couldn't have confided in them more than I do in you, nor loved them more. But you are too good for me, and expect too great things of me, and I shall end by being a disappointment, after all. That is my fear."

"I can never be disappointed while you and your brothers are happy; but how can I remedy an evil of which I must not hear?"

"You will harp on that idea of my having come to grief," says Eric, testily.

"Because I believe it to be true. I would never try to force your confidence, dear boy; but it would be a great comfort to know you had no secrets from me."

The young man has a struggle with himself, flushes, and then runs on hurriedly.

"Well, then, if it will give you any pleasure, I will tell you. I have had a trouble of the kind you mention, and I find it hard to throw it off, and I should very much like to leave England again for a short time. Perhaps, after all, it is better you

should know the truth, father, and then you will be able to account for the restlessness of my disposition."

"My poor boy!" says Lord Norham, abstractedly. But Eric doesn't care about being pitied.

"What about the traveling, dad? Charley Holmes is going in for his county next election, and wants me to run over to America with him for a spell first. It's nothing of a journey nowadays, and I could come back whenever you wanted me. Shall I say I'll go?"

"Go, my dear? Yes, of course, if it'll give you any pleasure; only take care of yourself, and come back cured."

"No fear of that," he replies, laughing; "in fact, it's half done already. We can't go through life without any scratches, father."

"No, my boy, no! and they're necessary, too—they're necessary. Make what arrangements you like about America, Eric; fix your own time and your own destination, only make up your mind to enjoy yourself, and to come back cured, my boy—to come back cured."

Lord Norham is about to leave the room as he chuckles over the last words, but suddenly he turns and comes back again.

"I have suffered, my dear," he says, gently; "I know what it is."

The young man grasps the hand extended; squeezes it as though it were in a vice, and walks away to the open window.

His father pats him softly on the back, passes his hand once fondly over his hair, and leaves him to himself. And this is the parent from whom he has concealed the darkest secret of his life!

"Oh, if I could but tell him!" groans Eric; "if I only could make up my mind to tell him, how much happier I should be.—Irene! Irene! you have doubled the gulf between us!"

He does not weep; he has grown too old for tears; but he stands at the window, suffering the tortures of hell, until the loud clanging of the luncheon-bell draws him back unwillingly into the world again.

CHAPTER V.

It is on a glorious July afternoon that Colonel Mordaunt brings his wife to Fen Court. There is no railway-station within ten miles of Priestley,

but an open carriage meets them on arrival at the nearest town, and as they roll homeward through long country lanes, bordered with hedges in which the bramble-flower and the woodbine have joined issue to pull the wild-roses and the purple nightshade to the ground, Irene experiences a sense of silent calm which makes her believe that she has at last breasted successfully the billows of life, and emerged thence with the greatest good this world affords us in her hand—contentment! They have had a long and tedious journey from Weymouth; the sun has been inconveniently warm, and the railway-carriages filled with dust, and even good-natured people might be excused from feeling a little peevish or impatient by the close of day; but Irene and Colonel Mordaunt seem admirably fitted to get on together. She is all gentle acquiescence to any thing he may propose (gratitude and indifference being the principal ingredients in submission), and he is devoted to his young wife, and has spent his time hitherto in anticipating her wishes, but in a manner so unobtrusive as to have rendered even the honey-moon agreeable to her. For, whatever may be the general opinion to the contrary, the honey-moon is not always the happiest part of married life; indeed there are few instances of it in which both husband and wife are not secretly pleased when it is drawing to a close. Brides who are worshiped as divinities during the first week are apt to become *exigantes* during the last three, and bridegrooms are sometimes forced to confess the melancholy truth that "the full soul loatheth the honey-comb." I have known a seven days' wife cry all the afternoon because her husband went to sleep on the sofa; and a freshly-made Benedict plead law, sickness, business, any thing, in order to procure a run up to town during the fatal moon, and a few hours' cessation from the continuous tax laid on his patience, gallantry, and temper. Many a married life that has ended in misery might have flowed on evenly enough had it not been for the injury done to a woman's character during that month of blandishments and folly. It requires a strong mind to accept at their true worth all the nonsense a man talks and all the foolish actions of which he is guilty during those first rapturous moments of possession—and women, as a rule, are not strong-minded. All the hyperbole of passion, which until then they have only heard in furtive lovers' whispers, is now poured out boldly at their feet, and the geese imagine it to be a specimen or a promise of what their future life shall be. A fortnight sees the ardor cooled; in a month it has evaporated, and thenceforth they

are judged, not as goddesses, but women. How few stand the test and can step down gracefully from the pedestal on which they have been unnaturally exalted to the level of their husbands' hearts, let the lives of our married acquaintances answer for us. But whether it would prevent the final issue or not, it is nevertheless true that the happiness of many a man and woman would not come so quickly to a close, were the latter treated with a little more discretion during the honeymoon. As husbands intend to go on, so should they begin. A woman is a suspicious animal; her experience is small, her views are narrow, her range of sight limited; and more men have been whined, and teased, and irritated out of their love than stormed out of it. There is no more miserable mistake in life than to attempt to warm up a fading passion: *réchauffés* are never worth much, but this style of *réchauffé* pays the worst of all. If wives would be reasonable, they will take all that is offered them; but never stoop to extract an unwilling avowal of affection, which will burn none the brighter for being dragged to the light of day. A little happy indifference is the best possible medicine for a drooping love; and the injunction to "leave them alone and they'll come home," holds as good with men as with the flock of Bo-peep. Irene Mordaunt bids fair to keep her husband's devotion in a healthy condition by this means. Her manner toward him is as sweet and gentle as it can be, but it naturally possesses no ardor; and this want of passion on her part is just sufficient to keep his middle-aged flame burning very brightly, without giving him any anxiety on account of hers.

He would have preferred, like other men, to make a fool of himself during the honey-moon (and the adage that "there is no fool like an old fool" holds truer in love than any other feeling), but something in Irene's quiet and sensible manner has forbidden it, and compelled him to treat her as if they had been married for several years. And yet she is not cold to him—she does not repulse his attentions nor refuse to acknowledge them; on the contrary, as they commence their drive to Priestley, and he wraps a shawl about her feet, and makes her put them upon the opposite seat, the smile with which she thanks him would be sufficient to put a younger man "off his head."

"How beautiful the country is!" she says, as they pass fields of clean-shorn sheep, and rosy children bobbing courtesies by the cottage-gates, and wagons of late-gathered hay breathing "odors of Araby" as they crawl by; "how sweet

and clean every thing looks and smells! Philip, I long to see the garden; I am so fond of flowers. Do you remember the lovely bouquets you used to send me in Brussels?"

"Perfectly, my darling" (Colonel Mordaunt seldom calls his wife any thing but "darling," and the word has ceased to grate on her ears as it did at first, recalling the lost voice that spoke it once); "and how you used to turn your nose up at my humble offerings."

"I never told you so, Philip; that must be an invention of your own."

"Perhaps I divined it, Irene; for my eyes were very keen for any thing that concerned you in those days."

"Well, it was very wicked of me, then, and I promise that I won't turn up my nose at the first bouquet you give me from Fen Court."

"You shall have a beauty the very first thing in the morning. I hope the garden will be in good order—I have given sufficient directions on the subject."

"Doesn't Isabella care for flowers?"

"Not much, I think. She is a strange creature in some of her ways. I sometimes wonder, darling, how you and she will get on with one another."

"Why, admirably, of course—I mean to get on with her."

Colonel Mordaunt turns round and gazes at his wife adoringly.

"You are too good!" he says; "O Irene! if I don't make you happy, may God's judgment—"

"Hush! hush!" she interrupts him quickly, "pray don't say that, you make me feel so small."

But see how much less than a woman she would have been not to care for him, who had taken her to his arms, despite his knowledge of her outraged affections, and treated her as though she had flown to them of her own accord.

She does not love him, this gallant gentleman who almost worships her, but she is very grateful and almost happy, and bids fair to make a model wife and mistress. As the carriage reaches the entrance to Fen Court, and rolls up the broad drive through the shrubbery, she becomes quite excited in her admiration.

"Is this ours—really?" she exclaims, inquiringly.

"It is yours, my own darling, every inch of it!" replies her husband.

"O Philip!" and in her delight and surprise she turns and kisses him, for the first time of her own accord.

Colonel Mordaunt flushes up to his eyes with

gratification, and this trifling episode has the power to dispel much of the nervousness with which he has looked forward to introducing his wife to Fen Court.

"Here we are, at last!" he exclaims, as the carriage stops before the bold porch, and a couple of men-servants appear upon the door-step. "Jump down, my darling; Isabella is sure to be waiting for you, and you must be tired to death with this long drive."

"I am not at all tired," is her rejoinder; "and I mean to see every bit of the garden before I go to bed to-night."

Miss Mordaunt is waiting for them in the hall. "Oh, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt! I came—I thought, perhaps—I didn't know—"

"Did you not expect us so soon?" replies Irene, stooping to kiss her sister-in-law. "I think we have come rather quickly."

"Quickly!" echoes Colonel Mordaunt, who is close upon her heels; "why, we have been hours on the road. What time have you ordered dinner, Isabella?"

"At seven—at least I believe at seven—but if you would rather not—"

"The sooner the better," says her brother; "seven will do admirably. And now if you will take Irene up to her bedroom and help her off with her things, I think she will be obliged to you.—You won't dress to-night, darling?"

"Oh, no! Philip; only take the dust off. What a wide staircase, and such pretty carpets! Oh, is this my room? it is beautiful. How nice and fresh it looks. And blue, too! I wonder who chose blue? it is my favorite color."

"It was my brother who ordered it to be furnished with this color. Can I help you off with your bonnet, Mrs. Mordaunt? or perhaps—if you had rather be alone—if I had better go—"

"Oh, no! don't go! I shall be ready directly. But why do you not call me by my Christian name? Surely we are not to be 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' to one another!"

"If you wish it—of course—but I shouldn't have thought—" Miss Mordaunt's deprecating manner is already casting a chill over Irene's coming home.

"Since we are to be sisters, I think it should be so," she answers, with a glance of scrutiny at her companion; but she is not so eager in her manner of addressing her again, and it is a relief to hear her husband's voice asking for admittance.

"Have you every thing you want—are you quite comfortable?—Isabella, where is Mrs. Que-

kett? I thought she would be here to welcome Irene to Fen Court."

Miss Mordaunt telegraphs a look of meaning to her brother—it is very slight, but Irene catches it, and feels immediately that there is something to be concealed.

"Who is Mrs. Quekett?" she demands abruptly, looking from one to the other.

"The house-keeper—" commences Miss Mordaunt.

"Well, hardly a house-keeper, Isabella, although she certainly does keep house for us," interrupts her brother.

"She does keep house for you, and yet she is not your house-keeper," says Irene, merrily; "she must be an anomaly, this Mrs. Quekett. Pray is she young or old, fat or thin, wise or foolish? though, after what you have just said, Philip, I should not be at all surprised to hear she is all of them put together."

"You are a saucy girl, and don't deserve an answer; but when you come to know her, you will acknowledge that Mrs. Quekett is a very wonderful woman, and can be almost any thing she chooses. When I said she was hardly a house-keeper, I meant she was superior to the place. But she lived many years with my father in that capacity, and has always had a home with me since his death. You will find her a great help to you, darling, for I'm sure you cannot know much about house-keeping; and I hope you will get on very well together."

"There is no doubt of it; I always get on well with servants; that is, if they keep their places. But with regard to house-keeping, Philip, I intend to agreeably surprise you. I know much more than you imagine, and mean to make myself perfect. I always thought I should like to have a large house like this to look after, and to keep in spick-span order. I like pretty things, but the romance of untidiness never held any charms for me. I was cut out for an old maid."

"It is lucky for me, darling, that we met before you had made up your mind unalterably upon that subject," says Colonel Mordaunt, laughing, as he draws her arm within his own to lead her to the dining-room. "But, however good a manager you may be, I am sure you will find Mrs. Quekett an admirable assistant, to say the very least of it. She has been always used to manage the household affairs, and, were I you, I should leave them in her hands. Why should you trouble your head about such matters, when I can afford to keep some one to do it for you?"

"Mrs. Quekett will have plenty to do, Philip.

I did not mean that I should rise with the lark each morning to call the maids, or walk about in the trail of the broom and dust-pan, to see that they do their duty; but I've no opinion of a mistress who leaves her work to the servants. Have you?"

At these words Isabella again steals one of those furtive, mutual-understanding glances at Colonel Mordaunt, with an expression that rouses not only Irene's curiosity, but her spirit, and she does not wait for an answer to her question:

"At all events, I mean to try and make myself equal to the position you have placed me in, Philip," she continues.

"And you would be so, my darling, a thousand times over," he whispers, fondly, "even had I placed you on a throne."

This conversation gives a brief insight to the state of mind in which Irene enters on the performance of her new duties. The glances which she intercepted between her sister-in-law and her husband do not give her more than a moment's uneasiness, while they strengthen her purpose of self-dependence.

She misinterprets their meaning: she imagines they arose from their doubt of her capability to maintain her position as mistress of Fen Court; and she becomes determined, in consequence, to prove that they are mistaken. From the hour she accepted Colonel Mordaunt's proposal, and fixed her thoughts upon a future shared with him, Irene has experienced more pleasure from the prospect of having the entire management of the household at Fen Court upon her hands than any thing else.

For, in order to fight successfully with disappointment, or even to fight at all, we must have some definite employment. A man generally has a business or profession to engross his loyal thoughts and shut the door in the face of all the rebel ones (though what a knack they have of peeping through the chinks!); with him the grinding necessity of making bread, either for himself or others, is paramount, and leaves little leisure for painful introspection. It is not that he feels the less for being busy; it is that he has less time to feel. The female sex has in all ages, most undeservedly, gained credit for being the more constant of the two; but, though they mourn more explosively, their grief is neither so bitter nor so long. A man and woman who love each other are irrevocably separated: what happens to them? He seldom speaks of his loss to any one; if he does, it is in short, sharp sentences, that are

dismissed as soon as possible : and he goes about his work as usual ; worries his head over the ledger in his counting-house ; strains every nerve to outwit the counsel for the other side ; conducts three or four services a day, or sits up all night writing for the press. Every now and then, doubtless, a sad thought comes between him and his employment ; he sees her, or hears of her, or the remembrance of something they have shared in the past smites him with sudden pain ; but he puts it away : he *must* put it away, if he is to pursue the business which depends upon his brain, or hand, or skill. Where is the woman, meanwhile, who mourns him, poor wretch, as hopelessly (I have no wish to detract from the sex's capability of loving) as only a woman can ?

Sitting by the fire, most likely, if it is winter, or lying on her bed if it is summer, with a novel in her hand, or a piece of fancy-work, and all her mind fixed upon her absent lover : ready and willing to talk over the cruelty of her disappointment with the first friend who calls : crying till she can hardly see out of her eyes : refusing to attend any party of pleasure (women think giving up balls and theatres and concerts an immense proof of constancy ; they don't understand how the lightest laughter is often used to conceal the heaviest hearts) ; even refusing to eat : sitting down, in fact, with her dead love in her lap, determined to nurse it and weep over it, and recall all she has lost with it, until she makes herself first hysterical and then useless, and lastly ill, and a worry to every one connected with her. Our friends die, and we bury them. Why can't we bury the corpses of our dead hopes in the same way ? The regret we feel for those whom we have lost by death is sad enough and sharp enough, God knows, as it returns in the silent watches of the night, or even amid the clamorous hurry of the day ; but what would it not be were we to keep those still forms ever beside us, to prevent all hope of sorrow sinking into natural sleep ? Yet, that is what most women do with their blighted affections ; and many of them experience actual disappointment when they discover that Time has mercifully closed the wound, and they are "getting over it." They keep it open as long as they possibly can ; they tear the bandage away, which opportunity affords them ; and when the healed spot is no longer capable of laceration, they will sit down and begin to cry afresh over their own inconstancy. And, perhaps, when they have reached this epoch, the man is still experiencing those occasional sharp, cruel stabs of remembrance which are all the worse to bear be-

cause they come so seldom, and the flesh is unused to them.

But if women were brought up to work like men (in other kind, perhaps, but with the same necessity), active employment, either of brain or hand, would place the sexes, in this matter, on a level ; and while much needless misery would be spared to the one, a large amount of comfort would accrue to the other ; for, of all persons with whom to shun intercourse in this life, give me the flabby thing which calls itself a woman who has had "a disappointment"—as though there were no disappointment in the world but that which springs from love turned sour with adversity, like small-beer by thunder.

Irene has never been a woman utterly without a purpose. In her early girlhood, and before she experienced any necessity to gamble with life for forgetfulness, she was accustomed to look upon each day in which she had done nothing as a day to be regretted. She used to read much at that time, not desultorily, but on a fixed plan ; and she would allow no pleasure, however tempting, to lure her from her self-imposed task until it was accomplished. She took a very bright interest in politics ; in the projects of improving the condition of the nation at large, and all new discoveries whether in art, science, or Nature ; attempted, also, as most able minds do, to put down her thoughts on all these things in writing, but was quite satisfied with the ample variety of mental food which ancient and modern literature placed before her, and never had the least desire to cram her own ideas down the throats of others. In fine, until the unfortunate moment arrived in which she met Eric Keir, Irene was a happy, helpful, matter-of-fact woman ; and though the two blows which she received so close together did for a while crush life's purpose out of her and blur her vision of a noble and elevated future, it is all coming back to her now as she finds herself mistress of Fen Court, and the mists that obscured her duty are clearing away from before her eyes. To make her husband's house what it should be (and what Colonel Mordaunt has already deplored, in her hearing, that it is not), one of the best-appointed and pleasantest houses in the county ; to render herself an agreeable, favorite hostess ; to be the ruler of his household, the friend of his tenants, and the benefactor of the poor who are dependent on him—this is the path which she has chalked out for herself, and in which she is resolute to walk. Some women think it beneath them to make their husband's homes comfortable. They want to deliver lectures like Emily Faith-

full, or write books like Mrs. Riddell, or compose songs like Elizabeth Philip, or play *Juliet* like Mrs. Scott Siddons; and if they are not permitted to labor through the medium of the stage, the platform, or the press, their mission is wrested from them: there is nothing more to live for.

Irene Mordaunt knows better. She knows that if genius is not required to keep the machinery of a large establishment in working order, good sense is; and, however capable and far-seeing and practical her head may be, it is none too much so for the worthy employment of the large sums of money that must annually pass through her hands. She does not think the work beneath her; she feels like a queen entering upon her territory; and as her husband, when their dinner is ended, makes the tour with her of his possessions, she notes with a keen eye where improvement is most needed, and registers inward vows to be faithful to the trust committed to her. The knowledge of her responsibility works on Irene like a charm: her spirits rise; her eyes become brighter, her pulses beat more healthfully, and she retires to rest full of expectation for the coming morrow. Such are some of the good effects of realizing that there is work left in the world to do which no one can accomplish so well as ourselves. Had Irene remained at Laburnum Cottage with Mrs. Cavendish, she might have continued to be a lovesick maiden to this day; as it is, the task which she has undertaken with a sincere intention of fulfilling, will lift her, step by step, above the earth-stained troubles of this world, until she has reached the highest elevation her mortal nature is capable of attaining.

She wakes in the morning, fresh as a flower, and active as a squirrel. She has not opened her eyes two seconds before she has thrown up the casement and is inhaling the sweetness of the noisette roses that cluster round it. The pure, cool country air is like a draught of life; the scented flowers are hanging, six and eight upon one stem; across the meadow comes the lowing of the cows as they return from the milking-shed, and the bleating of the calves, that welcome them; and underneath her are the gardeners, sharpening their scythes to mow the dewy lawn. The freshness, the sweetness, the simplicity, the peace of all around her, wake the deepest gratitude in Irene's heart, and make the tears rise to her eyes. She is all anxiety to mingle again in the scenes that lie before her; to retrace her footsteps of last night, and, make sure that it was all reality; and, before Colonel Mor-

daunt has realized that she has left him, she is up and dressed, and roaming over the wet grass, and through the shrubberies and gardens, whence, at sound of the breakfast-bell, she reappears, with rose-tinted cheeks, damp boots, a dragged muslin dress, and her hands full of flowers. Her husband, now looking one way and then the other, is on the door-step, anxiously awaiting her.

"My darling!" he commences, reproachfully.

"Now, Philip, don't scold! I know I'm a horrid object, but it won't take me a minute to change. I've been all through the hot-houses, and the kitchen-gardens, and down the wilderness, and over the bridge by that piece of water; and then I got into a field and found lots of mushrooms. (Do you like mushrooms? they're in my skirt, under the flowers.) And I came back by the meadows you showed me last night, where the horses are, and—oh! I am so tired and wet; but I haven't enjoyed any thing like it for months past."

Colonel Mordaunt looks as though he were enjoying the recital as much as she has done the reality.

"I am so glad to hear it," he says, as he kisses her; "but you can come in to breakfast as you are, can you not?"

"What! with my hair half-way down my back, and my dress clinging to me like a wet flag? I should scarcely look dignified at the head of your table, Philip. Give me ten minutes' grace, to set myself to rights.—Good-morning, Isabella. I have not a hand to offer you, but I have had such a delightful ramble."

Then she turns to the servant in attendance.

"Take these flowers, James, and place them on the sideboard; and bring up the breakfast.—Have you been used to make the tea, Isabella? Will you be so good as to do so for one morning more, in consideration of the novelty of the situation?—I will be in good time to-morrow, Philip; but I had no idea the place was half so lovely, and I ran from one delight to another, and could not tear myself away."

She is mounting the staircase now, still attended by her husband; and Miss Mordaunt looks after her with unfeigned surprise. So young and strange—and yet so cool and at her ease! The woman who has spent all her life in fear, lest she should be saying or doing something wrong, cannot understand, the confidence which is engendered by the knowledge of our own powers of pleasing. In another minute Irene is down again, her hair rearranged, and her dress exchanged for a wrapper of pale blue, which is

wonderfully becoming to her; and as her sister-in-law sees her smile, and hears her talk, and watches her do all the honors of the breakfast-table as though she had sat there for years, she marvels how so bright an apparition can ever have been persuaded to link her fortunes with those of Philip, and take up her residence at Fen Court.

"What are you going to do to-day, Philip?" says Irene, as the meal draws to a conclusion.

Colonel Mordaunt has already risen from table, and taken up his station on the hearth-rug.

"Well, that depends mostly on yourself, my darling. I have a great deal to do, of course, after two months' absence, about the kennel and the farm; but I should hardly like to leave you alone so soon."

"But I shall have Isabella, and plenty of employment. There are all my things to be unpacked; and the new maid seems stupid; so I shall go and superintend her; and I have the dinner to order, and the kitchen to inspect, and to make the acquaintance of Mrs. What's-her-name."

Colonel Mordaunt starts.

"Mrs. Quekett! Ah! true; I should like to introduce Mrs. Quekett to you before I go out, Irene. She is such a very old servant of the family."

"All right, dear. Ring the bell, and tell her to come up now. I am quite ready to see her."

Again does Isabella raise deprecating eyes to her brother's face. Something, which the unsuspecting bride is sure to resent, must come to the surface before long, and, man-like, Colonel Mordaunt tries to throw the responsibility of the disclosure on his sister's shoulders.

"Oh!—ah!—yes: to be sure! I suppose Mrs. Quekett will be able to see Irene now, Isabella?"

The mere question throws Miss Mordaunt into a state of extra flurry.

"I don't know, Philip—I know so little, you see. I am sure I cannot say. Perhaps you had better—but if Mrs. Mordaunt could wait—it is no use to ask me."

"Is the old woman ill?" demands Irene. It is the only solution of the apparent mystery she can imagine.

"Bless you, no! as well as you are," says her husband, forgetting the inexpediency of the confession; "only used to rise late. She has had no mistress, you know, my darling, and you must take some excuses for her in consequence; but—there, I hope to goodness you will get on well

together, and have no quarrels or disagreements of any sort."

"Quarrels, Philip, with the servants!—you need have no fear of that. If Mrs. Quekett has not yet risen, I can easily give my orders for to-day to the cook: I suppose she is efficient and trust-worthy?"

"Oh, yes; only, don't you think that it would be better, just at first, you know, to leave things as they are, and let Quekett manage the dinners for you?"

"No, Philip; I don't. I think were I to do so, that I should be very likely never to gain any proper authority among my servants; and I should rather begin as I intend to go on. I see you have not much faith in my house-keeping," she continues, gayly; "but you have never had an opportunity of judging my powers. Wait till this evening. What time shall we dine?"

"When you choose, my darling: but seven has been the usual hour. I think, Isabella," turning to his sister, "that, as Irene says, it will be better for her to give her dinner orders this morning to the cook: what do you say?"

"Oh, don't ask me, Philip; it must be just as you please: only, what will Quekett think?"

"You can explain the matter to her, surely; and by to-morrow she will be acquainted with Irene. Perhaps she had better not see her until I return. I will come back to lunch."

"What a fuss about nothing!" says Irene, laughing. "My dear Philip, one would think I had never had the management of any servants before. I see how it is—the old house-keeper is jealous of my coming, and you are afraid she may let me see it. Well, then, have no fears: I will talk her out of her jealousy, and we shall be the best of friends by the time you return."

"Who could resist you?" replies the enamored colonel, as he embraces his wife, and leaves the room.

"Now, the very first thing I want to see, Isabella," says Irene, rising from her chair, "is the drawing-room; for people will be coming to call on me by-and-by, you know, and I never fancy a sitting-room till I have arranged it according to my own taste. Will you come with me? You must let me be very *exigante* for the first few days, and keep you all to myself."

For this expression of interest, to which she is so unaccustomed, Isabella Mordaunt feels very much inclined to cast her arms about the speaker's neck and thank her; but her natural nervousness rises uppermost, and she only looks foolish and uneasy.

"The drawing-room!—well, I hardly know—of course it is no business of mine—but I think it is locked."

"Locked!—don't you use it, then?"

"Not often—that is to say, only when we have a dinner-party."

"Oh, I mean to use it every day, and make it the prettiest room in the house. Let us go and inspect it at once. Who has the key?—Quekett?"

"I believe so—I am not sure," commences Miss Mordaunt. Irene answers by ringing the bell.

"James, desire Mrs. Quekett, or whoever has the key of the drawing-room, to send it down to me."

There is a delay of several minutes, and then the footman reappears, with the key in his hand, and a comical expression in his face, half of pleasure, and half of fear, as though a battle had been found necessary in order to achieve his purpose, but that he rather liked the warfare than otherwise. Irene thrusts her arm through that of her sister-in-law, and leads her off in triumph.

"Shocking! Horrible!" is her verdict, as the glories of the Fen Court drawing-room come to view. "My dear Isabella, how could you allow things to remain like this? No flowers—no white curtains—and all the furniture done up in brown holland, as though we had gone out of town! The first thing we must do is to strip off those horrid covers. Where is the house-maid?"

"But, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt"—Isabella cannot yet pluck up courage to address her sister-in-law by any other name—"she thinks—that is, Mrs. Quekett thinks—they are quite necessary for the preservation of the damask."

"And I think them quite unnecessary," retorts Irene, merrily.—"Here, Anne; take off these covers; strip the muslin off the chandeliers, and open all the windows. The room feels as though a corpse had been laid out in it! What a fine piano!—that must come out into the middle of the room."

"It has always stood against the wall," says Isabella.

"Then I am sure it is quite time it had a change. Oh! what a lovely thing for flowers!" seizing an old basin of embossed silver which stands on the floor; "what is this rubbish in it?—rose-leaves?—Turn them out, Anne, and put the bowl on the sideboard in the dining-room. And, stop!—take all the vases away at the same time: I never keep a vase in sight unless it is filled with flowers."

"Yes, ma'am; but, please, what am I to do with these dead leaves?"

"Throw them away."

"Yes, ma'am; only," looking toward Miss Mordaunt, "Mrs. Quekett placed them here, you know, miss!"

"Yes; to be sure; so she did. I hardly know, Mrs. Mordaunt, whether you ought—"

"To throw away Quekett's rose-leaves?" with a hearty laugh; "well, perhaps not; so you can return them to her, Anne, if you choose: only please to relieve my bowl of them as soon as possible."

Then she flits away, altering the disposition of the chairs, and tables; discarding the ornaments which she considers in bad taste; scattering music on the open piano, books and work upon the table, and flowers everywhere—doing all that a woman can, in fact, to turn a commonplace and dull-looking apartment into a temple of fanciful grace and beauty.

"Come, that is a little better!" she exclaims at last; "but it will bear any amount of improvement yet. Flowers are the thing, Isabella;—you can make even an ugly room look nice with plenty of flowers; and there are really beautiful things here. It shall be a very picture of a room before the week is out. And now to my dinner—I had nearly forgotten it. That old woman must be up by this time."

"It is only just eleven," replies Miss Mordaunt.

"As much as that!" with a look of dismay; "my dear Isabella, I shall be all behindhand, and when I have been boasting to Philip! I must see Quekett at once in the morning-room, and then we will arrange our plans for the day."

She flies to the morning-room—a pleasant little apartment next the dining-room, which is to be dedicated to her use—and pulls the bell rather vigorously in her haste.

"James, desire Mrs. Quekett to come up to me at once."

"Yes, ma'am," replies James, and retires, inwardly chuckling. He reads the character of his new mistress, and views with unholy delight domestic differences looming in the distance.

"Won't there be a row!" he remarks, as the house-maid goes unwillingly to deliver the message at the door of Mrs. Quekett's room.

Now, as it happens, Mrs. Quekett is up and stirring: for curiosity to see the bride has overpowered her natural indolence; but she has not quite completed her toilet, and the unwelcome information that she is to "go down-stairs at once

and take her orders from the new missus in the morning-room" does not tend to promote her alacrity.

Another ten minutes have elapsed, when Irene rings the bell again.

"Have you delivered my message to the house-keeper?"

"Yes, ma'am; and she's just coming down the stairs now."

"She must be a little quicker another time," his mistress murmurs. She feels, prophetically, that she is about to have trouble with this "old servant of the family," and she determines at once to assert her authority as head of her husband's household.

Mrs. Quekett enters; Irene looks up, meets her eye, and feels at once that they are enemies. There is something in the woman's glance and manner, even in this first interview, that savors so much of insolent familiarity, that her indignation is roused, and she can hardly speak to her without evincing it.

"I hope I see you well, ma'am," says Mrs. Quekett, sinking into the nearest chair.

"Quite well, thank you!" replies Irene, choking down her wrath and trying to remember all her husband has told of the faithful services of the creature before her. "I have sent for you, Quekett, to take the orders for the dinner. We are rather late this morning"—glancing at her watch—"but, as it is the first time, it is perhaps excusable."

"Ah! I manage all that, ma'am; you will have no trouble about the dinners. I've pleased the colonel and his father before him for over a matter of thirty years, and as I've begun so I shall go on. My cook gives me more trouble than she ought to do, but I shall get rid of her at Michaelmas, if not before, and try one from London instead. They're better taught than these country-women. You're from London yourself, aren't you?"

Under this address Irene sits for a moment stupefied. She can hardly believe she is listening to a servant speaking. She has never been used to hear the domestics in her parent's house address her but in the most deferential tones; and, as she realizes that it really is the house-keeper who sits before her, her blood boils with indignation, and the look she raises should have withered Mrs. Quekett in her chair.

"I think we had better keep to the matter in hand," she answers, loftily. "I intend to give my own orders, Mrs. Quekett, and it will be your place to transmit them to the other servants. I

shall very soon be able to judge what the cook can do, and to decide on the necessity of parting with her or not. Meanwhile, we will speak about the dinner."

She runs through the list of dishes rapidly, names the hour at which she desires the meal to be served, and enjoins the strictest punctuality on the astonished house-keeper.

"And to-morrow morning," says Irene, as she rises from her chair, "I must request you will be in this room by ten o'clock, to receive my orders—and, if I am not here, you can wait for me. I shall go over the kitchens and lower offices this afternoon. Let the servants be prepared to receive me. And—one word, Mrs. Quekett; I have not been accustomed to see servants sit down in my presence."

With that she sails out of the room with the air of an offended queen.

Mrs. Quekett is not subdued, but she is enraged beyond measure. She turns purple and gasps in the chair where her new mistress has left her; and it takes a great deal of bottled porter and a great many stewed kidneys that morning to restore her to any thing like her usual equanimity.

"Wait about here till it pleases her to come and give me her orders! Not for the highest lady in Christendom would I do it, and I'm sure I sha'n't for her. She may give her orders to the cook, and welcome. I don't stir out of my bed for any one until I'm inclined to do it. And not sit down in her presence, indeed! I must speak to the colonel about this. Matters must be settled between the colonel and me before this day closes."

And so, in truth, they must have been, to judge from the forlorn and henpecked appearance with which the colonel enters his wife's dressing-room that evening before retiring to bed. He has passed a very happy day, for Irene has not confided the little domestic trouble of the morning to him; she has thought that she will fight the ignoble battle by herself, and that no servant will presume to make a few quietly-spoken words of caution a pretext for appealing to her master's judgment; but she is mistaken. Colonel Mordaunt has been enduring a very stormy half-hour in that study of his before making his escape up-stairs, and the vision of a peaceful married life has fled before it like a dream. He comes up to Irene's side, looking quite fagged and worn out, and older by ten years than he did in the morning. She notices it at once.

"My dear Philip, how tired you must be!

You have been exerting yourself too much after our long journey yesterday."

"I am only worried, my darling. What is this row between you and Quekett? I did so hope you would have been able to get on with the old woman."

"Has she been complaining to you?"

"She came into my study just now—she has been used to have a talk with me occasionally in the evenings—and told me what had happened. She is very much put out about it, naturally."

"So was I put out about it—naturally! But I didn't immediately bring my troubles to you, Philip, though I conclude I have more right to your sympathy than a servant can have."

"How did it happen?"

"Nothing happened. If Mrs. Quekett is vexed—which she did not intimate to me—I suppose it is because I told her I intended to give the household orders in future. I dare say she has had a great deal of liberty; but that kind of thing can't go on when a man marries."

"Of course not—and I hope she will come round to see it in that light after a time. But she says she would rather you gave your orders to the cook instead of her. You won't mind that, will you?"

"Not at all—I shall prefer it; for, to tell you the truth, I don't quite like your Mrs. Quekett, Philip; her manners are too familiar and assuming to please me."

"Remember how long she has been with us; old servants are apt to forget themselves sometimes."

"Do you think so? My mother had a lady's-maid who had been with her since her marriage, and only left us for a home of her own; she never addressed me except by name, nor thought of sitting down in my presence, though she had known me from my birth."

Colonel Mordaunt grows fidgety.

"Well, dear, I think the best way will be for you and Quekett to see as little of one another as possible. She has been accustomed to a great deal of consideration from us (rather more, perhaps, than the occasion warrants), and I dare say she does feel a little jealous, as you suggested, of your coming here, and monopolizing all the attention. But it will wear off by-and-by. Don't you think so?"—wistfully.

"I don't understand servants being jealous of their mistresses, Philip. But if Mrs. Quekett and I are not to meet, what is the use of our keeping her? After all, I sha'n't want a house-keeper. Let her go."

But at this piece of rank blasphemy her husband looks almost horrified.

"My dear child, do you know what you are talking about? Why, she has been with us for the last thirty years."

"No reason she should remain thirty more. I don't like her, Philip, and I never shall."

"Hush! Pray don't say that. I am sure you will grow to like her."

"I am sure I sha'n't."

"You have not had a proper opportunity yet of judging of her character."

"I have seen quite enough of it. If I were superstitious, Philip, I should think that woman possessed the evil eye—at all events for me."

"What nonsense, my darling! I thought you were too clever to talk like that. Why, if Quekett were to leave Fen Court, I should think the whole house was going to topple down on our heads!"

"And so you wouldn't get rid of her, *even for me?*" whispers Irene, with the most insinuating of upward glances.

"What is there I wouldn't do for you?" her husband answers; and for a few moments delivers himself up to the charm of realizing that he has secured the desire of his heart. But when he leaves her to herself again, the cloud returns to his brow, and his soul is disquieted within him. He feels that he is living on a volcano which is even now trembling beneath his feet, and may at any moment erupt in flames of malice and revenge which shall bring destruction in their train. His life is scarcely more enviable than that of Eric Keir. Each man walks the world with a heavy secret in his breast.

It is August. The harvest is nearly all gathered in, and every one is looking forward to September. Irene has issued her first invitations for the shooting-season: one to her aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, and her daughter Mary, another to Mr. Pettingall—who is most anxious to see his young friend in her new position—and a third to some bachelorette acquaintances of her husband's, whom Colonel Mordaunt assures her she will find delightful. In fact, the house is to be full; and Irene is quite excited at the prospect of entertaining so many guests. She fits about from room to room, followed by the meek Isabella, and issuing her orders without the slightest regard to the feelings of the great Mrs. Quekett. Not that Irene has forgotten Mrs. Quekett during the past month, or forgiven her. The mere fact of the house-keeper's refusal to receive her orders serves

to keep her memory alive in her mistress's bosom and to make the intercourse between them purely nominal. Together they are frigidly polite to one another; and apart they are determinately hostile. Irene has ceased to make any comment on the house-keeper's behavior or to express any desire for her dismissal; she has seen and heard enough during her residence at Fen Court to convince her that to pursue either course is futile, but she does what is far more galling to Mrs. Quekett's pride—she ignores her presence altogether. She makes no calls upon her duty: she neither blames nor praises her—she simply acts as though there were no such person in the house. So Rebecca Quekett continues to lie abed until noon, and to feed off the best of the land, and twist her master round her little finger; but the servants no longer tremble at her presence; she has lost the absolute authority she held over them—she has been transformed from a captious tyrant into an injured but faithful servitor; and she takes good care to drum the fact into the colonel's ears, and to hate the one who has brought about the change. Yet little does Irene reckon her annoyance or her hate; she considers the presence of the house-keeper at Fen Court as an intolerable nuisance, and often wonders how her husband, who can be so firm in some things, should be so weak in this; but consoles herself with the idea that no lot in this world is entirely without its annoyances, and that she might have encountered a worse skeleton in the closet than Mrs. Quekett. Whether the colonel would have agreed with her it is impossible to say. And so we bring them up to the latter days of August.

One morning Colonel Mordaunt receives a letter which seems greatly to disturb him.

"What is the matter, Philip?" demands Irene.

"Nothing that concerns you, my darling!—nothing, in fact, at all."

Yet he sits, with knitted brows, brooding over the contents of the epistle during the rest of breakfast, and reads it through three or four times before the meal is concluded. As Irene leaves the room, he calls his sister to his side.

"Isabella, I am greatly annoyed. Here is a letter from Oliver. He has heard of an opening for a practice somewhere in this neighborhood, and proposes coming down to speak to me about it."

"He can't expect to stay here," says Miss Mordaunt—"at least I should hardly think so—there will not be room for him, you know. The house will be full next week."

"If he sleeps at the inn it will be all the same. I don't want Irene and him to meet."

"Have you never mentioned Oliver to her then?" demands his sister, timidly.

"Cursorily I may, though I doubt if she will remember it. But it is not that, Isabella. You know well enough that if I introduce young Ralston to Irene, it will be difficult to explain why I don't ask him to the court."

"And you think he might not come. It is nearly a year since he has been here."

"Good God! You have not the slightest perception. If Oliver comes here, he must see Quekett; and you know they never meet without a disturbance of some sort; and in her present state of feeling toward Irene I couldn't risk it. There is no knowing what she might not say."

"Then, what do you propose to do?"

"Put off Oliver till Quekett goes to town. If she were away, I should have no fear. Doesn't she intend to pay her usual visit to Lady What's-her-name this autumn?"

"I don't know—I am almost afraid she doesn't. I was speaking to her about it yesterday; but she has not been herself at all lately—she's quite—crotchety," says Miss Mordaunt; as though crotchety were an entirely new phase in Mrs. Quekett's character.

"Means to stay here on purpose, I suppose, because she knows we want the house to ourselves. Isabella, I often wish I had taken Irene abroad again. I question whether it would not be worth my while to take up a residence there, even now. She likes Continental life, and I—well, any life almost would be preferable to this. I live in constant dread of an explosion."

"Wouldn't it"—commences Miss Mordaunt, timidly—"wouldn't it be better, Philip—of course you know best—but still I can't help thinking—"

"What?—what?" he interrupts, impatiently.

"That if you were to tell her—"

"Irene!"—the color fades out of Colonel Mordaunt's face at the bare idea—"to tell Irene? Why, Isabella, you must be mad to think of it!"

They are engaged out to a dinner-party that evening; a very grand dinner-party given by Sir Samuel and Lady Grimstone, who live at Calverley Park, about twelve miles from Priestley, and consider themselves of so much importance that they never even left their cards at Fen Court until they heard that the owner had brought home a wife to do the honors there. For, al-

though Colonel Mordaunt, as master of the Priestley foxhounds, holds an important position in the county, and is on visiting terms with the best houses in the neighborhood, his poor meek sister has hitherto been completely overlooked.

"A single woman, my dear!"—as Lady Grimstone remarked, when giving lessons on the inexpediency of forming useless acquaintances, to her newly-married daughter, Mrs. Eustace Lennox Jones—"a single woman, in order to gain a passport to society, should be either beautiful, accomplished, or clever. If she can look handsome, or sing well, or talk smartly, she amuses your other guests; if not, she only fills up the place of a better person. Nothing is to be had for nothing in this world; and we must work for our social as well as our daily bread."

"But, why then, mamma," demanded on that occasion, Mrs. Eustace Lennox Jones, "do you invite Lady Arabella Vane? I am sure she is neither young, beautiful, nor witty; and yet you made up a party expressly for her last time she was in Priestley."

"Oh, my dear! you forget how wealthy she is, and how well connected. With three unmarried girls on my hands, I could never afford to give up the *entrée* of her house in town. Besides, she has brothers! No, my dear Everilda, learn where to draw the line. The great secret of success in forming an agreeable circle of acquaintances is to exclude the useless of either sex."

And so poor Miss Mordaunt has been excluded hitherto as utterly useless, as in good truth she is; but my Lady Grimstone has been obliged to include her in the invitation to the bride and bridegroom. A young and pretty bride, fresh from the hands of the best society and a first-rate milliner, is no mean acquisition at a country dinner-table; better than if she were unmarried, especially where there are three daughters still to dispose of. And the useless single woman must needs come in her train. It is a great event to Isabella, though she is almost too shy to enjoy the prospect, and the kindness with which Irene has helped and advised her concerning her dress for the occasion has made her feel more inwardly indignant against Mrs. Quekett, and more afraid of that amiable creature's tongue than she has ever been before. Colonel Mordaunt, too, who expects to meet several influential supporters of his favorite pursuit, has been looking forward to the evening with unusual pleasure and with great pride, at the thought of introducing his young wife to his old friends; he is all the more disap-

pointed, therefore, when, after a long day spent in the harvest-fields, he returns home to find Irene lying down with a face as white as chalk, and a pain in her head so acute that she cannot open her eyes to the light, nor speak beyond a few words at a time.

"It is so stupid of me," she murmurs, in reply to his expressions of concern; "but I am sure it will go off by-and-by."

Isabella brings her strong tea, and she sits up and forces herself to swallow it, and feels as though her head would burst before the feat were accomplished.

"I think it must be the sun," she says, in explanation to her husband. "I felt it very hot upon my head this afternoon, and the pain came on directly afterward. Don't worry yourself about it, Philip; we need not start till six. I have a full hour in which to rest myself, and I am sure to be better before it is time to dress."

When that important moment arrives, she staggers to her feet, and attempts to go through the process of adornment; but her heart is stouter than her limbs; before it is half completed, she is seized with a deadly sickness and faintness, which prove beyond doubt that she is quite unfit for any further exertion that night; and reluctantly she is obliged to confess that she thinks she had better remain at home.

"How I wish I could stay with you!" says her husband, who is quite put out of conceit with the coming entertainment by the knowledge that she cannot accompany him; "but I suppose it would never do for us all to turn defaulters."

"Assuredly not," says Irene. "You will enjoy it when you get there, Philip, and I shall do very well here, lying on the sofa, with Phœbe to look after me, and most likely be quite recovered by the time you return. That is the annoying part of these sudden attacks. You generally begin to revive at the very moment when it is too late to do so."

"Any way, I couldn't take you as you are now," replies Colonel Mordaunt, "for you look perfectly ghastly. Well, I suppose it is time we should be off. Both these stupid dinners!—Isabella, are you ready?—Phœbe, take good care of your mistress.—*Au revoir*, my darling." And with that he steps into the carriage with his sister, and they drive away to Calverley Park. So my Lady Grimstone, much to her ladyship's disgust, only gets her "useless single woman," after all.

"I am much better," says Irene, two hours

after, as she opens her eyes at the entrance of her maid. "What o'clock is it, Phœbe? have I been asleep?"

"It's close upon half-past seven, ma'am; and you've been asleep for more than two hours. I was that pleased when I heard you snore; I was sure it would do you good."

"How romantic!" laughs her mistress; "but I suppose one may be excused for snoring, when one's head is a mass of pain and buried under three sofa-cushions. What a tumbled heap I have been lying in: and I feel as confused as though I had been asleep, like Rip Van Winkle, for a hundred years. What is that you have there, Phœbe? Coffee! Give it me without milk or sugar. It is the very thing I wanted. And throw that window wide open. Ah! what a heavenly coolness! It is like breathing new life."

"Let me fetch your brush, ma'am, and brush through your hair. You'll feel ever so much better after that! I know so well what these headaches as come from the sun are. Your head is just bursting for an hour or two, and you feels as sick as sick; and then of a sudden it all goes off and leaves you weak like; but well—"

"That is just it, Phœbe," says Irene, smiling at the graphic description; "and all that I want to set me up again is a little fresh air. Make me tidy, and give me my hat, and I will try what a turn in the garden will do for me. No; don't attempt to put it up; my head is far too tender for that; and I shall see no one."

So, robed in a soft muslin dress, with her fair hair floating over her shoulders, and her garden hat swinging in her hand, Irene goes down the staircase, rather staggeringly at first, but feeling less giddy with each step she takes, and out into the Fen Court garden. She turns toward the shrubbery, partly because it is sequestered, and partly because there are benches there on which she loves to sit and listen to the nightingales singing in the plantation beyond.

It is a very still evening; although the sun has so long gone down. Scarcely the voice of bird or insect is to be heard, and the rich August flowers hang their heads as though the heat had burned all their sweetness out of them, and they had no power left wherewith to scent the air. But to Irene, risen from a feverish couch, the stillness and the calm seem doubly grateful; and as she saunters along, silently and slowly, for she feels unequal to making much exertion, her footsteps leave no sound behind them.

She enters the shrubbery, which is thick and

situated at some little distance from the house, and walks toward her favorite tree, an aged holly, which shelters a very comfortable modern bench of iron. What is her surprise, on reaching the spot, to find it is not at her disposal? The figure of a man, with the back of his head toward her, is stretched very comfortably the length of the seat, while he pours forth volumes of smoke from a meerschaum in front.

Irene's first thought is to beat a retreat: is not her back hair guiltless of ribbon, net, or comb? But the surprise occasioned by encountering a stranger where she least expected to do so has elicited a little "Oh!" from her, which has caught his ear. He looks round, leaps off his seat, and in another moment is standing before her, very red in the face, with his wide-awake in his hand, and his meerschaum smoking away all by itself on the shrubby bench.

Both feel they ought to say something, and neither knows which should begin first. As usual, in most cases of difficulty, woman wins the day.

"Pray don't let me disturb you," she commences, though without the least idea if he has any right there. "I am only taking a little walk through the shrubbery; you need not move!"

"It is I that should apologize for trespassing, although I am not aware to whom I have the pleasure of speaking," he answers, and then stops, waiting for a clew to her identity. He is a good, honest-looking fellow, of three or four and twenty, with bright blue eyes, and hair of the color usually called "sandy;" not very distinguished in appearance, perhaps, which idea is strengthened at first sight by the rough style of dress in which he is attired, and the "horsey" look about his breastpin, tie, and watch-chain. And yet, there is something in the face that is turned toward her (notwithstanding that an inflamed look about the eyes and cheek-bones tells tales of a fast life); something of respectful admiration for herself, and delicacy lest he should have offended by his presence, that wins Irene's liking, even at this very early stage of her acquaintance with him.

"Perhaps you know Colonel Mordaunt, or were waiting here to see him," she goes on somewhat hurriedly; "but he is not at home this evening."

"I do know Colonel Mordaunt," replies the stranger, "and that he is from home. But, excuse me, is it possible I can be addressing Mrs. Mordaunt?"

"I am Mrs. Mordaunt," says Irene, simply.

"My uncle's wife!"

"Your uncle! Is my husband your uncle?"

In her surprise she moves a few steps nearer him. "But what, then, is your name?"

"Oliver Ralston; at your service, madam," he answers, laughing.

"Ralston! oh, of course, I have heard Philip speak of you. I remember it distinctly now; but it was some time ago. I am very glad to see you. How do you do?"

And then they shake hands and say "How do you do?" to each other in the absurd and aimless manner we are wont to use on meeting, although we know quite well how each one "does" before our mouths are opened.

"But why did you not come to the house, Mr. Ralston?" continues Irene, presently. "I do not think Colonel Mordaunt had any idea of your arrival. He has gone with his sister to dine at the Grimstones. I should have gone too, except for a racking headache."

"It is evident you have not heard much about me, Mrs. Mordaunt, or you would be aware that I have not the free run of Fen Court that you seem to imagine."

"Of your own uncle's house? What nonsense! I never could believe that. But why, then, are you in the shrubbery?"

"I will tell you frankly, if you will permit me. I am an orphan, and have been under the guardianship of my uncle ever since I was a baby. I am a medical student also, and have held the post of house-surgeon at one of the London hospitals for some time. London doesn't agree with me, morally or physically, and I have a great desire to get some practice in the country. I heard of something that might suit me near Priestley, yesterday, and wrote to my uncle concerning it. Afterward I was told, if I wished for success, I must lose no time in looking after the business myself. So I ran down this morning and put up at the 'Dog and Fox,' and, as I heard the Fen Court people were all going out to Calverley Park to dinner (indeed, the carriage passed me as I was loitering about the lanes, some two hours since), I thought I might venture to intrude so far as to smoke my pipe on one of the shrubbery benches. This is a true and particular confession, Mrs. Mordaunt, and I hope, after hearing it, that you will acquit the prisoner of malice prepense in intruding on your solitude."

But she is not listening to him.

"At the 'Dog and Fox!'" she answers; "that horridly low little place in the middle of the village! And for Colonel Mordaunt's neph-

ew! I never heard of such a thing. I am sure your uncle will be exceedingly vexed when you tell him. And Fen Court with a dozen bedrooms—why, it is enough to make all Priestley talk."

"Indeed, it was the best thing I could do—my uncle had not invited me here; and, as I told you before, I am not sufficiently a favorite to be able to run in and out just as I choose."

"Then I invite you, Mr. Ralston—I am mistress of Fen Court; and in the absence of my husband I beg you will consider yourself as my guest. We will go back to the house together."

"But, Mrs. Mordaunt, you are too good—but you do not know—you do not understand—I am afraid my uncle will be vexed—"

"He will not be vexed with any thing I choose to do, Mr. Ralston; but if he is vexed at this, I am quite sure I shall be vexed with him. Come, at all events, and have some supper, and wait up with me for his return. Come!"

She beckons him with an inclination of her head as she utters the last word, and he is fain to follow her. They pass through the shrubberies and garden, and take a turn or two down the drive, and have grown quite friendly and familiar with one another (as young people brought together, with any excuse to be so, soon become) by the time they reach the house again.

"Of course I am your aunt!" Irene is saying, as the porch comes in view; "and you must call me so. I feel quite proud of having such a big nephew. I shall degenerate into an old twaddler by-and-by, like poor Miss Higgins, who is always talking of 'my neevy the captain'—'my neevy the doctor' will sound very well, won't it? particularly if you'll promise to be a real one, with M. D. after your name."

"If any thing could induce me to shake myself free of the natural indolence that encumbers me," he is answering, and rather gravely, "it would be the belief that some one like yourself was good enough to take an interest in my career—" when, straight in the path before them, they encounter Mrs. Quekett, who, with a light shawl cast over her cap, has come out to enjoy the evening air.

Irene is passing on, without so much as a smile or an inclination of the head by way of recognition. She has received so much covert impertinence at Mrs. Quekett's hands, that she is not disposed to place herself in the way of more; and the very sight of the house-keeper is obnoxious to her. But Mrs. Quekett has no intention of permitting herself to be so slighted. At the first

sight of Oliver Ralston she started, but by the time they meet upon the graveled path she has laid her plans.

"Good-evening, ma'am!" she commences, with forced courtesy to her so-called mistress, and then turns to her companion.—"Well, Master Oliver! who would have thought of seeing you here? I am sure the colonel has no expectations of your coming."

"I dare say not, Mrs. Quekett; he could hardly have, considering I had not time to write and inform him of my arrival."

"And how will he like it, Master Oliver, when he does hear it, eh? He's not over-pleased in general to be taken by surprise."

Here Irene, who cannot help saying what she feels, injudiciously puts in her oar.

"It can be no concern of yours, Quekett, what Colonel Mordaunt thinks or does not think, nor can your opinion, I imagine, be of much value to Mr. Ralston. He will sleep here to-night; see that the Green-Room is prepared for him."

"When the colonel gives orders for it I will, ma'am; but you will excuse me for saying that Mr. Oliver has never been put in the Green-Room yet, and I don't expect that he will be."

"You will excuse me for saying, Mrs. Quekett," retorts Irene, now fairly roused, "that, as I am mistress of Fen Court, and you are the house-keeper, you will prepare any room for my guests that I may choose to select for their accommodation."

"I take my orders from the colonel," replies the woman, in a quietly insolent manner; "and as for the Green-Room, it was always kept for gentlemen in my time, and I don't expect that the colonel will choose to make any alterations now to what it was then." And so stumped past them.

Irene is violently agitated—her face grows livid—her hands turn cold. She drags Oliver after her into the Fen-Court dining-room, and there turns round on him with a vehemence that alarms him, lest they should be overheard.

"Mr. Ralston!—you know this place—you know your uncle—you have known them all for years. Tell me, for Heaven's sake, *what is the reason that that woman is permitted to behave toward us as she does.*"

CHAPTER VI.

"*What is the reason that that woman is permitted to behave toward us as she does?*"

Irene closes the dining-room door with a loud slam as she speaks, and, as she turns to confront him again, Oliver Ralston sees that the pallor that overspread her features at the house-keeper's insulting speech has given way to a rosy flush of anger.

"Indeed I cannot tell you, Mrs. Mordaunt: I have asked myself the same question for years past, but never been able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. But you are trembling; pray sit down—this scene has overcome you."

"Overcome me! How could it do else but overcome me? I have not been used to see servants assume the place of mistresses; and I feel, since I have come to Fen Court, as though the world were turned upside down. Mr. Ralston, do you know that that woman occupies one of the best rooms in the house?"

"I know it well! I was sent back to school once, in the midst of my holidays, for having had the childish curiosity to walk round it."

"That she lies in bed till noon," continues Irene, "and has her breakfast carried up to her; that she does nothing here to earn her living, but speaks of the house and servants as though they were her own property—"

"I can well believe it."

"And that she has actually refused to receive any orders from me."

"Not really!" exclaims Oliver Ralston, earnestly.

"Really and truly!"

"And what did my uncle say to it?"

"That I had better give my orders to the cook instead!"

There is silence between them for a few minutes, till Irene goes on, passionately:

"I could not bear it—I would not bear it—if it were not for Philip. But he is the very best and kindest man in the world, and I am sure he would prevent it if he could. Sometimes, Mr. Ralston, I have even fancied that he is more afraid of Quekett than any of us."

"It is most extraordinary," muses Oliver, "and unaccountable. That there is a mystery attached to it I have always believed, for the most quixotic devotion to a father's memory could hardly justify a man in putting up with insult from his inferiors. Why, even as a child, I used to remark the difference in my uncle's be-

havior toward me when Quekett was away. His manner would become quite affectionate."

"Doesn't she like you, then?"

"She *hates* me, I believe."

"But why?"

"I have not the least idea, unless it is that boys are not easily cowed into a deferential manner, and Mrs. Quekett has always stood greatly on her dignity. Do you not see how frightened Aunt Isabella is of her?"

"Indeed I do. I waylaid her, only yesterday, going up to the old woman's room with the newspapers, that had but just arrived by the morning's post. I took them all back again. 'Not today's, if you please, Isabella,' I said. 'I should think yesterday's news was quite fresh enough for the servants' hall.' 'Oh! but Mrs. Quekett has always been accustomed,' she began—you know her funny way—but I had mine in the end. And Philip said I was right. He always does say so whenever I appeal to him. But why can't he get rid of her?"

"Why indeed! Perhaps there is some clause attached to the conditions on which he holds the property, of which we know nothing. I suppose it will all come to light some day. Discussion is futile."

"And I am not sure that it is right," replies Irene, blushing. "Perhaps I should not have spoken so freely as I have, but I was much annoyed. Whatever Colonel Mordaunt's reasons may be for keeping Mrs. Quekett, I am sure of one thing—that they are good and just, for he is of too upright and honorable a character to lend his hand to any thing that is wrong."

"My uncle is a happy man to have so staunch a defender in his absence," says Oliver, admiringly.

"If his wife does not defend him, who shall?" she answers; "but all this time I am forgetting that you have had no refreshment, Mr. Ralston. What a careless hostess you must think me! Now confess that you have had no dinner."

"Well, none that deserves that name, certainly."

"I thought so; but what can you expect, if you go and stay at a wretched hovel like the 'Dog and Fox?' Let us see what the Court-larder can produce," ringing the bell. "At all events, Mrs. Quekett shall not balk us of our supper."

She orders the table to be spread, and in a very short time a substantial repast is placed before them, to which they sit down together, banishing the subject of Mrs. Quekett by mutual con-

sent, until the colonel shall return again, and chatting on such topics as are more consistent with their youth and relative positions.

At eleven o'clock the carriage-wheels are heard grating on the graveled drive, and Irene starts to her feet joyfully.

"Here he is," she cries. "Now we will have this matter set right for us."

Oliver also rises, but does not appear so confident: on the contrary, he remains in the background until the first salutations between Mrs. Mordaunt and the returning party are over. Then his uncle catches sight of him.

"Holloa! who have we here? Why, Oliver"—with the slightest shade of annoyance passing over his face—"I had no idea you intended coming down so soon. Why didn't you say so in your letter? When did you arrive?"

But his wife gives him no time to have his questions answered.

"Now, are you not pleased?" she exclaims. "Have I not done right? I met this gentleman in the shrubbery, Philip, smoking—all by himself; and, when I found he was your nephew, and was actually staying at that dirty little 'Dog and Fox'—fancy sleeping in that hole!—I gave him an invitation to Fen Court on the spot, and made him come back with me. Now, wasn't I right?—say so!"—with her face in dangerous proximity to the colonel's.

"Of course you were right, my darling—you always are," he replies, kissing her; "and I am very glad to see Oliver here.—Have you—have you seen old Quekett?" he continues, in rather a dubious tone, turning to his nephew.

But Irene again interferes.

"Seen her, Philip—I should think we had seen her, and heard her into the bargain. She has been so *horribly* rude to us."

Colonel Mordaunt's face flushes.

"Rude! I hope not! Perhaps you misinterpreted what she said, Irene. You are rather apt to take offense in that quarter, you know, young lady."

"I could not possibly mistake her meaning; she spoke too plainly for that. Besides, Mr. Ralston was with me, and heard what she said. She as good as told him he was not a gentleman!"

Colonel Mordaunt grows scarlet.

"Oh! come! come! don't let us think or talk any more about an old woman's crotchety speeches."

"But, Philip, we *must* talk, because the worst is to come. I told her to have the Green-Room

prepared for Mr. Ralston, and she flatly refused to do so without your orders."

"Well, give her my orders, then!"

"Indeed, I shall do no such thing!" with a slight pout. "If mine are not to be obeyed, you must deliver your own. Meanwhile no room is ready for your nephew, and—our guest, remember!"

"Well, my darling, ring the bell, then, and tell them to get it ready," he answers, testily.

The bell resounds through the house.

"Order Quekett"—Irene issues the command with a sharpness very foreign to her—"to have the Green-Room prepared at once for Mr. Ralston. Remember, the Green-Room!"

As soon as the servant has disappeared, Colonel Mordaunt seems most anxious to drop the subject.

"Well, Oliver, and so you think of practising in the country, eh? That's not the road to fame, remember."

"I am afraid the road I am treading now, sir, will not lead me there either. A town life is too expensive and too full of temptation for such a weak fool as I am. I cannot resist it, therefore I must put it out of my way."

"That is true strength," says Irene, with kindling eyes. She is standing now against her husband, and has drawn one of his arms round her waist.

"But why seek work near Priestley—the worst possible place you could come to?"

"Only because I heard of it here. A Dr. Robinson, of Fenton, advertised for an assistant, and I thought it might be an opening. I saw him this morning."

"And have you decided any thing?"

"Certainly not. Robertson and I like the looks of each other, and I think we should pull together. But I should not dream of settling any thing unless I had consulted you."

"Right!" To-morrow I may be able to advise you; to-night I am too sleepy.—Come, Irene, are you ready for bed?"

"Quite ready;" and the party separates. On her way up-stairs, Irene peeps into the Green-Room, half expecting to find it dark and deserted. But no; candles are burning on the toilet-table, towels and soap and other necessaries are in their proper places, and a couple of rosy house-maids are beating up the pillows and making the bed. All is right so far; and Irene enters her own room, almost ready to believe that Mrs. Quekett must have repented of her hasty behavior.

Here she finds her husband waiting for her.

"Irene," he commences, gravely, "don't try and persuade young Ralston to remain here over to-night."

"Of course I will not, if it is against your wish, Philip. But I thought, in asking him, that I was only doing just what you would have done yourself."

"Oh, yes! it doesn't matter—I am glad enough to see the boy—only he might have timed his visit more conveniently. We shall be full next week, you know."

She does not know any such thing, nor does she heed it. Another mystery is troubling her now.

"Philip! why have you never told me about this nephew of yours?"

"I have told you, haven't I? Don't you remember my mentioning him one day at Weymouth?"

"I do; but it was only *en passant*. Yet he tells me he is your ward."

"Well, a kind of ward. I wish he were not"—with a sigh.

"Does he give you so much trouble?"

"A great deal, and has always done so. He leads much too fast a life, and his health has given way under it, and his morals. He drinks too much and smokes too much—he has even gambled. It is for this reason, chiefly, that I do not wish him to become intimate with you. I value my precious girl too much to expose her purity to contamination."

She slips her hand into his.

"Too hard a word, Philip. How could Mr. Ralston's company injure me? He is not likely to infect me with the vices you mention. But, if you alienate him from all respectable society, what incentive will he ever have to relinquish them? And he is an orphan, too! poor fellow!"

"You like him, Irene?"

"Yes; I like his face; it is open and candid. I like his manner, too, which is so entirely free from self-conceit. I feel that I should like to be a friend to him. Why should I not try?"

"You shall try, my darling—at least, when Quekett is gone to town. But, to tell you the truth, Irene, Oliver and she are sworn enemies, and there is no peace in the house while they are together."

"Why do you allow it, Philip?" says Irene, stoutly. "Why don't you tell that woman she must either respect your guests, or go?"

"She doesn't look on Oliver as a guest," he replies, evasively. "She has known him from a baby."

"She has not known me from a baby," says his wife, bitterly; "and yet she speaks to me as no menial has ever presumed to speak before. O Philip! if it were not for you, I couldn't stand it!"

"Hush! hush! my darling, it shall not occur again, I promise you. I shall speak to Quekett, and tell her I will not have you annoyed in this manner. You saw that I upheld your authority this evening."

"Yes, I did. Thank you for it, and I hope it will be a lesson to the old wretch, for I detest her!"

"Strong words for a lady!" laughs Colonel Mordaunt, simply because he does not echo the sentiment.

He takes up his candlestick, and moves a little way toward the door. Then he returns suddenly, bends over his wife, and kisses her.

"Thank you," he says, softly, "for wishing to befriend poor Oliver, my dear!"

At these words, what Mr. Ralston told her concerning his uncle's affection being more demonstrative at one time than another, rushes into her mind, and she says, abruptly:

"Did you love his mother very much, Philip?"

"*His mother!*" Colonel Mordaunt appears quite upset by the remark.

"Yes; your sister; you never had a brother, had you?"

"No! I never had a brother," he answers, vaguely.

"Then Oliver is your sister's child, I suppose. Which sister? Was she older than Isabella?"

"No! she was two years younger." Colonel Mordaunt has recovered himself by this time, and speaks quite calmly. "I had three sisters, Anne, Isabella, and Mary. Poor Mary made a runaway match and her father never spoke to her afterward."

"Well!"

"When she was dying she wrote to me (she had always been my favorite sister, poor girl!) and asked me to go and see her. Of course I went (she had been a widow for more than a year then, and was living at Cannes), and stayed by her to the last. Then I returned home, and—and—brought Oliver with me."

"Her only child, of course."

"The only child—yes. My father would have nothing to say to the boy; he was a little chap of about two years old at the time, and so I kept him. What else could I do?"

"And have brought him up and educated him, and every thing since. O Philip, how good

of you—how very kind and good! How I do love and admire you for it!" And she seizes her husband's head between her hands and gives it a good squeeze. On being released, Colonel Mordaunt appears very red and confused.

"Don't, my darling, pray don't; I am not worthy of your pure affection; I wish I were. I have only done what common justice demanded of me."

"And you will let me help you to finish the task," says Irene. "I dare say all these things—the knowledge of his orphanhood and that his grandfather wouldn't acknowledge him—have weighed on his mind, poor boy, and driven him to the excesses of which you complain. Let us be his friends, Philip; good, firm, honest friends; ready to praise him when he is right, but not afraid to blame him when he is wrong—and you will see him a steady character yet. I am sure of it—there is something in the very expression of his face that tells me so."

Her husband catches her enthusiasm; thanks her again for the interest she displays on behalf of his nephew; and leaves her just in the mood to confront Mrs. Quekett and defeat her with her own weapons. And on the landing, outside the bedroom-door, where she had probably been airing her ear at the keyhole, he intercepts her.

"Quekett!" he says, loftily, as she starts at his forthcoming, "I wish to say two words to you in my dressing-room. Be so good as to follow me."

He stalks to the hall of judgment majestically with his candlestick in his hand, and she follows in his train, but she will not stoop so low as to close the dressing-room door upon their entrance; and so the colonel has to return and do it himself, which rather detracts from his assumption of dignity.

"Well, sir!" she commences from the chair in which she has, as usual, ensconced herself; "and what may your two words be? I have rather more than two to say to you myself; and as it's usual for ladies to come first, perhaps I'd better be the one to begin."

"You can do as you like," replies Colonel Mordaunt, whose courage is all oozing out of his fingers' ends at being shut up alone with the old beldame.

"My words won't take long to say, though they may be more than yours. It just comes to this, colonel; you promised me Oliver shouldn't stay in this house again, and you've broke your promise, that's all."

"I promised you that his staying here should

never inconvenience you, and you have got to prove that it will do so. Besides, it is almost entirely your own fault that it has occurred. If you had restrained your feelings a little this evening, as any prudent person would have done, you would not have excited Mrs. Mordaunt to try her influence against yours. You are carrying the game too far, Quekett. You have spoken rudely to my wife, and that is a thing that I cannot countenance in you or any one."

"Oh, yes; of course, *my wife*. Every thing's *my wife* now; and let by-gones be by-gones, and all the past forgotten."

"I think by-gones should be by-gones, Quekett, when we can do no good by raking them up again."

"Not for our own ill-convenience, colonel, certainly. But to such as me, who have held by one family for a space of thirty years, and suffered with it as the Lord alone knows how, to see a place turned topsy-turvy and the servants all helter-skelter to please the freaks of a young girl, no one can say but it's trying. Why, there's not a chair or a table in that drawing-room that stands in the same place as it used to do; and as for the dinners, since she's been at what you call the head of your establishment, there's not been a dinner placed upon the table that I'd ask a work-house pauper to sit down and eat with me!"

"Well, well," says Colonel Mordaunt, impatiently, "these are my grievances surely, and not yours. If you have no worse complaint to bring against Mrs. Mordaunt than this, I am satisfied. But what has it to do with your refusing to take her orders?"

"Her orders, indeed!" says the house-keeper, with a sniff.

"To follow her wishes, then, if you like them better, with respect to so simple a thing as having one room or another prepared for her guests."

"The Green-Room for Oliver," she interrupts, sarcastically; "I never heard of such a thing!"

"You, at all events," he answers, sternly "should be the last to raise an objection to it."

"But I do raise it, colonel, and I shall. I say it's absurd to treat that lad as though he was a nobleman (why, you haven't a better room to put the Prince of Wales in, if he came to visit you); and then to think of that—"

"Be careful what you say, Quekett. Don't make me too angry. I shall stand up for Oliver Ralston—"

"Oliver Fiddlesticks!"

"Whatever the rest of the family may do;

and you, who talk so much of clinging to us and being faithful to our interests, should uphold, instead of fighting against me in this matter. I confess that I cannot understand it. You loved his mother, or I conclude you did—"

"*Loved his mother!*" echoes the woman, shrilly, as she rises from her chair; "it is because I loved his mother, colonel, that I hate the sight of him; it is because I remember her innocent girlhood, and her blighted womanhood, and her broken-hearted death, that to hear him speak and see him smile, in his bold way, makes me wish she had died before she had left behind her such a mockery of herself. I can't think what she was after not to do it, for she hadn't much to live for at the last, as you know well."

"Poor Mary!" sighs the colonel.

"Ah! *poor Mary*; that's the way the world always speaks of the lucky creatures that have escaped from it. I don't call her *poor Mary*, and turn up the whites of my eyes after your fashion; but I can't live in the same house with her son, and so I've told you before. Either Oliver goes or I go. You can take your choice."

"But you are talking at random, Quekett. You have got a crotchet in your head about Oliver, just as you have a crotchet in your head about receiving Mrs. Mordaunt's orders, and one is as absurd as the other. Just try to look at these things in a reasonable light, and all would go smoothly."

But Mrs. Quekett is not to be smoothed down so easily

"You can do as you please, colonel, but my words stand. You have chosen to keep Master Oliver here."

"I could not have done otherwise without exciting suspicion; would you have me blab the story to all the world?" he says, angrily.

"Oh! if you go on in this way, colonel, I shall blab it myself, and save you the trouble. As if it wasn't enough to have the Court pulled to pieces before my eyes, and to be spoken to as if I was the scum of the earth, without being crossed in this fashion. You told me just now, colonel, not to make you *too* angry—don't you do the same by me, or I may prove a tougher customer than I've done yet. Now, do you mean to let Oliver stay here, or no?"

"I shall let him remain as long as it seems proper to myself," replies her master, whose temper is now fairly roused.

The house-keeper can hardly believe her ears.

"You—will—let—him—remain!" she gasps.

"And why don't you add, 'according to Mrs. Mordaunt's wishes?'"

"I do add it, Quekett—'according to Mrs. Mordaunt's wishes.' Mrs. Mordaunt is mistress here, and the length of her guests' visits will be determined by her desire. And while she is mistress here, remember that I will have her treated by you as a mistress, and not as an equal."

Quekett stares at him for a moment in silent surprise; and then the angry blood pumps up into her face, filling her triple chins until they look like the wattles of an infuriated turkey, and making her voice shake with the excitement that ensues.

"Very well, colonel. I understand you. You have said quite enough," she replies, quivering.

"It is as well you should understand me, Quekett, and I ought to have said all this long before. You are angry now, but, when you have had time to think over it, you will see that I am right."

"Very well, colonel—that is quite sufficient—you will have no more trouble on my account, I can assure you;" and with that Mrs. Quekett sweeps out of the dressing-room.

Colonel Mordaunt doesn't feel quite comfortable after her departure: it has been too abrupt to leave a comfortable impression behind it: but he consoles himself with the reflection that he has done what is right (not always a reflection to bring happiness with it, by-the-way, and often accompanied by much the same cold comfort presented by gruel, or any other nastiness that we swallow in order to do us good); and, seeking Irene's presence again, sleeps the sleep of the just, trusting to the morning's light to dispel much of his foreboding.

The morning's light dispels it after this wise: Between six and seven Irene is wakened by a strange sound by her bedside, something between the moaning of the wind and a cat's mew; and jumps up to find her sister-in-law standing there, looking as melancholy as a mute at a funeral, and sniffing into a pocket-handkerchief.

"Good gracious, Isabella! what is the matter? Is Philip—"

But no; Philip is occupying his own place of honor, and has not yet opened his eyes upon this wicked world.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"Oh, no, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt; but Mrs. Quekett—I shouldn't have ventured in here, you may be quite sure—" and here Isabella's virgin

eyes are modestly veiled—"except that Mrs. Quekett is—oh! what *will* Philip say?"

"Is she dead?" demands Irene, with a lively interest not quite in accordance with the solemn inquiry.

"Dead! My dear Mrs. Mordaunt, no!"

"What is the row?" says her brother, now awake for the first time.

"O Philip, Mrs. Quekett is *gone*."

"Gone! where to?"

"I don't know; but I think to London—to Lady Baldwin's—I tried to stop her, but I couldn't; she *would* go."

"Jubilate!" cries Irene, clapping her hands. "I am so glad. Is she really gone? It's too good to be true."

"Oh! but, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt, she was so angry, and so unkind, she wouldn't even *kiss* me," says Isabella, relapsing into a fresh series of sniffs.

"Faugh!" replies Irene. "What a misfortune!—But, Philip, had you any idea of this?"

"None!"

"Is it because of what occurred last night?"

"I am afraid so."

"Why afraid? We shall do much better without her.—How did she go, Isabella?"

"In the carriage. I knew nothing about it till I heard the carriage drive up to the door. There is a nine-o'clock train to London—I suppose she means to catch that!"

"*In the carriage*," repeats Irene.—"Philip, did you ever hear of such impertinence?"

"Well, never mind, my darling; never mind it now," he replies, soothingly. You see she always *has* been used to have the carriage to drive to the station in, on these occasions: it is not as though she were an ordinary servant, but it won't occur again—or, at all events, for some time," he adds, as a proviso to himself.—"Did Quekett mention how long she is likely to be absent, Isabella?"

"No! she told me nothing—she would hardly speak to me—she was very, *very* crotchety," replies his sister.

"How I hope she may stay away forever!" says Irene. "Come, Isabella, you must let me get up. It will be quite a new sensation to go down to breakfast and feel there is no chance of meeting that bird of evil omen on the stairs."

So Miss Mordaunt leaves her brother and sister-in-law to their respective toilets, and retires, quite overcome by Irene's boldness, and almost shaken in her faith respecting the power held by Mrs. Quekett over the inhabitants of Fen Court.

As, some minutes after, the colonel is quietly enjoying his matutinal bath, he is almost startled out of his seven senses by a violent rapping against the partition which divides his dressing-room from his wife's bedroom.

"My dear girl, what is the matter?" he exclaims, as he feels his inability to rush to the rescue.

"Philip! Philip!" with a dozen more raps from the back of her hair-brush. "Look here, Philip—may Oliver stay with us now?"

"Yes! yes!" he shouts, in answer, "as long as ever you like!—Thank Heaven, it's nothing worse," he murmurs to himself, as he sinks back into his bath. "I really thought the old witch had repented of her purpose, and was down on us again!"

As a whole, the village of Priestley is not picturesque in appearance, but it has wonderfully romantic-looking bits scattered about it here and there, as what country-village has not? Tumble-down cottages, belonging to landlords more "near" than thrifty, or rented by tenants whose weekly wages go to swell the income of the "Dog and Fox;" with untidy gardens attached to them, where the narrow paths have been almost washed away by the spring showers, until they form mere gutters for the summer rain, into which the heavy blossoms of the neglected rose-trees lie, sodden and polluted from the touch of earth. Or old-fashioned cottages, built half a century before, when bricks and mortar were not so scarce as now, and held together in a firmer union, and roofs were thatched instead of slated. Cottages with darker rooms, perhaps, than the more modern ones possess, because the casements are latticed with small diamond-shaped panes, of which the glass is green and dingy, but which can boast of wide fireplaces and a chimney-corner (that inestimable comfort to the aged poor, who feel the winter's draughts as keenly as their richer brethren, and have been known to suffer from rheumatics), and cupboards to stow away provisions in, such as are never thought necessary to build in newer tenements. Such cottages as these have usually a garden as old-fashioned as themselves, surrounded by a low stone wall—not a stiff, straight wall, but a deliciously-irregular erection, with a large block left every here and there, to serve as a stepping-stone for such as prefer that mode of ingress to passing through the wicket, and of which fact stone-crop and creeping-jenny have seized base advantage, and, taking root, increased in such pro-

fusion that it would be useless now to give them notice of eviction. Over the wall a regiment of various-tinted hollyhocks rear their stately heads, interspersed here and there with a bright sunflower; while at their feet we find clove-pinks and thyme and southern-wood and camomile flowers, and all the old-world darlings which look so sweet, and, in many cases, smell so nasty, but without which an old-world garden would not be complete.

All this is very nice, but it is not so wild and romantic as the other; indeed, as a rule, we may generally conclude that the most picturesque places to look at are the least comfortable to live in. Perhaps the cottage of all others in Priestley that an artist would select as a subject for his pencil would be that of Mrs. Cray, the laundress, and it is certainly as uncomfortable a home as the village possesses. It is not situated in the principal thoroughfare—the "street," as Priestley proudly calls it, on account, perhaps, of its owning the celebrated "Dog and Fox"—but at the extremity of a long lane which divides the little settlement into a cross. It is, indeed, the very last house before we pass into the open country, and chosen, doubtless, for its contiguity to the green fields which form the washerwoman's drying-grounds. It is a long, low, shambling building, more like a barn than a cottage, with windows irregularly placed, some in the thatched roof and others on a level with one's knees. It has a wide space in front, which once was garden, but is now only a tract of beaten-down earth, like a children's playground, as indeed it is. In the centre stands an old-fashioned well, large and deep, encircled by a high brink of stone-work, over which ivy grows with such luxuriance that it endeavors to climb, and would climb and suffocate, the very windlass, were Mrs. Cray's boys and girls not constantly employed in tearing it ruthlessly away. At the side of the well is the pig-sty, but the pigs share the play-ground with the children, rout away among the ivy, snuff about the open door, try to drink out of Mrs. Cray's washing-tubs, and make themselves generally at home. On a line stretching from the cottage to the gate above the heads of this strange company, flutter a variety of white and colored garments, like the flags on a holiday-dressed frigate; while the projecting wooden porch—a very bower of greenery—contains several evidences of the trade which is being driven within.

The old home! How little she has thought

of it of late! Yet she can see it in her mind's eye, as she stands pondering his words. It was not a particularly happy home to her—the homes of the poor seldom are. She had known hunger and thirst and cold, and occasionally the sound of harsh words within its limits, yet the memory of the dull life she led there seems very peaceful now, compared to the excited and stormy scenes through which she has passed since leaving it.

Yes! it was of this old home that Myra had been thinking three years ago, when Joel Cray stood beside her in the fields of Fretterley, and urged her to return with him. It was to this old home she flew for refuge from the bitter knowledge of her lover's want of love for her, and it is in this old home that we now meet with her again.

It is at the close of a long, hot September day, and she is sitting by the open window—not attired as we saw her last, in a robe of costly material, with her hair dressed in the prevailing fashion, and gold ornaments gleaming in her ears and on her breast. Myra is arrayed in cotton now; the shawl, which is still pinned about her shoulders, is of black merino, and the hat, which she has just cast upon the table is of black straw, and almost without trimming. Yet there is a greater change in the woman than could be produced by any quality of dress—a change so vivid and startling, to such as have not seen her during this interval of three years, as to draw off the consideration from every thing except herself.

Her face has fallen away to half its former size, so that the most prominent features in it are her cheek-bones, above which her large dark eyes gleam feverishly and hollow. Her hair, which used to be so luxuriant, now poor and thin, is pushed plainly away behind her ears; while her lips are colorless, and the bloodless appearance of her complexion is only relieved by two patches of crimson beneath her eyes, which make her look as though she had been rouged. Her shape, too, once so round and buxom, has lost all its comeliness; her print gown hangs in folds about her waist and bosom, and she has acquired a stoop which she never had before. Eight-and-twenty—only eight-and-twenty on her birthday passed, and brought to this! But, as she gazes vacantly at the patch of ground in front of her aunt's cottage, she is not thinking of her health—people who are dangerously ill seldom do; yet her thoughts are bitter. The children are playing there—five children between the ages of eight and fourteen, belonging to Mrs. Cray, and a

little nurse-child of which she has the charge. The latter—an infant who has not long learned to walk alone—escapes from his guardian, who is the youngest of the Crays, and attempts to climb the ivy-covered brink of the well; more, he manages to hoist his sturdy limbs up to the top, and to crawl toward the uncovered pit. His guardian attempts to gain hold of one of his mottled legs; he kicks resistance; she screams, and the scream arouses Myra from her dream. She has just been thinking how little life is worth to any one; she sees life in danger of being lost, and flies to preserve it. As she reaches the well, and seizes hold of the rebellious infant, her face is crimson with excitement.

"Tommy *would* do it!" explains Jenny, beginning to whimper with the fright.

The infant doesn't whimper, but still kicks vigorously against the sides of his preserver.

Myra throws down the wooden lid which ought at all times to keep the well covered; presses Tommy passionately against her breast; then putting him down, with a good cuff on the side of his head, to teach him better for the future, walks back into the cottage, panting.

"Why did I do it?" she thinks, as she leans her exhausted frame upon the table. "What's the good of life to him, or me, or any one? We had much better be all dead together!"

"Hollo, Myra!" exclaims the voice of her cousin Joel, "what, you're back again, are you? Well! I'm right glad to see you, lass, though I can't say as you look any the better for your going."

He has come in from his daily labor, through the back-kitchen, and now stands before her, with his rough, kind hands placed upon her shoulders.

"Let me look in your face, my dear, and read what it says! *No news*. I thought as much. Didn't I tell you so before ever you went?"

"And if an angel had told me so," she says, passionately, "do you think I should have listened to what he said? What's health, or wealth, or peace, or any thing to me, compared to the chance of finding *him* again, and seeing myself righted? And yet you blame me because I can't make up my mind to part with it—the only thing the world has left me."

"I blame you, my dear? God forbid! Only you can't expect me to see you wasting all your life running after a shadder, without warning you of the consequences. You'll wear yourself out, Myra."

"There's a deal left to wear out," she answers.

"Well, you're not so strong as you ought to be, and you knows it; all the more reason *you* should hearken to what your friends tell you. This makes the sixth time you've been on the tramp after that 'Amilton."

"Don't speak his name!" she says, quickly; "I can't bear it."

"Why don't you forget it, then?" he answers, almost savagely, as he deposits his tools in a corner of the room.

"O Joel!" she wails, rocking herself backward and forward, "I can't forget it—I wish I could. It seems written in letters of fire wherever I turn. There have I been toiling away for the last three months (I took the accounts at a large West-end shop this time), and walking myself off my legs between whiles, and yet I can't hear any thing. I believe I've been to the house of every Hamilton in London, but it only ended in disappointment. I've spent all my money, and had to sell my clothes off my back to get home again into the bargain—and here I am, just as I went!" and Myra throws her head down on her outstretched arms, and falls to sobbing.

The sobs melt Joel's honest heart.

"My poor lamb!" he says, tenderly, "you'd better give it up once and for all—it beant's of no manner of use. And suppose you found him, now!—just suppose, is he the man to right you?"

"Oh! I don't know—I don't know," she says, amid her tears.

"Yes, you *do* know; only you haven't the courage to speak out. He was sick of you three years ago; he told you as much: is he likely to be sweet on you now?"

But to this question there comes no answer but her sobs.

"I was sweet on you long before that, Myra," continues her cousin, presently, in a low voice; "but I ain't changed toward you. Why won't you let me mend this business? There ain't much difference between one man and another, but there's a deal to a woman in an honest name; and that's what I'll give you to-morrow, my dear, if you'll only make up your mind to it."

"Don't, Joel! pray don't!"

"Are you never going to have another answer for me save that? One would think I wanted to do you a harm by marrying you. Tain't every one as would do it, Myra; but I knows all, and yet I says again, I'll make an honest woman of you to-morrow, if you'll choose to be my wife."

"I can't—indeed I can't!"

"That ain't true! You could do it well enough, if you chose," replies Joel, moving a little away from her.

"Lor, Myra! are you back again?" interrupts the coarse voice of Mrs. Cray, as she appears at the kitchen-door, with her sleeves tucked up to her elbows, and wiping her steaming arms and hands upon her canvas apron; "when did you reach?"

"About an hour ago," says the girl, wearily.

"And no wiser than you went, I reckon?"

"No wiser than I went!"

"In course not: you're a fool for going. Trapesing about the country in that fashion after a wild-goose chase, when you ought to stop at home and look after the children!"

"I shall stop, now."

"I'm glad to hear it, I'm sure. I've been worked to death, between the brats and the linen, since you went. And there's been fine changes up at the Court, too. The colonel's brought home his lady; and a nice-looking creature she is, so I hear (Joel's seen her—he can tell you); and old Mother Quckett's gone off in a huff. So much the better; I don't wish her good luck, for one; and if I see a chance of getting back the Court washing, why, I shall do it, particular if the colonel's lady is what Joel seems to think her.—Why, Joel, lad, what's up with you?—you look as if you'd had a crack on the head."

"You'd better ask Myra," replies Joel, sullenly.

"Why, you're never at loggerheads again, and she not home an hour!—Here, Polly, lass, bring Tommy over to me, and go and see about setting out tea in the back-kitchen. The kettle ain't filled yet. And you sit quiet there," she continues, to the unfortunate Tommy, as she bumps him handsomely down on the stone floor to enforce her command, and leaves him there whimpering. At the sound of the child's voice, Myra raises her eyes quickly, and glances at him; then turns away, with a heavy sigh, and resumes her former position.

"What's up, between you?" demands Mrs. Cray of her niece, when she has time to revert to the subject in hand. "I suppose Joel don't like your ways of going on, and so you're huffed at it."

"It isn't that," replies Myra. "Joel wants me to do what's impossible, and he's angry because I tell him so."

"I wants her to be my wife, mother—that's the long and short of it. I want her to give up running back'ards and forrards after a will-o'-the-

wisp (for if she found that fine gentleman as her mind is bent upon to-morrow, he'd no more marry her than he would you), and bide here at Priestley, and bring up an honest man's children. She knows as I've bankered after her for years, and that I'd make her a good husband, and never throw nothing of what's gone in her teeth. But she puts me off with saying it's impossible. What do you think of that?"

"I think she must be out of her mind not to jump at it. Why, here comes as good a fellow as ever worked for his bread, and offers to bemean himself by looking over all your tricks and making an honest woman of you, and you won't have him. You must be mad!"

"Perhaps I am, aunt; but I can't help it."

"Don't talk such rubbish—(sit down when I tell you, will yer?—or I'll give yer something to remember me by!)" This *par parenthèse* to the little scape-goat Tommy, who has dared to rise. Mrs. Cray does not only promise—she performs; and the child does not whimper this time—he roars.

Myra springs up hastily and snatches him from her aunt's hands.

"How can you be so cruel? You treat him like a dog!"

"Well, he ain't of much more value, nor half so much use. He cumpers up the place terrible, and is a deal of trouble with his violent ways. I've said more than once lately, that he's more bother than he's worth."

"Any ways, you're paid for him," retorts the other.

"Do you think I'd keep him without?"

"Well, you might give a little feeling for the money, then. You'll split the child's head open some day"

"And a good job, too, if I did. He ain't likely to be missed."

The younger woman's breast heaves, but she does not answer.

Joel tries to make peace between them.

"Come! don't you think no more about it, Myra. His 'ed ain't split this time, and mother says more than she means."

"I don't know that, Joel," says Mrs. Cray. "If she scorns you, nothing can't be too hard for her."

"Nothing has ever been too hard for me—in your opinion," replies Myra. "I wish I was gone, and out of it all—that I do! O, my God!"—and with that commences weeping afresh. But her weakness is soon interrupted by her aunt's hurried remonstrance.

"Come, now! shake yourself up, girl! There's quality coming up the path.—Here, Joel! who can it be?"

"Blest if it ain't the colonel's lady!"

And before they have time to do more than realize the fact, Irene's tap has sounded on the half-opened door, and her voice is asking for admission. Joel, very red in the face, stands bolt-upright against the chimney-place. Myra hastily passes her hand across her eyes, and turns her head another way; while Mrs. Cray advances to receive the visitor with her forgiving nurse-child hiding his head in her skirts.

"Are you Mrs. Cray?" demands Irene.

"Yes, mum." Mrs. Cray, remembering her last interview with Mrs. Quekett, and ignorant as to what dealings the Court people may now wish to have with her, is rather stiff and reserved at first, and stands upon her dignity.

"I have come to ask if you can do me a favor, Mrs. Cray. I have some friends staying with me who want some muslin dresses got up in a hurry for a flower-show at Fenton, and the Court laundress cannot undertake to let us have them by Wednesday. Could you?"

"Well, that depends a deal upon what they are like, mum," replies Mrs. Cray; whereupon follows a vivid description of puffs, and flounces, and laces, quite unnecessary to the well-doing of my story.

"I don't see why I shouldn't give you satisfaction, mum," is the laundress's concluding sentence; "for it won't be the first time as I've worked for the Court gentlefolk by a many."

"Indeed! I never heard your name till this afternoon, when my maid mentioned it to me."

"That's likely enough, mum. I don't suppose you would go to hear it mentioned; but I worked for the Court for four years all the same. And it was a hard day for me, with all my poor children (six of them, if there's one), when I got turned away for asking my due."

"Who turned you away, Mrs. Cray?"

"Why, bless you, mum, Mrs. Quekett, as was mistress of the Court then—who else should have done it?—and only because I wanted my three weeks' money, as I believe was lining her own pockets all the time. It's been a heavy loss to me, mum. But where's the use of talking, when a woman like that, as no one in the village has a good word for, is queen, and nothing less! You'll hardly believe it, mum, but she ordered me straight out of the house then and there, and forbid even the servants to send me their bits of things—and that was a couple or more pounds

a quarter out of my pocket, let alone the other."

Irene grows rather red during this harangue, and stands with her eyes on the floor, trying to break the tip of her parasol by digging it into a dusty crevice between the flags. She does not relish hearing this common woman speak the truth, and as soon as there is a break in the conversation she resents it.

"Well, Quekett is not mistress of the Court now, Mrs. Cray, as I suppose I need not tell you; and her likes and dislikes are nothing whatever to me. We shall often have friends staying with us, and the washing is likely to be more than our laundress can do. At all events, I can promise you shall have back the servants' linën; and, if I am satisfied with the way in which you get up the dresses I speak of, you shall have some of mine also."

"Oh! thank you, mum, kindly. I saw you was a real lady the minute I set eyes on you; and as for my son there, who's seen you a many times, 'Mother,' he says to me—"

"Yes, yes!" interrupts Irene, anxious to cut short so embarrassing an eulogium; "and I shall be sure to have the dresses by Wednesday, shall I not?"

"We can let the lady have them by Wednesday, can't we, Myra?" says Mrs. Cray, appealing to her niece. "This is Monday, and you feels well enough to help, don't you?"

"Yes, I'll help," is the listless answer.

"Is that your daughter? Is she ill?" demands Irene.

"She's my niece, mum, and but a poor creature just now—there's no denying of it."

"Indeed, she does look very ill," says Irene, sympathizingly, as she approaches Myra's side, and gazes with sad interest at the girl's hollow cheeks and staring eyes, in which the traces of tears are still visible. "Do you suffer any pain?"

At first Myra is disposed to answer rudely, or not at all. She is sensitively alive to the fact of her altered appearance, and always ready to take umbrage at any allusion made to it; but she looks up into the sweet, kind face that is bent over hers, and feels forced to be courteous even against her will.

"None now—sometimes I do."

"Where is it? You do not mind my asking, do you? Perhaps I might send you something that would do you good."

"Here!" replied Myra, pressing her hand just below her collar-bones, "at night, when the cough's bad, and I can't sleep for it. I some-

times feel as though I should go mad with the pain here."

"And what kind of a pain is it?"

"It's just a gnawing—nothing more; and I'm a little sore sometimes."

"And she can't eat nothing, poor dear," interposes Mrs. Cray. "She turns against meat and pudding as though they was poison; but she drinks water by the gallon. I'm sure the buckets of water as that girl have drunk—"

"And does not washing make you worse?" again inquires Irene.

"Sometimes; but I don't stand at it long—I can't."

"And how do you employ your time, then, Myra?"

"I'm just home from a job in London, ma'am. I'm good at keeping accounts, and such like—it's what I've been brought up to; but it tried me rather this hot weather, and I'm glad to be back in Priestley again."

"She ain't fit for nothing of that sort now," interposes Mrs. Cray.

"I dare say not. She must take care of herself till she gets stronger," says Irene, cheerfully. "I will send you some soup from the Court, Myra—perhaps that will tempt you to eat. And are you fond of reading? Would you like to have some books?"

"Oh, she's a fine scholar, mum," again puts in Mrs. Cray. "Many and many's the time I've thought we'd given her too much learning; but her poor uncle that's dead and gone used to say—" Here she interrupts herself to give her skirts a good shake. "Get out of that, do, you varmint! What do you mean by hanging on to me after that fashion?"—which adjuration is succeeded by the appearance of Tommy's curly head and dirty face in the full light of day.

"Whose child is that?" cries Irene, suddenly.

The question is so unexpected, that no one seems inclined to answer it. Joel changes feet awkwardly upon the hearth, which he has never quitted, and Myra turns round in her chair and looks full into Irene's face, whose eyes are riveted upon the child, still clinging for protection to the skirts of his nurse.

Mrs. Cray is the first to find her tongue.

"What! this boy, mum, as is hanging on my gown in this ill-convenient fashion?—but lor! children will be children," she continues, as she puts her hand on Tommy's head and pushes him forward for Irene's better inspection. "Well, he's not mine, though I look on him most as my own. To tell truth, he's a nuss-child."

"A nurse-child! You are paid for keeping him; but who, then, are his parents?"

"They're very respectable people, mum—quite gentlefolks, as you may say. I think his pa's in the grocery line; but I couldn't speak for certain. My money is paid regular, and that's all I have to look after."

"Oh, of course—of course. And—what is his name?"

"He's called Tommy, mum.—Go and speak to the lady, Tommy."

"But his surname?"

"Well, we haven't much call here to use his other name, mum; and I'm sure it's almost slipped my memory.—What's the name as the gentleman writes as owns of Tommy, Joel?" she continues, appealing, in rather a conscious manner, to her son.

"I don't know. You'd better ask Myra," he replies, gruffly.

"Brown," says Myra, quickly; "the child's name is Brown. You might go to remember as much as that, aunt."

"Oh, it doesn't signify," interrupts Irene, who perceives she has stumbled on an unwelcome subject, "it is of no consequence;" and then, in her fresh summer dress, she kneels down on the uncovered stone floor, that has been trampled by dusty feet all day long. "Come here, Tommy. Won't you come and speak to me? Look what pretty things I have here;" and she dangles her watch-chain, with its bunch of glittering charms, before his eyes.

Tommy cannot resist the bait; curiosity casts out fear; and in another moment his deep blue eyes are bent greedily upon the flashing baubles, while his dirty little fingers are leaving their dull impress upon pencil-case and locket and seal.

"Oh dear! mum, he ain't fit as you should touch him; and his feet are trampling the edge of your gown.—Here, Jenny, make haste and put Tommy under the pump till the lady looks at him."

"No, no! pray don't; he is doing no harm."

So the dirty little brat is left in peace, while the lady takes stock of his eyes and mouth and hair. Once in his ecstasy at finding a gold fish among her treasures, he raises his eyes suddenly to hers, and she darts forward as suddenly and kisses him. Then, becoming aware that she has done something rather out of the common, and that Mrs. Cray and Joel and Myra are looking at her with surprise, Irene rises to her feet, dragging the bunch of charms far out of disappointed

Tommy's reach, and, with a heightened color, stammers something very like an apology.

"I like little children," she says, hurriedly; "and—and—he has very blue eyes.—Are you fond of lollipops, Tommy?"

"I want the fess," says Tommy, from behind Mrs. Cray's gown again.

"Oh, fie! then you can't have it. Now be'ave yourself, or I'll give you a good hiding," is the gentle rejoinder.

Irene feels very much inclined to give him the "fess," but has sufficient sense to know it would be a very foolish thing to do; so she takes a shilling out of her purse instead.

"See, Tommy! a beautiful bright new shilling! won't you go and buy some lollipops with it?"

Tommy advances his hand far enough to grab the coin, and then retreats in silence.

"Say 'thankye' to the lady," suggests Mrs. Cray.

But Tommy is dumb.

"Say 'thankye' at once; d'ye hear?" and a good shake is followed by an equally good cuff on the small delinquent's head.

"Oh! don't strike him," cries Irene, earnestly—"pray don't strike him; he is but a baby. Poor little Tommy! I am sure he will say 'thank you,' when he knows me better."

"You're too good to him, mum; you can't do nothing with children without hitting 'em now and then: which you will find when you have a young family of your own."

"I must go now. My friends are waiting for me," says Irene, whose color has risen at the last allusion. "Good-evening, Mrs. Cray! Send up for the dresses to-night; and the cook shall give you some soup, at the same time, for your niece."

But she has not long stepped over the threshold, before Myra is after her; and they meet by the ivy-covered well.

"You'll—you'll—be coming this way again, won't you?" says the girl, panting even, with that slight effort.

"If you wish it, certainly. Would you like me to come and see you, Myra?"

"Very much! There are few faces here look at me as yours does."

"My poor girl! then I will come, with the greatest pleasure."

"Soon?"

"Very soon." And so they part; and Irene joins Mary Cavendish and Oliver Ralston, who have been walking up and down the green lane outside the cottage, waiting for her.

"What a time you've been!"

"Have I? There's a poor young woman there in a consumption, or something of the sort, who interested me. And such a dear little child: a nurse-child of Mrs. Cray's. I staid to talk to them."

"How long is it since you have developed a love for children, Irene?" says Mary Cavendish, laughing. "I did not think they were at all in your line."

"I never disliked them; and this baby has such beautiful, earnest eyes."

"It is remarkable what lovely eyes some of the children of the poor have. I remember, when I was in Berwick—"

"Let us get over the stile here; it leads to the Court by a much shorter way," exclaims Irene, interrupting her cousin in the rudest manner in the world. But so is Miss Cavendish always interrupted if she ventures to make the slightest reference to her visit of the summer. She has been dying, heaps of times, to relate all the glories of that period to Irene, but she has never been able to advance farther than the fact that they took place. The mere name of Berwick is sufficient to send Mrs. Mordaunt out of the room or—as in the present instance—over the stile.

Irene cannot get the remembrance of poor Myra's hollow features and attenuated figure out of her head. It forms the staple subject of her conversation at the dinner-table, and she talks of it all the evening, while her guests are rambling about the gardens and shrubbery; and she is sitting on a bench with her husband in the dusk, and flirting with him in her little quiet way.

"It is very sad," says Colonel Mordaunt, for about the fiftieth time, "and I'm very glad that you should have fallen in with her, my dear. It is in such cases that the rich can do so much to help the poor. Sickness is bad enough to bear when we are surrounded by every luxury; it must be twice as hard when one is deprived of the necessaries of life." And he continues to puff solemnly into the evening air, while his arm tightens round the waist of his wife.

"Yes," says Irene, leaning up against him, "and you should see how thin and pale she is, Philip. Her bones look as though they were coming through the skin. And she has no appetite, her aunt says. I have ordered cook to send her down some soup and jelly."

"Quite right. I am afraid you would find several more in the same condition if you were

to look for them. Country poor are too proud to beg."

"I will make a point of looking. But I never saw any one so terribly thin before. And her eyes are hollow, poor thing!"

"You seem to have taken a great fancy to this girl, Irene."

"She has awakened a great interest in me, though I cannot tell why. She seems more than ill—she looks unhappy."

"And have you told Colonel Mordaunt about the child you took such a fancy to?" laughs Mary Cavendish, who is loitering near enough to hear the last words. "It's a new thing for Irene to be running after babies—isn't it, Colonel Mordaunt?"

Irene flushes; it is not so dark but he can see the change, and a new tenderness creeps over him.

"What baby, darling?" he says, as he presses her closer to him. Irene is vexed at the turn in the conversation; she is not a bit sentimental, and she cannot affect to be so.

"It was not a baby," she replies, almost curtly; "it was a big child two or three years old."

"And you took a fancy to it—why?"

Colonel Mordaunt's "why" has a totally different bearing to the "why" that falls upon Irene's ears. She grows scarlet, and almost starts away from him.

"Why!—why! For no particular reason—only—because—I don't care for children in general, I know—but—but—"

While she is hammering out a reasonable answer, her husband supplies it.

"But you thought," he whispers close into her ear, "that some day you might possess such a child of your own, Irene!"

"I—I thought— Good Heavens, no! I never thought any thing of the kind," she exclaims aloud; and then, out of sheer nervousness, she laughs. The laugh grates on Colonel Mordaunt's ear; he draws himself away, not offended, but hurt.

"If such a prospect holds no charms for you, Irene, you might keep the unpleasant truth to yourself. It is not necessary to laugh at me."

"Laugh!—did I laugh?" she replies, still tittering. "I'm sure I didn't know it. I don't think I quite know what I did do." And with this, the incomprehensible creature falls to crying, not heavily, but in a smart little shower of tears that savor strongly of the hysterical. Colonel Mordaunt does not know what to make of it;

he has been little used to women, and this one seems to him, at times, a mystery; but he adopts the safe course: he throws his arms about her neck and begs her not to think any more about it. And, apparently, Irene adopts his advice, for she dries her eyes, and flits away from his side, and the next minute he hears her light laugh ringing out through the shrubbery at some jest of Oliver Ralston's.

They are a very happy party at Fen Court now; even Isabella Mordaunt seems to have crept out of her shell, and to dare to enjoy herself after a demurely quiet fashion; and as for Colonel Mordaunt, he has been a different man since rid of the presence of the awful Mrs. Quekett. Not that he was quiet himself for some days after the house-keeper's summary departure. A gloomy dread seemed hanging over him at that time, for which Irene was unable to account. But at the end of a fortnight, Mrs. Quekett's temper having evaporated with change of air, she thought fit to send her master a letter, written as though nothing unpleasant had happened between them, which intimated her whereabouts, and wound up with her compliments to his "good lady."

Colonel Mordaunt's mind was instantly relieved; and the next post took back a lengthy epistle in reply. Irene saw neither of these letters, nor wished to do so; but she could not help observing how much more at ease her husband appeared to be after receiving and dispatching them.

And with the fear of Mrs. Quekett's everlasting displeasure lifted off his mind, Colonel Mordaunt became pleasanter and more lively than she had seen him since their marriage. He petted Irene all day long, chaffed Isabella, and appeared thoroughly to enjoy the companionship of Oliver, as though, in the affection of these three, he had all he desired in this life to make him happy.

His wife had begun to wish that it could go on thus forever, and that they had no friends coming to break in upon their domestic felicity. But the guests have arrived, and the unruffled intercourse is continued, and Irene is being carried quietly along the stream of life as though she had left all its storms behind her, and there were no black clouds gathering in the future.

Colonel Mordaunt is of an exceedingly benevolent nature; he takes great interest in the poor of the parish, and never neglects an opportunity of sympathizing with or relieving them; but after a while he does grow very sick of the name of Myra Cray. It appears as though his wife were

always harping on it; every topic, from whatever point started, veers round, in some mysterious manner, to the sick girl at the laundress's cottage; and, whenever he misses Irene, he is sure to hear that she has "just run down" to the end of the village with a book or a pudding. At last he grows fidgety on the subject.

"You are, surely, never going out in this broiling sun!" he exclaims, one hot morning in October, as he meets his wife arrayed for walking, a basket of fruit on one arm, and a bottle of wine under the other. "I cannot allow it, Irene. You will get fever or something of the sort: you must wait till the day is cooler."

"Oh, I can't wait, Philip," she says, coaxingly, "for poor Myra is so very much worse. She broke a blood-vessel last night, and they have just sent up to tell me so."

"What good can you do by going down?"

"I don't know: but I think she will feel my presence to be a comfort; she has taken a great fancy to me, you know. Besides, I want to carry her a few grapes."

"Send them by a servant. I cannot have you risk your health by encountering such fatigue for any one."

"It will not fatigue, and I want to see Myra myself."

"Take the pony-chaise, then."

"No, indeed! before your lazy grooms will have put the harness together, I shall be by her bedside." And, running past him, she takes her way down to the village.

Colonel Mordaunt is vexed. He likes his wife to be interested in the parishioners, but her visits of late have been confined to the Crays—who are generally considered to be the least deserving of them all. Besides, he argues, the house is full of guests, to whom she owes more attention than is consonant with absenting herself from their company at all hours of the day. When they meet at luncheon, consequently, he is what is termed a little "put out;" but she is too full of her *protégée* to notice it.

"Poor Myra!" she sighs, as she takes her seat at the table. "I am afraid there is little hope for her; she is so weak, she cannot speak above a whisper."

"She oughtn't to be allowed to speak at all, after having broken a blood-vessel," says her husband, shortly. "Will you take a cutlet, Irene?"

"No—nothing, thank you. I couldn't eat; my whole mind is absorbed by the thought of that poor girl."

"But you are not going to allow it to spoil

your luncheon, are you? Running about all the morning, and eating nothing on the top of it. The end of it will be, you will be ill."

"Not while there is work for me to do—as there ever is."

"Nonsense! you talk of it as though it were a duty. It is a much greater duty for you to eat when your husband asks you to do so."

"Don't ask me then, dear Philip; for I really can't."

He does not press her, but directs his attention to the rest of the company; while she leans back in her chair, pale, pensive, and almost entirely silent.

"You won't go out again?" he says to her, as the meal is concluded and they rise from table.

"Oh, no! I don't think so."

"Go, then, and lie down, my dear. You have been too much excited. I never saw you more overcome."

"I think I will lie down, just for an hour or two. My head aches terribly."

Then his trifling annoyance vanishes, and he is all sympathy and tenderness; supporting her up-stairs with his arm around her waist, and coaxing and petting her like a sick child, until she has exchanged her dress for a cool wrapper, and lain down on her bed: when he steps about the room, on tiptoe, like a woman, pulling down the blinds and putting every thing within her reach that he thinks she may require.

"I shall be back by six, my own darling," he whispers, in farewell; "and I hope you will have had a good sleep by that time."

"I dare say I shall," she murmurs, dreamily; and then he leaves her. At the appointed hour he is back again, and entering the room cautiously, for fear of startling her, finds all the blinds drawn up, and Phœbe sitting by the open window, stitching a rent in one of her mistress's dresses.

"Mrs. Mordaunt gone down?" he says, interrogatively.

"Yes, sir. I believe she's gone out, sir."

"Out! Not out-of-doors again?"

"I think so, sir. A message came up from Cray's for my missus, about four o'clock, and she put on her things at once and went to them. I believe the young woman's sent for her, sir."

"Too bad! too bad!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, angrily—though referring more to the Crays than to Irene. "But I suppose she will be back to dinner."

"I suppose so, sir. My missus said she

would wear a white muslin this evening, and I was just stitching this one together for her."

But dinner-time arrives, and they are all assembled in the dining-room, and still the mistress of the house is absent.

"It is close upon seven: she must be here directly," remarks Colonel Mordaunt, though un- easily.

"A note from Cray's, if you please, sir," says the footman, placing the crumpled piece of paper before him.

He opens it and reads:

"DEAR PHILIP: Pray don't wait dinner for me. It is impossible that I can come home just yet.

"Yours, IRENE."

"Serve the dinner at once!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, in a voice of real displeasure, as he tears up the note into a dozen fragments and casts them into the empty grate behind him.

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE Irene, unconscious how her work of charity will influence her future, is sitting with a trembling heart by the bedside of the laundress's niece. She is unused to sickness or to death, but she knows now that the one can only vanish hence before the presence of the other; for the parish doctor met her, on her entrance to the cottage, and answered her questions about Myra with the utmost frankness.

"She *may* linger," he said, doubtfully, "but it is more likely that she will not. She has been breaking up for some time past, and has not sufficient strength to rally from this last attack. I shall be here again in the morning; but, as I can do her no good, it would be useless my staying now." And the doctor mounted his stout cob and trotted off in another direction.

Irene stood watching him till he was out of sight, and then turned into the cottage with a sigh. When the doctor leaves the house in which a patient lies *in extremis*, it seems as if death had already entered there.

There is no cessation of business in Mrs. Cray's dwelling; though her niece does lie dying. People who work hard for stern daily bread cannot afford time for sentiment; and the back-kitchen is full of steam and soap-suds, and the washer-women are clanking backward and forward over the wet stones in their pattens, to wring and hang out the linen; and the clatter of tongues and rat-

ting of tubs and noise 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 lookout 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 hear it."

"Oh, hush! your voice will reach her," remonstrates Irene; for the laundress is speaking, if any thing, 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 wrop 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 have 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 paleness 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 short time—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 every thing 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 goes up to the bedside, 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 sympathize with your present trouble."

"You mustn't do it again. Ah! you don't press. 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 dare say 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. Now 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 every thing!"

At this juncture, the sound of "thwacking" is audible from below, and immediately followed by the rising 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 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, while 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 every think, 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, up-stairs," 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 dare say 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 backward and forward, 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—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 toward 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 pretenses; 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 soon be 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 you could tell what your kindness has been to me—like 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 ill-treat 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!—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 *benefit* this little one when you are gone."

"Would you—really?"

"To the utmost of my power."

"Then I will tell you every thing—every thing! 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 disheveled head is thrust sheepishly 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 any thing 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 dispatched 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 any thing 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! O 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 never 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 rid of me; why should I say a word to him? But I grieved afterward—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 traveled miles and miles, and walked myself off my feet to find him. I've been to Oxford and Fretterley (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 every thing 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 every

thing, 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-whiles. 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 church-yard!" 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 pillows, exhausted by her own emotion, while 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 of the sick girl's hand, Irene resumes her walking-sticks, and drives back to the Court as quickly as her ponies will carry her. Her husband is waiting to receive her on the door-step.

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 every thing 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 death-bed of what, in his vexation, he calls a "consumptive pauper."

And so, when he puts 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, an-

other time, if these paupers' confidences were got over in the morning. And I certainly do not approve of your being at the beck and call of every sick person in the village, whether you are fit to attend to him or not! You had a bad headache yourself when I left you this afternoon."

"Oh, my poor head! I had forgotten all about it. Yes; it was very painful at one time, but I suppose my excitement has driven the pain away. Philip, I have been listening to such a sad story. You know the child—the little boy that they said was at nurse with Mrs. Cray."

"I have heard you mention it. I really did not know if 'twas a boy or a girl, or if you knew yourself," he replies, indifferently.

"No, no; of course not!" she says, coloring. "But you know what I mean. Well, what do you think—it's a secret though, mind"—lowering her voice—"he belongs to poor Myra, after all: isn't it shocking?"

"And what is the use of their telling you such tales as that?" replies Colonel Mordaunt, angrily; "I won't have them defiling your ears with things that are not fit for you to hear. If it is the case, why can't they keep the disgrace to themselves? You can do no good by knowing the truth."

"O Philip! but you don't understand; it was the poor girl told me, and it was such a comfort to her—she has no one else to confide in. And, besides, she is so unhappy, because Mrs. Cray beats her poor little boy, and she is afraid he will be ill-treated when she is gone."

"And wants to extract a promise from you to go down there every morning and see that her precious offspring has slept and eaten well since the day before. No, thank you, Irene! I think we've had quite enough of this sort of thing for the present, and when the laundress's niece is dead, I hope that you will confine your charity more to home, and not carry it *ad infinitum* to the third and fourth generation."

He makes one step downward as though to leave her then, but she plucks him timidly by the sleeve and detains him.

"But, Philip—I promised her!"

"Promised what?"

"That I would befriend her child when she is gone; that I would take him away from Mrs. Cray. She was so miserable about him, poor girl, she said she couldn't die in peace; and—and (I do so hope you won't be vexed)—and bring him up under my own care."

"What!" cries Colonel Mordaunt, roughly, startled out of all politeness.

"I promised her I would adopt him; surely, it is nothing so very much out of the way."

"Adopt a beggar's brat out of the village—a child not born in wedlock—a boy, of all things in the world! Irene, you must be out of your senses!"

"But it is done every day."

"It may be done occasionally by people who have an interest in ragged schools, or the Emigration Society, or the Shoe-black Brigade, or who have arrived at the meridian of life without any nearer ties of their own; but for a young lady, just married, and with her hands full of occupation, both for the present and the future, it would be absurd—unheard of—impossible!"

"But what occupation have I that need prevent my looking after a little child, Philip? It—if—"

"If what?"

"I don't know why I should be so silly as not to like to mention it," she goes on hurriedly, though with an effort; "but supposing I—I—had a child of my own; *that* would not interfere with my duties as mistress here, would it?"

"And would you like to have a child of your own, darling?" he answers sweetly, but irrelevantly, and relapsing into all his usual tenderness. Were Irene politic, she might win him over at this moment to grant her any thing. A smile, an answering look, a pressure of the hand, would do it, and bring him to her feet a slave! But, in one sense of the word, she is *not* politic; her nature is too open. She cannot bring her heart to stoop to a deception, however plausible, for her own advantage. And so she answers her husband's question frankly.

"No! not at all, Philip. I've told you that a dozen times already! but I want to take this poor little boy away from Mrs. Cray, and bring him up respectably in mind and body."

Colonel Mordaunt's momentary softness vanishes, and his "grumpiness" returns in full force.

"Then I object altogether. I'm not so fond of brats at any time as to care to have those of other people sprawling over my house—and a pauper's brat of all things. You must dismiss the idea at once."

"But I have *promised*, Philip."

"You promised more than you can perform."

"But I *swore* it. O Philip! you will not make me go back from an oath made to the dying! I shall hate myself forever if you do."

"You had no right to take such an oath without consulting me."

"Perhaps not; I acknowledge it; but it is done, and I cannot recede from my given word."

"I refuse to indorse it. I will have no bastard brought up at my expense."

The coarseness of the retort provokes her; she colors crimson, and recoils from him.

"How cruel! how pitiless of you to use that term! You have no charity! Some day you may need it for yourself!"

At that he turns upon her, crimson too, and panting.

"What makes you say so? What have you heard?"

"More than I ever thought to hear from your lips. O Philip, I did not think you could be so unkind to me!" and she turns from him weeping, and goes up to her own room, leaving him conscience-stricken in the porch. It is their first quarrel; the first time angry words have ever passed between them, and he is afraid to follow her, lest he should meet with a rebuff, so he remains there, moody and miserable, and, before half an hour has elapsed, could bite out his tongue for every word it uttered.

The idea of the adopted child is as unpalatable to him as ever; it appears a most floundering and absurd idea to him; but he cannot bear to think that he should have been cross with Irene, or that she should have been betrayed into using hasty words to him.

Oh, that first quarrel! how infinitely wretched it makes humanity, and what a shock it is to hear hot and angry words pouring from the lips that have never opened yet for us except in blessing!

Better thus, though—better, hot and angry words, than cold and calm.

The direct death for love to die is when it is reasoned into silence by the voice of indifference and good sense.

Othello's passion was rough and deadly, but while it lasted it must have been very sweet pain. Was it not kinder to smother Desdemona while it was at white heat than to let her live to see the iron cool?

But Colonel Mordaunt is in no mood for reasoning; he is simply miserable; and his mood ends—as all such moods do end for true lovers—by his creeping up to Irene's side in the twilight, and humbly begging her forgiveness, which she grants him readily—crying a little over her own shortcomings the while—and then they make it up, and kiss, as husband and wife should do, and come down-stairs together, and are very cheerful for the remainder of the evening, and never once

mention the obnoxious subject that disturbed their peace.

The next morning is bright and beautiful; all Nature appears jubilant, but between these two there is a slight reserve. All trace of discomfiture has passed—they are as loving and attentive to each other as before—but they are not quite so easy. With her first awakening, Irene's thoughts have flown to poor Myra. She wonders how she has passed the night, and vividly remembers that she promised to visit her in the morning; but Colonel Mordaunt says nothing on the subject, and Irene dares not broach it. She is so afraid of disturbing his restored serenity, or of appearing ungrateful for the extra love he has bestowed on her in order to efface the remembrance of their misunderstanding.

Every one knows what it is to feel like this after a quarrel with one whom we love. The storm was so terrible, and the succeeding peace is so precious to us, we are not brave enough to risk a repetition of our trouble by alluding to the subject that provoked it. So Irene dresses in silence, thinking much of her interview with Myra of the day before, and wondering how it will all end, and longing that her husband would be the first to revert to it. But they meet at breakfast; and nothing has been said.

Mrs. Cavendish is particularly lively this morning. She knows there was a slight disagreement between her host and hostess last evening, and she is anxious to dispel the notion that any one observed it but themselves.

"What a beautiful day!" she says, as she enters the room; "bright, but not too warm. Ah, Colonel Mordaunt, who was it promised to take us all over to picnic at Walmsley Castle on the first opportunity?"

"One who is quite ready to redeem his promise, madam," replies the colonel, gallantly, "if his commander-in-chief will give him leave. But I am only under orders, you know—only under orders."

"Not very strict ones, I imagine.—What do you say, Irene? Is this not just the day for Walmsley? And Mary and I must leave you the beginning of the week."

"Oh! do let us go, Irene," interposes her cousin.

"It will be awful fun," says Oliver Ralston. "Just what we were wishing for; is it not, Miss Cavendish?"

Irene thinks of Myra in a moment; it is on the tip of her tongue to remonstrate, and say she cannot go to-day of all days in the week; but she

glances at her husband, and the expression of his face makes her hesitate.

"Philip, what would you wish me to do?" she says timidly.

"I want you to please yourself, my dear; but I see no reason why you should not go. The weather is beautiful, the distance nothing—a matter of fourteen miles; just a pleasant drive. And I am sure it will do you good, besides giving pleasure to our guests. If you ask my opinion, I say, let's go."

"That's right, uncle," shouts Oliver; "she can have nothing to say after that.—Now, Irene (for it had been settled between these young people that, considering the equality of their ages, they should address each other by their Christian names), 'let's make an inroad on the larder (what a blessing it is old Quekett's not here to prevent us!), pack up the hamper, order round the carriage, put on our hats, and the thing is done.'"

"Shall we be long away?" demands Irene, anxiously, of her husband.

He observes her indifference to the proposed plan, guesses its cause, and frowns.

"That depends entirely on our own will. But if our *friends*" (with a slight stress on the word) "enjoy themselves at the castle, I see no reason why we should not remain as long as it gives them pleasure."

"Dear Irene, pray don't go against your inclination," urges Miss Cavendish. Colonel Mordaunt answers for her—with a laugh.

"Don't indulge her, Miss Cavendish. She is only lazy. She will enjoy herself as much as any of us when she is once there.—Come, my darling, see after the commissariat department at once, and I will order the carriage. The sooner we start the better.—Oliver, will you ride, or take the box-seat?" And so it is all settled without further intervention on her part.

She goes up-stairs to prepare for the expedition, feeling very undecided and miserable. After all, does not her duty lie more toward the fulfilment of her husband's wishes than an engagement with one who has no real claims upon her? Only, she is so sorry that she promised to visit Myra this morning. Perhaps she is expecting her even at this moment—straining her ears to catch the sound of her footstep—waiting in feverish anxiety to repose some further confidence in her. The thought is too painful. Could she not run down to the cottage before they go, if it was only for ten minutes? She hears her husband in his dressing-room.

"Philip," she says, hurriedly, "I promised to

see poor Myra again this morning. Is there no time before we start?"

"Time!" he echoes; "why, the carriage is coming round now, and the ladies have their things on. You've gone mad on the subject of that woman, Irene; but, if it's absolutely important you should see her again to-day, you must go down in the evening. Come, my darling," he continues, changing his manner to a caressing, coaxing tone, which it is most difficult to combat, "we had quite enough fuss over this subject yesterday: let us have a peaceful, happy day all to ourselves, for once in a way; there's a dear girl." And, after that, there is nothing more for Irene to do but to walk down-stairs disconsolately, and drive off with her guests to Walmsley Castle.

They are a merry party; for it is just one of those glorious days when to live is to enjoy; and she tries to be merry, too, for gloom and ill-humor have no part in her composition: but she cannot help her thoughts reverting, every now and then, to Myra, with a tinge of self-reproach for not having been braver. Yet her husband sits opposite to her, his eye glowing with pride as it rests upon her countenance, and a quiet pressure of the hand or foot telling her at intervals that, with whomsoever he may appear to be occupied, his thoughts are always hers; and she cannot decide whether she has done right or wrong. It is useless to ponder the question now, when she is already miles away from Priestley; and so she tries to dismiss it from her mind, with a resolution to pay her promised visit the minute she returns.

Walmsley Castle is a ruin, situated in a very picturesque part of the county; and, allowing for a long drive there and a fatiguing exploration, followed by a lengthy luncheon and a lazy discussion on the sward, it is not surprising that morning merged into noon, and noon into evening, before our party were aware of the fact, and that the first thing that calls Irene's attention to the hour is a cool breeze blowing across the hills, which makes her shiver.

"How cold it has turned!" she says, suddenly, as she changes her position. "Why, Philip, what o'clock is it?"

"Just five, dear," he answers, quietly.

"Five! Five o'clock! It never can be five."

"Within a few minutes. I suppose we had better be thinking of going home, or we shall be late for dinner."

"I hardly think we shall have much appetite for dinner after this," says Miss Cavendish, laughing, as she regards the scanty remnants of their meal.

"Five! It cannot be so late as five," repeats Irene, in a voice of distress. "O Philip, do order the horses to be put to at once.—Poor Myra!"

Her expression is so pleading that he rises to do her bidding without delay; but he cannot resist a grumble as he does it. But she does not heed him: she heeds nothing now but her own thoughts, which have flown back to her broken promise, with a dreadful fear that she may be too late to redeem it. She remembers every thing that happened with sickening fidelity: how Myra longed to detain her, and only let her go upon her given word that she would return. What right had she to break it—for any one, even for Philip? What must the dying woman think of her?

She is so absorbed in this idea that she cannot speak to any one: her conduct seems quite changed from what it did in the morning. She is a pitiful coward in her own eyes now. And, as she drives back to Priestley, she sits alone, miserable and silent, longing to reach home, and fancying the road twice as long as when they last traversed it.

"Are you ill, my dear?" says Miss Cavendish. "Has the day fatigued you?"

"You had better not speak to Irene," replies Colonel Mordaunt, in her stead. "She is in one of her Lady Bountiful moods. You and I are not worth attending to in comparison."

She is too low-spirited even to be saucy in reply: and presently her husband's hand creeps into hers; and she knows that her reticence has pleased him, and gives it a good squeeze for reward.

But as the carriage drives up to the Court her quick eye catches sight of a dirty little figure crouched by the door-steps, and all her vague forebodings return.

"Oh, there is Jenny!" she exclaims, excitedly. "I felt sure there was something wrong.—Jenny, what is it?"—as the carriage reaches the door—"is Myra worse?"

"Please, mum," says Jenny, with a bob, "she's as bad as ever she can be: and mother says, please, mum, could you come down and see her, for she's a-goin' fast, and she keeps on a-calling' for you. And mother says—"

"Oh! I will go at once," says Irene, leaping down from the carriage. "Philip, dearest, you won't be angry." And, with that, begins to run down the drive.

"Stop, Irene, stop!" cries her husband; but she does not heed or hear him; and, having handed the other ladies out, he drives after her,

and catches her before she has reached the outside of the grounds.

"Stop, dearest! Get in. I will drive down with you," he exclaims, as he overtakes her.

"You, Philip?"

"Yes, why not? Am I to have no share in the troubles of this kind little heart?"

"O Philip! Thank you! You are too good to me! It is such a comfort to me!" And, with that, she seizes the great rough hand that has drawn her so tenderly to his side, and cries over it quietly. He smears her tears all over her face with his pocket-handkerchief in well-meant attempts to wipe them away, after the manner of men, but not another word is exchanged between them till they reach the cottage.

There all is silent. The lower part of the house seems deserted. And Irene, leaving her husband pacing the garden in front, finds her way quietly up-stairs.

Myra's room seems full. Mrs. Cray is there with her soapy satellites, and all her children, except Joel and Jenny; and at first Irene's entrance is unnoticed. But as the women nearest the door perceive her, they fall back.

"Ah! you've come too late, mum," says Mrs. Cray, reproachfully. "I doubt if she'll recognize you. She's a'most gone, poor creature."

"I am so sorry," replies Irene, flaking her way up to the bed on which the sick girl lies motionless; "but I could not come before.—Dear Myra, don't you know me?" And she lays her warm lips upon the clammy forehead. The dying eyes quiver—open—recognize her; and a faint smile hovers over the lead-colored lips.

"We were—we were—" she gasps, and then stops, still gasping, and unable to proceed.

"Is it any thing you want to tell me?" says Irene gently, trying to help her.

"We were—" commences Myra again; but Death will not let her finish. "Tommy!" she ejaculates, with a world of meaning in her eyes, but with an effort so painful to behold that Irene involuntarily closes her own: and when she opens them again Myra's are glazed, her lips are parted, and two quick, sobbing breaths herald the exit of her soul.

"She's a'going!" screams Mrs. Cray, rushing forward to assist in the great change.

"*She is gone,*" says Irene, quietly, as, awe-struck, she sinks down by the bedside and covers her face with her hands.

"Poor dear!" quoths Mrs. Cray, in order to better the occasion, "how bad she's bin a wantin' of you, mum, all to-day, to be here; and how

she's bin a-asking every minute when I thought you'd be here. It seemed to me as though the poor creature couldn't die till she'd seen you again. I've seen 'em lie like this, bless 'em, for days a-fighten for their breath, and not able to go, when there's bin a pigeon-feather in the ticking, but never from trying to see a face as that poor thing has longed to see yours. And I'm sure, if I've sent one message to the Court to-day, I've sent a dozen, and she a-watchin' each time as though—"

"Oh! don't tell me! please, don't tell me!" entreats Irene, as the whole mournful panorama passes before her mental vision, and overwhelms her with reproach, that ends in sobbing. Colonel Mordaunt hears the sound of her tears through the open casement, and comes to the bottom of the stairs.

"Irene—Irene!" he says, remonstratingly.

"Oh! please do walk up, sir; it is all over," says Mrs. Cray, with her apron to her eyes, and for the sake of his wife, the colonel does walk up. When he reaches the little room, he is distressed beyond measure at the sight before him; the poor dead, wasted body stretched upon the bed, and his beautiful Irene crying beside it as though her heart would break.

"Come! my dearest," he says soothingly, "you can do no more good here. Let me take you home."

But she turns from him: she will not answer him; she does not even seem to be aware that he is present.

"I hate myself, I hate myself," she says, vehemently; "why did I ever consent to go to that detestable picnic, when my place was here! I promised her, poor dear girl, that I would come again this morning, and she has been waiting and watching for me, and thinking that I had forgotten. And the last word was to remind me of the oath I took to protect her child—and even that I must break. And she is about me now; I feel it: despising me for my weakness and my falsehood. But she cannot think me more degraded than I think myself."

Colonel Mordaunt is shocked at the expression; he cannot bear that it should be connected, even wrongfully, with any action of Irene's.

"Degraded! my darling! what can make you use such a term with reference to yourself—you who are every thing that is true and noble!"

"True, to break my promise to the dying—noble, to swear an oath and not fulfill it! Oh, very true and very noble! I wish you could see my conduct as it looks to me."

"If that is really the light in which you view the matter, Irene, I will oppose no further obstacle to the satisfaction of your conscience. You shall keep your promise, and adopt the child."

At that she lifts her tear-stained face and regards him curiously.

"Are you in earnest, Philip?"

"Quite in earnest! I could hardly jest on such a subject."

"Oh, thank you! thank you—you have made me feel so happy;" and, regardless of spectators (for though the room is nearly cleared by this time, the laundress and some of her children still remain in attendance), up comes her sweet mouth to meet his. Colonel Mordaunt is already repaid for his generosity. And then Irene turns to the bed.

"Myra!" she says, as naturally as though the poor mother were still alive, "I will be true to my word. I will take your little one and bring him up for you; and when we meet again you will forgive me for this last breach of faith."

At this appeal, Mrs. Cray pricks up her ears; she understands it at once, and the idea of getting rid of Tommy is too welcome to be passed over in silence; but, being a cunning woman, she foresees that it will strengthen his claim if she professes to have been aware of it beforehand.

"Your good lady is talking of taking the poor child, colonel," she says, whining, "which I'm sure it will be a blessing to him, and may be him to be a blessing to her. Ah, you see I know all about it; I've bin a mother to that poor girl as lies there, and who should she tell her troubles and 'opes to if it warn't to me? But I kep' her misfortune close, didn't I, mum?—not a word passed my lips but that all the village might have heard, which it's proved by not a soul knowing of it, except ourselves and Joel—and one or two neighbors, maybe, and my brother as lives over at Fenton. But now she's gone—poor dear—and you've promised to do kindly by the child, I don't care who knows it, for it can't harm no one."

"Then your niece told you of my wife's offer to look after her little boy?" says Colonel Mordaunt, falling into the trap.

"Oh, lor! yes, sir; a many times; which I've looked forward to her doing so, knowing that no lady could break her promise; and she's always been so fond of Tommy, too; I'm sure he'll take to her jist as though she was his mother. And it's a fine thing for the child; though it'll near break my heart to part with him."

This last assertion is a little too much, even for Colonel Mordaunt's softened mood, and he rises to his feet hastily.

"Come, dearest!" he says to his wife, "it is time we were going."

"And Tommy?" she replies, inquiringly.

"You don't want to take him with you now, surely?" is the dubious rejoinder.

"No! I suppose not! but—how will he come?"

"Lor, mum! I'll bring him up this evening—he sha'n't be kep' from you, not half an hour more than's needful; but I must redde him up a bit first, and give him a clean face."

"Oh! never mind his face," begins Irene; but her husband cuts her short.

"There, there, my love! you hear, the child will be up this evening. Surely that is all that can be required. Good-evening, Mrs. Cray.—Come, Irene;" and with one farewell look at Myra's corpse, she follows him from the room.

All the way home the husband and wife sit very close to each other, but they do not speak. The scene they have just witnessed has sobered them. Colonel Mordaunt is the first to break the silence, and he does so as the carriage stops before the hall-door of the Court.

"I am thinking what the d—l you'll do with it," he ejaculates, suddenly.

"With the child?—oh! a thousand things," she says, joyously. Her voice startles him; he turns and looks into her face; it is beaming with happiness and a wonderful new light that he has never seen there before.

"Why, Irene," he exclaims, as he hands her out, "what is this? you look as if you had come into a fortune."

"Because I have such a dear, good old husband," she whispers fondly, as she passes him and runs up-stairs to dress for dinner.

Of course the whole conversation at the dinner-table is furnished by the discussion of Mrs. Mordaunt's strange freak. By the time Irene descends to the dining-room, she finds the story is known all over the house; and the opinions on it are free and various. Mrs. Cavendish holds up her hands at the very idea.

"My dear colonel! you spoil this child. Fancy, letting her adopt the brat of no one knows who!—the trouble it will give you—the money it will cost."

"Oh, Irene has promised faithfully I shall have no trouble in the matter," laughs the colonel, who, having once given his consent to the ar-

rangement, will never betray that it was against his will; "and as for the expense—well, I don't think one poor little mortal will add much to the expenditure of the household."

"Particularly as I intend to pay for him out of my pin-money," says Irene.

"But the nuisance, my dear; no money will pay for that. Ah! you won't believe me now—but by-and-by—wait a bit—you'll see!" with mysterious words and winks, of which her niece takes no notice.

"She'll have to end by turning him into a buttons-boy," remarks her husband, who is secretly delighted with the pantomime.

"I'm sure we shall do nothing of the sort," says Irene quickly, and then calms down again. "I mean that I shall grow too fond of the child to make him into a servant."

"You fond of a baby, Irene," says Mary Cavendish; "that is just what puzzles me—why, I'm sure you always said you hated children."

"Oh, very well, then! keep your own opinion—you know so much more about it than I do," with a little rising temper.

"Irene, my darling!" says the colonel, soothingly.

"Why do they all set upon me, then, Philip? What is there so extraordinary in my wishing to befriend a wretched little outcast? I'm sure I almost begin to wish I had never seen the child at all."

"Let us change the subject," is her husband's only answer.

But when the dinner is over and the evening draws to a close, Irene begins to move restlessly up and down the house. She has already taken her maid Phœbe into her confidence, and the girl, being country bred, and with no absurd notions above her station, is almost as delighted at the prospect of having the little child to take care of as her mistress. And they have arranged that he is to sleep in Phœbe's bed, which is large and airy. And before the house-maid comes up with a broad grin on her countenance to announce that Mrs. Cray, the laundress, has brought a little boy for "mishus," these extravagant young women have sliced up half a dozen or more good articles of wear, in order that the young rascal may have a wardrobe.

In the midst of their arrangements, Master Tommy, clean as to the outside platter, but smelling very strong after the manner of the Great Unwashed, even though they dwell in villages, is introduced by his guardian. Irene cannot talk

to Mrs. Cray to-night, she dismisses the subject of poor Myra and her death-struggles summarily; and, thrusting a five-pound note into the laundress's hand, gets rid of her as soon as she decently can. She is trying to have the little child all to herself, and she does not feel as though he were really her own until the woman who beats him is once more outside the door. And then she turns to Phœbe triumphantly.

"And now, Phœbe, what shall we do with him?"

"I should wash him, ma'am," replies Phœbe, following the advice of the great Mr. Dick, with respect to David Copperfield.

"Of course! we'll give him a warm bath. Run down-stairs and get the water, Phœbe. And is this his night-gown?" examining the bundle of rags that Mrs. Cray has left behind her. "Oh! what a wretched thing; but, luckily, it is clean. He must have new night-gowns, Phœbe, at once and—"

"He must have *every thing* new, ma'am, bless his heart!" exclaims Phœbe, enthusiastically, as she disappears in quest of the water. When she is gone, Irene lifts the child upon her knees and gazes in his face.

"Tommy," she says, gently, "Tommy, will you love me?"

"Iss," replies Tommy, who has seen her often enough to feel familiar with her.

"You are going to be my little boy now, Tommy."

"Iss," repeats Tommy, as he surveys the wonderful fairy-land in which he finds himself. It must be recorded of Tommy that, with all his faults, he is not shy.

In another minute Phœbe is back with the water, and the bath is filled, and the two women undress the child together and plunge him in and sponge and lather him kneeling on each side the bath the while, and laughing at their own awkwardness at the unaccustomed task. And then Tommy gets the soap into his eyes, and roars, which cheerful sound, attracting Colonel Mordaunt's attention as he mounts the stairs, causes him to peep into the open bedroom-door unseen. And there he watches his young wife and her maid first kiss the naked cupid to console him, and then return to the soaping and splashing until they have made him smile again. And when the washing is completed, and Phœbe stretches out her arms to take the child and dry him, Colonel Mordaunt sees with astonishment that her mistress will not allow it.

"No, no, Phœbe! give him to me," she says,

authoritatively, as she prepares her lap to receive the dripping infant; and then, as the servant laughingly obeys her orders, and carries the bath into the next room, he watches Irene's lips pressed on the boy's undried face.

"My little Tommy!" she says, as she does so.

He sees and hears it, turns away with a sigh, and a heart heavy, he knows not wherefore, and goes down-stairs, as he ascended them, unnoticed.

A week has passed. Poor Myra's form has just been left to rest beneath a rough hillock of clay in the church-yard, and Joel Cray is seated in the sanded kitchen of his mother's cottage, his arms cast over the deal table, and his head bent down despairingly upon them.

Mrs. Cray, returning abruptly from having just "dropped in" to a neighbor's, to display her "black" and furnish all funereal details, finds him in this position.

"Come, lad," she says, roughly, but not unkindly, "it's no use frettin'; it won't bring her back agin."

"There's no call for you to tell me that, mother," he answers, wearily, as he raises two hollow eyes from the shelter of his hands; "it's writ too plainly here"—striking his breast—"but you might have warned me she was goin'."

"Warned you! when all the world could see it! Why, the poor crectur has had death marked in her face for the last six months; and Mrs. Jones has jest bin' a-sayin' it's a wonder as she lasted so long," replies Mrs. Cray, as she hangs her new bonnet on a nail in the kitchen wall, and carefully folds up her shawl.

"All the world but me, you mean. 'Twould have come a bit easier if I had seen it, perhaps. Why, 'twas only the other day I was begging of her to be my wife, and now, to think I've just come from burying her! Oh, good Lord!" and down sinks the poor fellow's head again, while the tears trickle through his earth-stained fingers.

Mrs. Cray loves her son after her own fashion. It is, in a great measure, her love for him and sympathy with his disappointment that have made her hard upon Myra and Myra's child; and she desires to give him comfort in his present trouble. So she draws a chair close beside him, and sits down deliberately to tear open all his worst wounds. But it is not entirely her want of education that begets this peculiarity, for the example has been set her, ever since the world began, by people as well-meaning and far less ignorant than herself.

"Now, where's the good of thinkin' of that,

lad?" she says, as soothingly as her harsh voice will permit. "She'd never have bin yours had she lived ever so long; and all the better, too, for no woman can make a good wife when her fancy's fixed upon another man."

"And if hers were, you needn't remind a feller of it," he replies, uneasily.

"Oh! but I says it for your good. Not that I wants to speak a word against the poor thing as is gone; for when a fellow-crectur's under the ground, let his faults be buried atop of him, say I; that's my maxim, and I keeps to it. Still, there's no denying poor Myra were very flighty, and a deal of trouble to us all. I'm sure I thought this afternoon, when I see the handsome grave Simmons had dug for her, and all the village looking on at the burial, and Tommy brought down from the Court by the colonel's lady herself, in a brand-new suit of black, and with a crape bow and a feather in his hat, that no one would have thought as seed it that we was only burying a—"

"Mother, *what* are you going to say?" demands Joel, as, with a clinched hand and gloomy eyes, he springs to his feet.

"Lor! you needn't fly out so. I wasn't going to say nothing but the truth."

"The truth! But *is* it the truth? Who knows that it's the truth?"

"Why, you wouldn't be after saying as she was an honest woman, Joel?"

"I don't know. I'd rather be saying nothin' of her at all. My poor girl, trodden down and spit on! And she, who was the bonniest lass for miles round Priestley.—Mother, I must leave this place."

"Leave! when you've just got such a fine situation under Farmer Green! Have you lost your senses, lad?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I don't seem to have nothin' now; but I can't bide here any longer; there's something in the air that chokes me."

"But where would you be going?"

"I can't tell that either. Jest where chance may take me. Only be sure of one thing, mother—I don't come back to Priestley till I've cleared her name or killed the man who ruined her."

"You're going in search of *him*, Joel?"

"It's bin growing on me ever since that evenin' I came home and found her dead.—I won't believe that Myra was the girl to give herself over to destruction; but if she were—well, then the man who destroyed her must answer for it to me."

"But what'll I do without you?" commences Mrs. Cray, as her apron goes up to receive the maternal droppings of despair.

"You'll do well enough, mother. If I didn't feel that, I wouldn't go. And the child (if it wasn't for *her*, I could say, Curse him!) But I won't. No, Myra, never you fear; he'll allays have a friend in me, he's off your hands, and well provided for. So you've nothin' but your own little ones to look after. And you'll have friends at the Court, too. You won't miss me."

"But how are you ever to find the gentleman, Joel?"

"I know his name was 'Amilton,' and I'll track that name through the world until I light on him. And I saw him once, mother. 'Twas only for a few minutes, but I marked him well—a tall, up-standing feller, with dark hair and blue eyes. The child's the very moral of him, curse him! And I'll search till I come acrost that face again; and when I comes acrost it, we'll have our reckoning, or I'm much mistaken."

"And how shall you live meanwhile?"

"As I always have lived, by my hands. And now, mother, put up my bundle, and let me be going."

"To-night, lad? Oh, you can't be in earnest."

"Yes, to-night. I tell you there's something in the air of this place that stops my breathing. I could no more lie down and sleep in my bed here, while she lies out yonder with the lumps of clay upon her tender breast, than I could eat while she was starvin'. Let me go, mother. If you don't want to see me mad, let me go where I can still fancy she's a-living here with you, and that coffin and that shroud is all a horrid dream."

And so, regardless of his mother's entreaties or his own well-doing, Joel Cray goes forth from Priestley. While the neighbors are preparing to retire to their couches, and the dead woman's child, alike unconscious of his motherless condition and the stigma resting on his birth, is lying, flushed and rosy, in his first sleep in Phœbe's bed, the uncouth figure shambles slowly from the laundress's cottage, and takes the high-road to Fenton, which is on the way to the nearest town. But before he quits the village he passes a little shamefacedly, even though the dusk of the summer's eve has fallen and he is quite alone, through the wooden wicket that guards God's acre, and finds his way up to the new-made grave.

But it looks so desolate and mournful, cov-

ered in' with its hillock of damp red earth, that he cannot stand the sight, and, as he gazes at it, his honest breast begins to heave.

"I can't abear it," he whispers, hoarsely, "to leave her here—the thought of it will haunt me night and day."

And then he stoops and gathers up a morsel of the uninviting marl studded with rough stones.

"And to think you should be lying under this—you whose head should be resting on my bosom—oh, my darlin', my darlin'! my heart'll break!"

And for a few moments the poor wretch finds relief in a gush of tears.

"I'm glad no one saw 'em," he ponders quaintly, as the last of the low sobs breaks from his laboring bosom; "but I feels all the better. And I swear by 'em—by these here tears which the thought of you has drawn from me, Myra, that I don't look upon your grave again until I've had satisfaction for the wrong he's done you. Oh, my lost darlin', I shall never love another woman! Good-by, till we meets in a happier world than this has been for both of us!"

And when the morning breaks, he is miles away from Priestley.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. CAVENDISH and her daughter are gone; the sportsmen are gone; and, with the exception of Oliver Ralston, whom Irene has come to look upon almost as one of the family, Fen Court is cleared of guests, and she is left once more to the society of her husband and her sister-in-law, and the care of her little *protégé*, Tommy Brown. The transformation wrought in this child by a few weeks' attention and a suit of new clothes is something marvelous. No one who had only seen him grubbing in the front-yard of Mrs. Cray's domicile, or driving the truant pigs in from the lane, would recognize him now. His hair, cleansed from its normal state of dirt, is several shades lighter than it was before, and lies in loose waving curls about his head and neck. The tan is gradually wearing off his broad white brow, and his plump neck and arms and shoulders, now fully exposed by his low frocks, make him appear what he really is—a very handsome child. Above all, he possesses the violet eyes that first attracted Irene's notice; and beneath the dark lashes of which he has a quaint, half-shy, half-sly manner

of looking up at her which makes her heart throb each time she encounters it, though she can hardly tell the reason why. But the name by which the boy is generally known grates upon her ear; and her annoyance on this subject is a source of never-failing amusement to Colonel Mordaunt. He considers it so thoroughly feminine.

"Such a dreadful name!" she says, plaintively, as they are sitting out-of-doors one evening, and watching the child play upon the lawn. "*Tommy Brown!* It has not even got the virtue of singularity to recommend it. Could any thing be more commonplace?"

"Why don't you rechristen him, my dear?" demands the colonel, laughing. "Call him Aubrey de Vere, or Lancelot Vane, or Percival Lisle, or by any other simple and unpretending title. He is sure to end by being a footman, or a drummer, or a shop-boy—nothing could be more appropriate."

"He shall *never* be any thing of the sort," cries Irene, indignantly; "and it is not kind of you to laugh at me, Philip, when you know I am fond of the child. I don't mind Tommy so much. Thomas isn't a pretty name, but it was my dear father's, and there are plenty of Thomases in the peerage; but I can't stand Brown."

"Sligo family," interpolates her husband, with mock seriousness.

"O Philip, do be quiet! Of course, if it were his rightful name, there would be no help for it; but as he has no name at all, poor little fellow, I don't see why it should not be changed."

"Nor I. What do you propose to change it to?"

"I suppose, Philip— Now, I know I'm going to say a very stupid thing, so I give you fair warning; but I suppose it wouldn't do to call him by my maiden name?"

"What, St. John?"

"Yes," confusedly, "Thomas St. John. After papa, you know."

"My dear Irene, you have gone clean out of your senses about that child. Pick a beggar's brat from the gutter, and dub him with your father's name!—with the name of my cousin. I couldn't hear of it. What on earth would people say?"

"Let them say what they like. They must have something to talk about—"

"They shall not talk about my wife. No, Irene. I have permitted you to follow your own inclinations in adopting this boy—whether wisely or not remains to be determined—but I will not hear of his being endowed with the name of any

one belonging to my family. Call him Montmorency, or Plantagenet, or any tomfoolery you may fancy, but let us have no trifling with what is sacred." And, so saying, Colonel Mordaunt rises from his seat, and walks back into the house. He is beginning to feel a little jealous of the interest evinced in Tommy Brown.

Irene remains where he left her, red and silent. She does not attempt to detain him, or to call him back, for his words have left a sore impression on her mind, and she is afraid to trust herself to speak. It seems so hard to her that every one should resent her desire to be a mother to this poor motherless baby, or to forget that so wide a gap exists between herself and him. And she watches the little black frock and white pinafore, as their owner toddles about the grass, now making ineffectual attempts to grab a moth that the evening breezes have awakened, then stooping to pick off the heads of the daisies that the mowing-machine has passed over, until her thoughts wander to his poor dead mother, and her eyes fill with tears.

"I hope—that is, I suppose, that my brother—but what do you think, Mrs. Mordaunt?" remarks the sapient Isabella, who, book in hand, has been sitting at a respectful distance from the master and mistress of Fen Court, as though she had no right to approach them or join in their conversation.

"I beg your pardon—I wasn't listening," rejoins Irene, as she quickly blinks away the drops that hang upon her lashes.

"I mean—he is not angry, I trust, or vexed, with what you said, as he has gone in-doors, you see."

"What, Philip? why should he be? We were only talking about Tommy.—Ah! you mustn't do that, dear," as the child plunges over a flower-bed in the ardor of the chase. "Come here, Tommy—come to me."

But prompt obedience not being one of Tommy's many virtues, Irene has to go in pursuit of him; and, having captured, she brings him back to the garden bench, and seats him on her knee. Miss Mordaunt immediately retreats to the farthest extremity: It is the funniest thing in the world to see these two women with the child between them—the delight of the one, and the distaste and almost fear of the other, being so plainly depicted on their countenances.

"Now, Tommy, *do sit still,*" says Irene.—"What a weight the fellow grows! I am sure he must be pounds heavier than when he came here.—See! here's my watch. Put it to your ear, and

hear the tick-tick.—Hasn't he got lovely hair, Isabella?"

"It appears to be very fine," replies Miss Mordaunt.

"It's as soft as silk, and curls quite naturally.—No, darling—not my ear-rings. You hurt me!—oh! how he does pull. And now he wants that rose out of your dress. What a child it is!—No, Tommy mustn't take poor auntie's rose. (He may call you 'auntie,' mayn't he, Isabella?)"

"Well, if Philip has no objection; but of course—"

"What possible objection could Philip make? The child must call us something. He's going to call me 'mamma,' I know that!—Who am I, Tommy?—now, tell me."

"Mamma!—you's my mamma," replies Tommy, as he makes another grab at the ear-rings.

"You darling! But you will pull your mamma's ears out by the roots. And you positively make my knees ache with your weight. Just take him for a minute, Isabella. You can have no idea how heavy he is." And, without ceremony, Irene places the boy in the arms of her sister-in-law. Miss Mordaunt receives him on a hard and bony lap, with a deep well in the centre of it, as though he were a wild animal, warranted to bite upon the first occasion; and Tommy doesn't like the situation. He is of a rebellious and democratic turn of mind, and has no courtly hesitation in calling a spade by its right name. And some of Tommy's right names, acquired outside the Priestley public-house, are very wrong names indeed.

"Let me go!" he says wildly, as Miss Mordaunt's arms, in deference to Irene's wishes, make a feeble barrier to retain him. "I don't like oo."

"O Tommy, Tommy, that's naughty. You must love poor auntie," remonstrates Irene. But the child struggles on.

"I don't like oo—I don't like oo—oo's ugly—oo's a devil!" he winds up with, triumphantly, as he escapes from her grasp, and rushes back upon the flower-beds.

"Really, Mrs. Mordaunt, I trust you will not ask me to feel his weight again," says poor Isabella, who is quite excited by the compliments she has so unexpectedly received.

"It is very naughty of him," replies Irene, soothingly. "I must scold him well; in fact, I would slap his hands if I did not know that his language is entirely attributable to the horrible way in which he has been brought up. Poor lit-

tle child! Fancy how shocking it is that a baby of his age should even know such a word!"

"I trust—that is, it would be very unpleasant for all parties, if he were to call my brother by such a name," remarks Miss Mordaunt in her primmest manner.

"Oh! don't tell him, please," says Irene, as she catches up the truant to carry him off to bed. As she makes the request, she sighs. She sees so plainly that she will have to bear the brunt of all Master Tommy's peccadilloes.

Phoebe meets her at the bedroom-door with a message.

"If you please, ma'am, Mrs. Cray's waiting in the kitchen to know if she can speak to you."

"Oh, of course! Tell them to show her into my morning-room, and then come back and take the child;" and in another minute Irene is confronted with the laundress.

"Well, Mrs. Cray, is there any thing I can do for you this evening?"

"Thank you, no, ma'am. The washing as you've been so good as to find me is a real help. And what with Tommy off my hands, and poor Myra gone, we're getting on finely. And how is Tommy, ma'am? They tell me below-stairs as he've grown marvelous, bless 'im."

"Oh, he's very well, Mrs. Cray, and very happy. Did you wish to speak to me?"

"Well, ma'am, I was wishing to take the liberty to do so. I suppose you've heard of my loss, ma'am?"

"Your loss?—no!"

"My poor son, ma'am—my Joel! He's gone away."

"What! left Priestley?"

"Yes, ma'am. He couldn't abide the place now his cousin's buried, and his whole mind seems bent on finding out the man that's wronged her. He wanted to marry her himself, you see, ma'am, and I do believe it's gone to turn his head." (Here Mrs. Cray's canvas apron goes up, as usual, to her eyes.) "The last words he says to me was, 'Mother, I'll find him,' he says, 'and I'll kill him,' he says, 'if I travels the whole world over for it,' he says."

"Oh, but you mustn't believe all that people say when they are in such grief as that, Mrs. Cray. When your son is able to reason a little more calmly, he will never think of doing any thing so wicked. You may rest assured that whoever wronged poor Myra will not be permitted to go unpunished: but the punishment must be left in God's hands."

"That's just what I says to Joel, ma'am. I

says, 'Joel,' says I, 'whoever done it, its no business of yourn; and men will be men,' I says, 'and the girl was quite able to take care of herself.' But you don't know him, what Joel is, ma'am. He's as strong in his will as a helephant, and you might turn a posty sooner. So that I feel whenever they two meet there'll be bloodshed and murder, and perhaps worse. And I sha'n't never be easy till he comes back again!"

"Where is he now, Mrs. Cray?"

"The Lord knows, ma'am, for I'm sure I don't. He went away last Thursday week, and I've seen nothin' of him since. And it's hard for his mother to be left in this way, and she a widder, with five littl'uns to work for, and her poor niece in the church-yard. It's very hard; very hard, indeed."

"But I thought you said you were getting on so well, Mrs. Cray?"

"So I am, ma'am—thanks to you and the washing. And it's a real relief to have poor Myra laid comfortable underground, and to feel she'll never want for nothin' again. And that's what brings me up here this evening, ma'am. I've been reddling up the house a bit, and turning out her boxes to see what would make up for the poor children, and I came across a few letters and bits of things of hers as I'm sure I never knew she had—she kep' 'em so close."

"Are they of any importance to the child?"

"That I can't say, ma'am, being no scholar myself; but, as you've provided so handsome for Tommy, I thought as you'd the best right to see them, and come to your own decision whether they should be burned or not."

"Thank you. I think you are right. Have you got them with you?"

Here Mrs. Cray produces a red-cotton handkerchief from under her shawl, which, unfolded, discloses a small packet tied up in part of a dirty old newspaper.

"There they are, ma'am, just as I found them in Myra's box. There's a bit of hair among the papers, and a glove—which it looks to me like a gentleman's glove, but there's no saying, and gloves ain't a proof if there were. So, not being able to read the writing, I didn't disturb them more than necessary, for I guessed you'd like to have 'em as they was—and taking such a hinterest as you do in Tommy, and they being of value perhaps to the child—which of course I shall be very willing to leave them with you, ma'am—for being no scholar, as I says before—"

As Mrs. Cray stands there, repeating the

same sentences again and again, and fumbling the dirty packet about in her hands, a light breaks in upon Irene. The letters are to be paid for. And she is quite ready to pay for them, for her interest and curiosity are alike aroused by what the laundress has told her, and she hopes the papers may prove of use in tracing the parentage of the adopted child.

"Oh! certainly, I quite understand," she exclaims eagerly, as her hand dives into her pocket for her purse; "and I'm sure I'm much obliged to you, Mrs. Cray, for the trouble you have taken in bringing them up to me." And thereupon she seizes on the letters, and transfers instead a sovereign to the woman's palm—an exchange which so entirely meets Mrs. Cray's views of justice, that it is several minutes before Irene can stop her torrent of thanks, and get her well out of the room again.

It is dusk now, for the autumn evenings close in fast, and she rings for candles, and, full of expectation, sits down to inspect the contents of the packet she has bought. She is so deeply interested in this case—so sentimentally regretful still over the memory of poor Myra—so anxious that her child should not be left entirely dependent on herself for a friend. So she draws her chair close in to the table, and leans both her arms upon it, and bends her head down to the light, as people do who are about to enter on a task that engrosses all their minds. When she has cast away the dirty string, and still dirtier outside paper, she comes upon a small bundle of letters, or rather notes, in number about six, and which, to judge from two or three specimens selected at random, do not appear at first sight to be likely to prove worth a sovereign vested in the interests of Tommy.

"DEAR MYRA: Don't expect me to-morrow. It is impossible I can come. The bill shall be paid next week. Yours ever, E. H."

"DEAR M.: I shall be over on Friday at six. Never mind dinner. Shall dine before starting. I ordered in six dozen of claret yesterday. Carriage was paid.

"Yours affectionately, E. H."

"DEAREST M.: You are a thorough woman. How could I be at F— when S— was twenty miles the other way? You will see me some time next week. Get the dress by all means. I inclose check. Yours truly, E. H."

When Irene has deciphered these and a few

others, very similar in character, she pauses for a moment's thought.

"What do they tell her? Positively nothing but what she knew before. It is evident that the writer was not a passing acquaintance of the dead girl's, but some one who considered her home as his, and held himself responsible for her expenditure; without doubt, the father of her child—the Hamilton of whom Myra had spoken to her."

Irene thrusts the letters to one side indignantly, almost with disgust. She fancies she can trace the selfish nature of the writer in every line; she thinks she would not care to stand in that man's place at the present moment, and only wishes she could find some clew by which to trace him, and make him aware of the mischief and misery he has wrought.

Having disposed of the letters, she next takes up the glove—a gentleman's glove, as the laundress had observed, but of no value in tracing the identity of its owner—and the envelope that contains the lock of hair.

It is a soft, wavy piece of dark-brown hair, the counterpart of that which grows on Tommy's head, and Irene experiences a strange sensation of mingled admiration and dislike as she takes it in her hand. Besides these, the packet contains nothing but a gold locket, broken and empty; a heap of withered flowers, chiefly of violets, and one of those highly-ornamental and strictly-useless ivory-backed prayer-books which are manufactured for young gentlemen to present to young ladies, and which Myra was very unlikely to have received from any friend in her own class of life. Irene opens the prayer-book to see if there is any inscription in it, but the title-page is guiltless of the indiscretion of revealing its donor's name. It is blank and silent and inscrutable as the past appears likely to be upon the subject of her adopted child. She turns over the leaves mechanically and with an air of disappointment. At the service for the solemnization of marriage the page is folded down. Poor Myra! how often may she not have glanced at the holy words, which bore no sweet memories for her, with longing tears! As Irene's hand shakes, the little volume shakes, and something—an oval piece of cardboard apparently—falls loosely from it on the table. She seizes and turns it uppermost. It is a photographed face, cut from an ordinary *carte de visite*, which, from its size and appearance, has evidently once been encased in the broken locket—the face of a man, which she holds forward eagerly to the light.

"God in heaven! it is that of Eric Keir!"

In her anxiety to examine the portrait, Irene has risen to her feet, and now stands, quivering in every limb, and gazing at it as though she were spellbound. There can be no mistake—she appears younger here than when she knew him, there is less hair about the face—less thought upon the brow—a look of more *insouciance* about the mouth—but the eyes, the nose, the contour of the countenance, are the same; there can be no doubt but that it was taken from himself.

"But how—how can *his* photograph have found its way among Myra's poor possessions? Why should it be mixed up with these relics of the base and selfish lover who betrayed her innocence?"

The deadly sickness that rises to her heart makes answer to the question.

"The initials E. H. stand for Eric Hamilton; *he* is the man, at whose door all the suffering she has witnessed must be laid; *his* child, whom she has adopted as her own, lies sleeping at this moment under her protection."

As the reality of the thought strikes home to her, Irene lets the photograph fall from her hands, and sinks back upon the chair which she had quitted.

Eric Hamilton Keir and Myra Cray. For a few moments, all that she does, or thinks of doing, is to repeat those two names conjunctively over and over again, until the syllables lose all significance for her.

The effect is to harden her heart and cause it to feel quite dead and cold. Presently she hears a sound outside in the hall, and, springing up, pushes all the sad mementos of poor Myra's disgrace together in one heap, and, thrusting them into the writing-table drawer, turns the key upon them. And then she leaves the room, almost as though she were in a dream, and, still dreaming, encounters her sister-in-law upon the stairs.

"Are you not coming down into the drawing-room?" says Isabella. "I think—that is, I am not sure, of course—but I believe that my brother is expecting you. Coffee has been in for half an hour."

"Don't wait for me," Irene replies, in a low voice, as she toils in a languid, purposeless manner up the staircase.

As she gains her bedroom-door, Phoebe appears upon the landing from her own apartment.

"Oh! please, ma'am, *would* you just step in and look at Master Tommy. He *do* look so beautiful in his sleep."

"No, no! I can't. I don't wish to see him. I don't care about seeing him," replies her mistress, in tones so unusually sharp and decisive, that Phœbe, bewildered, retreats to her nursery again, feeling that somehow she has made a mistake.

Irene enters her own room and paces up and down in the dark, not fast, but restlessly.

"Myra Cray!" so run her thoughts, "a low-born, uneducated girl, whom he was base enough to betray and desert, and then he came to me—and dared to trifle with my affections too!"

The knowledge of the similarity between their cases should make her soften toward Myra's memory, but it does not; the shock of the discovery has occurred too lately. As yet she can only think of her as of one who (however briefly) held the heart she was unable to secure. And she is impotently weak to cope with a feeling which she knows to be unworthy of her; and the whole world loses favor in her eyes in consequence of her own defalcation.

As she is still walking up and down the room, trying hard to stamp down the demons of envy and jealousy and revenge that are struggling for supremacy in her bosom, Colonel Mordaunt's deferential tap for admittance is heard against the door. It is an unfortunate moment for him in which to appear before her; we are best left to conduct these mental warfares by ourselves; and there are moments in life in which the attentions of our best and dearest friends irritate instead of soothing us. And all Colonel Mordaunt's attentions, however kindly meant, are conducted on that soothing stroke-you-down-gently principle which is so trying to accept patiently when every nerve is quivering with excitement.

"Why, my darling," he commences, "all in the dark! What can you find to amuse you up here?"

"Oh, I'm all right, thank you, I don't feel inclined for the light just now—I'm thinking."

"And what can the little woman be thinking about that requires both gloom and solitude? Nothing unpleasant, I hope, Irene."

"How should it be?"

"Then come down to the drawing-room, my darling. Isabella is waiting till you appear to pour out the coffee."

"I would much rather not go; why can't she take it alone?"

"What reason can you have for not joining her?"

"Only that I feel a little—a little bipped to-night, and would rather remain by myself."

"Hipped! Why, what on earth can you have to make you feel bipped? Has anything gone wrong?"

"I have already said no to that question. But is it absolutely necessary, in order to feel low, that we should be suffering in the present? Have we no past to return at times upon us?"

Irene forgets, as she says this sentence, how much confidence she reposed in her husband before marriage; and as it escapes her, and the remembrance returns, she grows still more impatient with herself and him.

"I had hoped," he observes (and the observation alone, in her present condition, carries offense with it), "that your past was done away with forever, Irene."

"I never gave you cause to hope so," she retorts sharply, as he turns away in silence to leave the room. In a moment she has seen her error and sprung after him.

"Forgive me, Philip, I am in a horrid temper! But when you talk of my past as gone forever, you forget that I have lost my father and mother and—"

"There, there, darling! It is I who should ask your forgiveness; I was a brute to say what I did. But I have been hoping I had made you happy, Irene."

"And so you have—very happy!" she returns with a sort of hysterical gasp. "Let us say no more about it, but go down to Isabella." And for the remainder of the evening she is, to all outward appearance, much like her usual self. She goes to bed, however, sleeps brokenly, and rises in the morning unrefreshed. The revelation of the night before has made no difference in her future prospects, nor can it influence in any way her present actions; but it has revived all her bitterest feelings with regard to Eric Keir's behavior to herself—feelings which she had hoped were long since laid to rest, because the tame existence which she is leading affords no opportunity of arousing them. But the dull, leaden weight which, alternated with fierce moods of scorn and irony, once rendered life a torture to her, has settled down upon her heart again, and disposes her to feel hard and cold to all mankind, until, while she is dressing, a certain chubby hand knocks uncertainly upon her bedroom-door. She knows well the faint, broken sound his dimpled knuckles make, and generally flies to the door to open it herself. But, to-day her brows contract, and she shrinks backward as though the mere

knowledge of his presence there could give her pain.

"If you please, ma'am, it's Master Tommy," says Phœbe's voice from the outside.

"I can't see him this morning, Phœbe. Let him run in the garden until we come down."

"I want oo—I want oo," says Tommy, as he kicks at the bedroom-door.

"Are you going to let that child kick all the paint off the paneling?" shouts her husband from his dressing-room.

"If you please, ma'am, he's been in the garden already, and he's got a most beautiful rose for you—haven't you, Master Tommy?"

"Let me in! I want oo," repeats the *pro-tégé*.

Then she advances slowly and unlocks the door, and admits the child before Phœbe can follow him, and finds herself standing in the centre of the room, gazing with her large, hungry eyes at the atom of humanity whose existence vexes her so sorely.

"What do you want, Tommy?" she commences coldly.

"A rose for Tommy, mamma—a booful rose," he lips as he presents the flower.

She does not offer to accept it, on the contrary, she turns away.

"Don't call me *mamma*," she says, quickly.

The urchin looks astonished, and then pouts his lips. Children are ready judges; he recognizes the injustice and waywardness of her new mood at once.

"I go, Phœbe," he utters plaintively in remonstrance to the change. Irene looks round—sees the dewy mouth drooping at both corners—catches the deprecating glance of the violet eyes—becomes aware of her barbarity in a moment, and flies to fold the friendless, fatherless little creature in her arms.

"As if 'twas *your* fault," she murmurs, pressing her lips upon his curly head. "Poor lamb—poor unhappy, deserted little child! O Tommy! he has left us both—he has left us both—we will be all the world to one another."

The mistress of Fen Court is very thoughtful for some days after this little episode, and only like herself by fits and starts, though, strange to say, no one notices the change, except it be Oliver Ralston. But our most intimate friends are often the last to read what is passing in our inmost minds. We are suffering, perhaps, so keenly that we scarcely dare to raise our eyes lest they should blurt out our secret, and imagine

every one we meet must read it written on our brow, in characters of fire; and yet those with whom we live go on consulting us day after day with reference to the weekly expenditure, or the servants' peccadilloes, or the children's spring dresses, as if, for the time being, such matters had not lost their significance for us almost as much as though we had passed beyond them. Yet it is not so with strangers, unless, indeed, we happen to be actors and actresses of the first rank. They meet us, and observe to one another afterward, "What is that man's perplexity? What cause *can* that woman have for weeping?" And so Oliver Ralston discovers that Irene is not so cheerful as before, and taxes her with it in his rough, hearty way.

"Dreaming again, Irene! What is up?"

"When you can explain to me, Oliver, how much is comprehended in that mystical term, perhaps I may be able to inform you."

"You know what I mean! Why are you so down in the mouth?"

"The natural reaction after so much dissipation."

"Fiddle-de-dee! Excuse my rudeness, but you know *fiddle-de-dee* is the only word to suit your explanation. Seriously, though, is it any thing in which I can help you?"

"Not at all, Oliver! thanks all the same—except, indeed, by not commenting upon what you are pleased to call my being 'down in the mouth.'"

"But may I tell you to what I think it's due?"

"Certainly! if you can—which I know you can't."

"You are sorry you ever adopted that little brat, Tommy?"

She grows scarlet.

"Indeed I'm not. What should make you think so?" Has your uncle been saying any thing against him?"

"He never mentions the subject to me. But I have seen you looking at the child scores of times lately, and can read it in your face."

"Acute observer! but wrong for once in his life. I wouldn't part with Tommy for any thing in the world."

"Not if I found his relations for you?"

"He has no relations," hurriedly—"he belongs to me entirely—he will never be taken away. But please let us talk of something else, Oliver. Have you seen Dr. Robertson again?"

"How artfully you change the subject!—Yes: I saw Robertson this morning; and it's all but settled."

"With Philip's consent?"

"Certainly. He has come round to think it will be the best thing in the world for me. And so it will. I have still sense enough to see that. There will not be much temptation for me to dissipate in Fenton. The only drawback is, that I am afraid I shall not get so much practice as I ought to have."

"Oh, never mind the practice. To lead a quiet life is the most important thing. And I promise you shall operate on me whenever occasion calls for it."

"What an opening! I'll have both your legs off before the year's out. But really, Irene, it will be a great thing for me to live so near you."

"It will be perfectly delightful; for, *entre nous*, though poor Isabella is extremely good, she is a very stupid companion. And you must come over and dine with us every day. Now, won't you?"

"And leave Robertson to look after his five parishes alone? I'm afraid he won't consent to that. But I must keep a horse, and dare say I shall often be able to take Fen Court in my rounds."

"Are you going to live with Dr. Robertson?"

"No; he has a wife and large family: so I should prefer not to do so. But I can have two rooms in a farm-house close by—very nice ones."

"And we will furnish them for you; that will be charming. You have no idea how pretty I shall make them. I shall send you over table-linen and crockery and every thing from the Court. We have much more than we can use. It will be the greatest fun in the world getting your rooms ready."

"You are much too good to me."

"And when you have taken possession, you shall give a house-warming. Isabella and I will go over in the pony-chaise; and Tommy shall ride his donkey. (By-the-way, do you know that I've bought a donkey for Tommy, and he sticks on like a little brick?)—here Irene interrupts her rapid delivery with a deep-drawn sigh.

"Why that sigh, Irene?"

"What sigh?"

"At Tommy's name again. Ah! you can't deceive me. All the low spirits of the last week are attributable to the existence of that wretched child."

"How you do tease me, Oliver! And it's very rude to break off the conversation in that way. Where was I? Oh! yes; the upshot is that we'll all go and have afternoon tea at your Fenton apartments—that is, if you'll have us."

"How can you doubt it? Only your proposals are so delightful, I'm afraid they are too good to come true. What will Uncle Philip say to them?"

"Just what I do. But I will go and sound him at once." And off runs Irene in search of her husband. She finds Colonel Mordaunt in a beaming humor, and every thing goes right. He considers the offered appointment as good an opening as a young man in Oliver's position could expect to obtain; acknowledges he should like to have him near Fen Court; agrees heartily to every suggestion with respect to furnishing the apartments; and even mentions a certain strong hunting-cob now standing in his stables as very likely to be his own particular contribution to his nephew's new establishment.

"And so you see, Oliver, *that's* all right," is Irene's comfortable conclusion as the last clause has been discussed and provided for; and then follows a merrier evening than they have spent for some days past; for Irene catches the infection of her husband's good-humor and Oliver's content, and miraculously recovering her voice, which has been *hors de combat* for at least a week, sits up to a much later hour than usual, singing snatches of old ballads that were famous before she was born, and interrupting herself every second minute to twist round on the music-stool, and make some little harmless joke at the expense of Oliver's future *ménage*.

So they all go to bed pretty well tired out, and my heroine does not wake until her accustomed hour on the following morning. The first thing of which she is conscious is that Colonel Mordaunt is already up and dressed.

"Why, Philip"—sitting up in bed, and rubbing her sleepy eyes—"is that really you? Have I overslept myself?"

"I think not. It is only just eight. I rose rather earlier than usual."

"Why? Were you disturbed? or is there a meet to-day? By-the-way, Philip, were there carts in the night?"

"Carts, my darling?"

"Yes! scraping over the gravel. I fancied I heard them; or perhaps I dreamed it. I was very sleepy.—Are you going away?"

"I shall be back in a minute," says her husband hastily; but several minutes elapse, and he does not return, so Irene rises, and proceeds to dress herself. She is just about to ring for Phoebe to assist in the completion of her toilet, when she is attracted by a loud roar from somewhere below-stairs. Tommy has evidently come to grief.

"Oh! they have let him fall and hurt himself," she exclaims aloud, all the maternal solicitude with which her breast is laden springing into action directly a call is made upon it; "they have let the baby fall!" and rushes to the door.

"Phæbe!" There is no answer; but she fancies a slight bustle is going on in the hall, and hears, above the crying of the child, a confused and angry murmur, as of voices engaged in argument.

"Phæbe! Phæbe! where are you? Bring Master Tommy here!" she exclaims again, as she leans over the banisters: and then a diversion is created and a movement made in her direction, and Phæbe, with the boy still whimpering in her arms, and Colonel Mordaunt bringing up the rear, appears upon the staircase.

"Oh, is he really hurt?" begins Irene, anxiously, as she perceives the guard of honor.

"My darling, there is nothing the matter. Pray don't distress yourself," replies the colonel.

"Then, why do you come up, too? And how did it happen?—Did he fall down the kitchen-stairs, Phæbe? You know I have strictly forbidden you to take him there."

"He didn't fall down the kitchen-stairs, ma'am," replies Phæbe, with a very pursed-up mouth.

"How did you do it, darling?" demands Irene, of the child, now safely in her arms.

"Naughty ooman," lisps Tommy, half disposed to cry afresh at the mere recollection.

"My dear Irene, how absurd of you to question an infant of that age! As if he could possibly tell any thing that is to be depended on."

"Why don't you tell me, then?—How did it happen, Phæbe?"

"Well, ma'am, I wasn't exactly present at the time, because I had gone to—"

"I consider I am a far better person to explain matters than your maid, Irene," interrupts the colonel, rather testily. "The fact is, the child was playing about where he has no business to be at all (but, really, you do indulge him to that extent that it becomes dangerous even to suggest matters might be amended)—"

"Please go on, and let me hear how the accident occurred."

"Well, he went into the dining-room when it was—was occupied—and—and—when he was told to go, and would not obey (he is one of the most disobedient little animals I ever met), he was sent out. That's all."

"Sent out! Did you strike him, Philip?"

"Oh! no, ma'am, 'twasn't master," interposes Phæbe, quickly.

"Who, then?"

"Naughty ooman," explains Tommy.

"Who *dared* to do it?" repeats Irene.

"Well, my love, it's really nothing to make such a fuss about; it's not everybody that would think so much of giving a tiresome child a tap on the head as you do. And I dare say she never thought twice of what she was doing."

"She!—she! Not Isabella, surely."

"Oh! Lor, no, ma'am. Miss Mordaunt ain't out of her room yet," cries Phæbe.

A thought strikes Irene. The mystery becomes clear.

"*Has Quekett returned?*" And the change in her voice as she puts the question is so patent to her hearers that Colonel Mordaunt becomes quite alarmed for what may follow.

"Yes, yes, dear; she has. Now you know all. But I am sure she didn't mean to offend you.—Phæbe, you had better go, and take the child with you."

But Irene folds the boy closer in her arms.

"I can do without you, Phæbe; but I shall keep Master Tommy." And the bedroom-door recloses on the servant only.

"And so that woman has come back, and *dared*, to strike my child," says Irene, as soon as they find themselves alone.

"Pooh! nonsense! my love. *Your child*. Do just think what you are saying. And, as for *daring*, I consider that a very strange term for you to use when speaking of any action, from so old and valued a friend as Mrs. Quekett is to me, toward so very recent an acquisition as that nameless *protégé* of yours." The colonel tries to speak with his usual ease and composure, but the attempt is a melancholy failure.

"She has dared to strike my child!" repeats his wife, with a heaving breast.

"The boy refused to obey her, and she boxed his ears. It was a very natural thing to do."

"It may be very natural, but it shall not be repeated."

"Then you must teach the child to be more obedient."

"I shall teach him nothing for that woman's sake. When did she return?"

"This morning, at about six. She prefers traveling by the night train."

"It appears to me that she prefers any mode of action by which she can best show off her insolence and the unusual position she has been permitted to attain here. She leaves us without

a moment's warning in order to humor her own caprice; and she returns in the same manner, without the slightest consideration for our convenience. A pretty way for a servant to go on in, truly!"

"Irene, I thought this subject had been discussed and done with."

"I shall never have done with it while she remains here, and is permitted to behave as she does. It is past all bearing."

"Well, there is no chance of her leaving," replies the poor colonel, with a sigh; "so the prospect is cheerful."

"If her presence here is a necessary evil, I must bear it; but she shall not interfere in my private affairs. Philip, I have borne more from that woman than you know of; and I tell you, candidly, were it not for your sake, I would not remain another moment under the same roof with her. But, as she has really returned, for which I am infinitely sorry—"

"Why, you did not imagine she was gone for good, surely," interrupts the colonel. "This is her home, and always has been."

"But she might have died, or something, in the interim."

"Irene, I am surprised to hear you speak in that strain."

"Don't be surprised at any thing I say of that woman. Nothing could be too bad for her. But of one thing I am determined. She shall not strike this child. And of that I shall make her aware on our first meeting."

"I advise you not to quarrel with her."

"I shall not condescend to quarrel. I shall simply give my orders; and if she doesn't choose to obey them—"

"What then?"

"I shall appeal to you."

"And if I am powerless?"

"Why, then—but it will be time enough to decide what I shall do when the occasion for decision arrives. Meanwhile I shall speak my mind very plainly to Mrs. Quekett."

"I advise you to keep good friends with her," repeats the colonel, who appears to his wife to have assumed quite a depressed and craven air since the night before. "She is an estimable woman in many respects: faithful, honest, and to be depended on; but she makes a bitter enemy. It will be far wiser to have her on your side."

Irene's lip curls in proud contempt.

"Thank you, Philip; but I have been used to choose my allies from a class superior to that of Mrs. Quekett. I have borne with her patiently

hitherto, but she has put me on my mettle now; and, if I die for it, *she shall not strike this child again!*"

"Oh, hush!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, fearfully, as they issue on the landing together (the little boy still clinging round Irene's neck), and commence to descend the staircase, at the foot of which appears the house-keeper, proceeding in state to her own apartment, and followed by a couple of men-servants bearing her boxes.

"I hope I see you well, Mrs. Mordaunt," she says, with a smirk, as she encounters the couple about half-way down.

Colonel Mordaunt, who is as nervous as a woman, nudges Irene upon the elbow.

"Mrs. Quekett speaks to you, my love."

"I heard her.—I should think you might have given us some notice of your return, Quekett. It is rather unusual to take people by surprise in this way."

The tone in which she is spoken to makes Quekett flush up at once, and her voice changes with her mood.

"I couldn't have let you know beforehand," she replies, rudely, "as Lady Baldwin didn't say till yesterday that she could dispense with me. And it's quite a new thing, into the bargain, for me to hear that I'm to account for all my comings and goings to a family where I've lived for—"

"Of course—of course," interrupts the colonel, hurriedly. "You mistake Mrs. Mordaunt's meaning, Quekett, altogether.—Irene, my dear, breakfast is waiting. Had we not better go down?"

He is terribly afraid of what may be coming, and has but one wish: to separate the combatants. But Irene's cup of wrath is filled to the brim, and she stands her ground. With Tommy clinging tightly to her from pure fear, she feels brave enough to say or do any thing.

"One moment, Philip.—As you have returned, Mrs. Quekett, you and I had better understand each other. You struck this child this morning. Don't do it again!"

"Irene! Irene!" implores the hapless colonel.

"*Don't do it again!*" pants Mrs. Quekett.

"Don't do it again," repeats her mistress, calmly. "I have adopted him: he is under my protection; and I will allow no one to correct him but myself."

"A pretty pass things is come to!" exclaims the house-keeper, whose rage at being rebuked before the footmen is beyond all description. "I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself, colonel, to allow it. A dirty brat, belonging to

the Lord knows who, and coming from the lowest lot in Priestley, to be brought up here and prinked out like a young gentlesfolk, and not a finger to be laid on him! Why, what'll the neighbors say? What do you expect the village is saying at this very moment? Do you want a repetition of old times?"

"Hush, Quekett! Pray be silent!"

"Oh, yes! it's very easy to bid me hold my tongue, when I come home to find the Court run over with by-blows—"

"How dare you speak of this child in my presence by such a name?" exclaims Irene.—

"Philip, will you permit such an insult to be offered to your wife—and before your servants, too?"

"No, no, my dear, of course not.—Quekett, I must entreat you to pass on to your room.—Neither you nor Mrs. Mordaunt is in a fit state to discuss this matter now."

"But remember, Mrs. Quekett," adds Irene, "that whatever you may think, you shall not speak of Master Tommy in that way again."

"Master Tommy, indeed!" sneers the house-keeper.

"Yes, Master Tommy. Whoever he may be, wherever he has come from, I have adopted him as my own child, and I will have him treated as my own child."

"Oh! very well, ma'am, just as you please."

"I am glad you see it in its proper light at last. Let me pass." And with the boy still in her arms, Irene marches stately to the breakfast-room, while the colonel, glad at any cost to see the interview come to an end, follows, though with his spirits down at zero.

As they leave her, Rebecca Quekett turns round upon the landing to gaze at the retreating form of the mistress of Fen Court, with a look of unmistakable hatred.

"Humph! To be treated as *her own child*, is he?" she says, maliciously aloud, so that the servants in attendance can overhear her; "and he a nurse-child of that creature Cray's, left unclaimed for any lady to adopt. That's a queer story, ain't it?" she continues, appealing to one of the men beside her; "and perhaps she ain't so far wrong when she stands out for his being treated as her own. There's lots more things happen in this world than we've any notion of.—Well, you'd better get up with the boxes now, James. They have kept us on the landing long enough, Lord knows?"

And so the worthy disappears into her own room, and is lost to the view, at all events of Irene, for the remainder of the day.

Colonel and Mrs. Mordaunt have a sharp little discussion on this subject during breakfast-time—quite the sharpest they have engaged in since their marriage; and, though Irene will not yield one inch with regard to stooping to conciliate the house-keeper, she feels, at the termination of the meal, that she has been worsted in the fight. For the subject of her adoption of Tommy Brown has necessarily formed part of the argument, and her husband has gone so far as to observe that if a child who is no relation to either of them is to bring discord into the house, he had better go. And here Irene recognizes, for the first time, her impotence to keep him in opposition to her husband's wishes, and the knowledge silences her, even to making her reflect sadly whether she may not ultimately (unless her *protégé* is to be cast on the world again) be compelled, for his sake, to submit to Mrs. Quekett's terms of peace; and the fear lowers Colonel Mordaunt in her eyes—with him lowers herself, and renders her morbidly depressed. She spends all the morning in the shrubbery, running about with Tommy, for she cannot stand Isabella's deprecating air and deep-drawn sighs; and here, after a while, Oliver Ralston comes to find her, with bad news written on his countenance.

"It's all knocked on the head, Irene. I can't close with Robertson."

"Why not? Has he changed his mind?"

"On the contrary, I had a letter from him this morning, begging for my final decision, as he is in need of immediate help; but my uncle has just had me into his study, and he says it's no go."

"Oliver! surely not on account of Quekett?"

"Most surely yes, Irene. I'm as certain that old fiend is at the bottom of it as I am that I'm alive. Not that Uncle Philip told me so. He hummed and hawed—you know his way when that woman's got him into a scrape—and said he had been thinking the matter over, and looking at it from all points of view, and it seemed to him now that it would be more prudent of me not to accept a trust I might not care to retain."

"But didn't you tell him you *do* care for it?"

"Of course I did. I said every thing I could think of, but without effect. The fact is, he doesn't wish me to stay here. I could take the appointment without consulting him further: but I owe every thing to him, Irene, and—"

"Oh, yes! Don't go against his wishes. But perhaps he may change his mind again. Shall I speak to him?"

"I wish you would."

"Well, look after Tommy, and I'll go at once."

She finds her husband still in his study, apparently wrapt in thought, and dashes at the matter in hand in her own frank, straightforward way.

"Philip, why have you altered your mind about Oliver going to Fenton?"

"I *have* altered it, my dear, and that should be sufficient."

"Not at all, unless you have a good reason. It isn't fair."

"I would rather not discuss the matter with you, Irene. We have had bickering enough for to-day."

"Need we bicker because we talk? This subject does not touch my interests so nearly as the other; but I think you owe Oliver some explanation of the change."

"The explanation is very simple. Upon consideration, I don't think the plan a good one, or likely to prove for his happiness or mine."

"And the consideration came through that woman Quckett."

"Why should you think so?"

"Because I know it. O Philip, Philip!" And Irene, kneeling down by his arm-chair, puts her head upon her husband's knee, and begins to cry.

His tender affection is aroused at once.

"My darling, why is this? Have I really made you unhappy?"

"Yes, you have. To see you so completely under subjection to your own servant; to know that she can sway you when I fail; that her wishes can make you act contrary to your own good judgment, as you are acting now—you, whom I looked up to as so strong and brave, and worthy to command all who came within your range. It lowers you in my eyes; it makes you contemptible in the eyes of others, and I cannot bear it!"

"Irene, Irene! for God's sake, spare me!"

He has grown very pale during the progression of this speech, and, now that it is ended, he takes out his handkerchief and passes it across his brow.

"Spare you! Why don't you spare me from insult in the house where you have made me mistress?"

"My darling, you don't understand. How I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't. But several members of my family (my father, for instance) have been laid, at different periods of their lives, under great obligations to Mrs. Quckett. I acknowledge she is not always pleasant in her manners, and I regret to see she has not

taken so kindly to you as I should have liked; but, notwithstanding, I could not feel myself justified in not doing all in my power to repay the debt I owe her."

"And which I should imagine she had canceled a thousand times over by her insolence. But why should poor Oliver suffer for your father's liabilities?"

Colonel Mordaunt is silent.

"Fenton is more than three miles from Fen Court. Surely his presence at this distance can have no influence on Mrs. Quckett's peace of mind."

"He would always be over here, my dear."

"And so, because she objects to it, your own nephew is to be banished from your house. O Philip! I could hardly have believed it of you."

"Pray, don't make me more unhappy about it, Irene, than I am. Do you think I don't feel it, also?"

"Is that possible?"

"I am suffering, at this moment, far more than you, my child, or than Oliver either, for that matter."

"Poor Philip! I am so sorry for you! But is it quite, *quite* necessary that Oliver should go?"

"It is 'quite, *quite* necessary.' If he did not go now, he would be compelled to do so in a few months, and perhaps under circumstances most unpleasant to us all. And yet sometimes I think if I could trust you, Irene—"

"You may trust me, Philip, and to any extent."

"I believe it, my darling—but no, no, it cannot be. Don't ask me again. Only go to poor Oliver, and tell him that I will hold myself responsible for any expenses he may incur, in the way of premium or outfit, in procuring another appointment, on the condition that it is not in this county—anywhere, in fact, but near here."

"And you *won't* trust me, then?" she says, with a reproachful air, as she prepares to leave him.

"I cannot—I dare not. Yes, dearest, I will." And with that he rises suddenly, and stands before her, and takes her two hands in his own.

"Irene, when you gave your dear self to me at the altar, did you not promise to honor me?"

"And I have honored you, Philip."

"I believe it; and I trust you to honor me still, notwithstanding that I am unable to explain all that you wish to know."

"But secrets are so horrid between husbands and wives," she says, pouting, with true feminine curiosity; "and it is so hard to forgive what one understands nothing about."

"Have you never kept a secret from me, then, Irene?"

He is alluding to the possible name of her former lover, and the circumstances of their intimacy, which have never been confided to him. But *her* thoughts fly immediately to her adopted child and the knowledge she possesses of his parentage; and under her husband's steady gaze she becomes crimson to the very parting of her hair.

"Oh, very well," she answers, with a light laugh; "don't let us say any more about it, since talking won't mend matters. Only I trust my confidence in your integrity, Philip, is not supposed to extend to holding out the right hand of fellowship to Mrs. Quekett."

But Colonel Mordaunt appears to have forgotten the root of the subject in question. He is still holding her hands, and looking fixedly at her downcast eyes and working features.

"My query seems to have affected you, Irene?"

"It would affect any one, I should think, to be stared at as you are staring at me. But this is child's play, Philip. What is it you want me to do?"

"Only to believe in me as I believe in you."

"That would be easy if believing in you did not involve believing in Mrs. Quekett also. However, I will leave the woman to go her way, if she will leave me to go mine. Is that a bargain?"

"I suppose you are alluding to the child; she has not interfered in any thing else."

"I am. You gave me permission to adopt and bring him up. Will you make this fact clear to your house-keeper, and tell her, at the same time, that my forbearance depends entirely upon her own."

"Then you sign a treaty of peace with her?"

"Under those conditions, and for your sake, yes. I feel myself degraded to enter upon any terms with a dependant; but, since it is for your comfort, I concede. Only it must be kept as religiously on her side as mine. And now I trust we have heard the last of so contemptible a business."

Colonel Mordaunt sighs, and turns away.

"You are not yet satisfied, Philip. What, in Heaven's name, would you have me do more?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing. Indeed, I do not see what else there is to be done. Only, pray remember what I said to you this morning, and do not irritate her more than you can help."

"I shall never speak to—or notice her!" replies Irene; and here, feeling that all that can

be said has been said upon the subject, she leaves the study to communicate the up-shot of the interview to Oliver.

Colonel Mordaunt, left to himself, looks more thoughtful than before. He has courted the information that his wife has not laid her whole heart bare to him, and yet now he feels miserable because she has put the sign-manual of silence on a fact which he knew to be such. Mrs. Quekett, Oliver Ralston, the child, every thing which has worried him hitherto, passes from his mind, to give place to the curiosity with which he longs to discover *how* much of her former life Irene has kept back from him. He remembers vividly all she said to him at Brussels, and in the little sitting-room at Norwood, on the subject of her disappointment; but he was so eager in the chase at that time—so anxious to secure her for himself at any cost—that he did not choose to believe what she asserted to be true—that the best part of her life was over. "Yet had not the sequel proved him to be in the right? For the six months she has been his wife her spirits have gone on gradually improving day by day. Indeed, a few weeks ago she was buoyant—radiant—running over with fun; and, if they have commenced to flag again, it has only been since—

"Since when?"

"Since the arrival of Tommy Brown among them!" As Colonel Mordaunt's thoughts, traveling backward and taking notes by the way, light on this fact, he rises from his seat, and walks aimlessly about the room.

"D—n that child!" he says, without the least reserve, "I wish to God we had never seen or heard of him!"

And then he goes out to his stables and kennel, and tries to forget all about it; but the idea haunts him nevertheless, and often after that day Irene, glancing up suddenly, finds him studying her face, with an earnestness not altogether born of affection, which puzzles while it wounds her.

Mrs. Mordaunt, in desiring her husband to inform Mrs. Quekett that peace between them can only be maintained at the cost of all communication, has entered into the worst pact with the house-keeper she could possibly have made. For Rebecca Quekett is a woman to be conciliated, not to be dared. She has her good points (no human creature is without) and her weak points, and were Irene politic enough to draw out the one or trade upon the other, she might turn what promises to be a formidable enemy into

a harmless if not desirable friend. But she is too spirited and too frank to profess to be what she is not; and so, from the hour that Colonel Mordaunt timidly announces his wife's determination to his house-keeper, the future of the former is undermined. Mrs. Quekett does not lay any plans for attack. She gives vent to no feelings of animosity, nor does she, at least openly, break the truce; but she remembers and she waits, and Mrs. Quekett does not remember and wait for—nothing.

The months go by. Oliver Minton has procured employment with another country practitioner, somewhere down in Devon, and is working steadily. Tommy has passed his third birthday, and, under the tuition of his adopted mother, is becoming quite a civilized little being, who has learned the use of a pocket-handkerchief, and speaks English almost as well as she does. Colonel Mordaunt, as kind as ever to his wife, though perhaps a little more sober in displaying his affection for her—a fact which Irene never discovers—finds that the hunting-season is over, and wonders how he shall amuse himself for the next six months. Isabella is as quiet and timid and reserved and melancholy as ever; and Mrs. Quekett still keeps the peace.

Not that she never meets her mistress face to face—that would be impossible in a place like Fen Court—but a quiet “good-morning” or “good-night” in passing—a courtesy on her side, and an inclination of Irene’s head upon the other—is all the communication that takes place between them; and, as far as my heroine can discover, Mrs. Quekett has never again dared to correct Tommy, although the child’s aversion for her, and terror of going near any room which she occupies, seem as though she had taken some means of letting him understand what he has to expect if he ventures to presume on her forbearance. Yet, though outwardly there is peace, Irene has many an inward heartache. The subsidence of her husband’s first adoration (which would have been quickly noticed by a woman in love with him) gives her no uneasiness. On the contrary, had she observed and questioned her own heart on the subject, she would have confessed the change was a relief to her. But there is something between them, beyond that—an undefinable something which can be felt, if not explained. It is the cold cloud of Reserve. There is *that* between the husband and wife which they dare not speak of, because they know they cannot agree upon the subject; and Reserve feeds upon itself, and grows by what it feeds on.

The heart has many little chambers, and it is difficult to keep one door closed and throw open all the others. And so, imperceptibly, they drift a little farther and a little farther apart from one another every day. Irene has no object in life apparently but the education of the child—Colonel Mordaunt none but the care of his kennel and his stables. Irene is kinder to the horses and dogs than he is to Tommy. She often accompanies him on his rounds to stroke and fondle and admire the noble animals, but he seldom or ever throws a kind word to the boy.

Indeed, Tommy is almost as afraid of him as he is of Mrs. Quekett. Colonel Mordaunt, at all events, comes second in his list of “bogies;” and sometimes Irene feels so disheartened, she almost wishes she had never seen the child. But the remembrance of her promise to his mother (whom she has grown to pity far more than herself) will soon recall her to a sense of pleasure in her duty. But she is no longer so happy as she was at first. The gloss has worn off the new life—change has ceased to be change—and sometimes an awful sense of regret smites her, and makes her hate herself for her ingratitude. But we cannot force ourselves to be happy; and the extreme dullness of Priestley does not contribute to make her shake off a feeling of which she is ashamed.

Meanwhile the bleak, cold spring creeps on, and loses itself in April.

One morning, as they are all seated by the breakfast-table, Colonel Mordaunt has a large and important-looking envelope put into his hand; and his correspondence in general being by no means important, its appearance attracts attention.

“An invitation, I should imagine,” remarks Irene, as she looks up from buttering Tommy’s fourth round of bread.

“Wait a moment, my dear, and we shall see. Yes, exactly so; and a very proper attention for them to pay him. I shall have the greatest pleasure in complying with their wishes.”

“What wishes, Philip?—(No, Tommy! no jam this morning).”

“That I shall be one of the stewards. It seems that our new member, Mr. Holmes, is about to visit Glotonbury, and the people are desirous to welcome him with a dinner and a ball, in the town-hall. And a very happy thought, too. The festivities will please all classes; give employment to the poor, and amusement to the rich—and the ladies of Glotonbury that cannot appear at the dinner, will grace the ball. An ex-

tremely happy thought. I wonder who originated it?"

"A public dinner and ball, I suppose?"

"Generally so—but they will sell as tickets. You will go, my dear, of course?"

"To the ball? Oh, indeed, I would rather not. I have not danced for ages."

"There is no need to dance, if you will only put in an appearance. As the wife of a man holding so important a position in the county as myself, and one of the stewards of the dinner, I think it becomes your duty to be present, if you can."

"Very well, I have no objection. I suppose one of the last year's dresses will do for Glottonbury. But really I feel as though I should be quite out of my element. Who will be there?"

"Most of the county people, I conclude—the Grimstones and Batcherleys, and Sir John Cootes's party, and Lord Denham and the Mowbrays. Sir John and Mr. Batcherley are upon the list of stewards, I see. I am gratified at their including my name. Then there will be a large party of Mr. Holmes's friends from town, and among them Lord Muiraven. Isn't that a member of the family your aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, was so fond of talking about?"

But to this question Colonel Mordaunt receives no answer. Presently, he looks across the table to where his wife is tracing fancy patterns with a fork upon the cloth, and thinks that she looks very pale.

"Do the Cavendishes know Lord Muiraven?"

"I believe Mary met him once at a ball."

"Do you know him?"

"No!"

"Then what the deuce was your aunt always making such a row about him for?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't you well?"

"Perfectly, thank you. When is this ball to take place?"

"Next Tuesday week. It is short notice; but Mr. Holmes's visit is unexpected. He seems to have made his way in the county wonderfully."

"Is he a young man?"

"Thirty or thereabout. I saw him at the election. He has a pleasant voice and manner, but is no beauty. He and Lord Muiraven and a Mr. Norton are to be the guests of Sir John Cootes."

"Are any other strangers coming with them?"

"I don't know. My letter is from Huddleston. He doesn't mention it."

"I wish you would find out."

"Why?"

"Because it will make a great difference in the evening's enjoyment. One doesn't care to be dependent on the tradesmen of Glottonbury for partners."

"I thought you didn't mean to dance."

"No more I do—at present. But there is no knowing what one might not be tempted to. Anyway, find out for me, Philip."

"What friends Mr. Holmes brings with him?"

"Exactly so. Will you?"

"I cannot understand what interest the matter can possibly have for you, my dear."

"Oh, never mind it, then.—Have you quite finished, Tommy? Then come along and order the dinner with mamma." And, with the child in her hand, Irene leaves the room. Colonel Mordaunt looks after her suspiciously. "Who on earth can she be expecting to come down from London to this ball?" He is beginning to be suspicious about very little things nowadays, and he alludes to the subject in an irritable sort of manner two or three times during the forenoon, until he puts Irene out.

"Look here, Philip. I would rather not go to this ball at all. I have no inclination for it, and the preparations will probably involve a great deal of trouble. Please let me stay at home."

"Indeed, I cannot hear of it. You *must* go, and look your best. As my wife, it will be expected of you, Irene."

"To be jostled by a crowd of tradespeople," she murmurs. "I hate a public ball at any time, but an election-ball must be the worst of all."

"I don't see that. The rooms are large, and the arrangements will be conducted on the most liberal scale. All you will have to do will be to look pretty, and enjoy yourself; and the first is never difficult to you, my darling."

"Well, I suppose I shall have to go, after that, Philip. Only I don't consent till I have seen a list of the expected guests from town."

"Why this anxiety about a pack of strangers?" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, pettishly. But he procures the list nevertheless. It contains but one name with which she is in the least familiar—that of Lord Muiraven.

"And these are really all?" she says, as she peruses it.

"Really all! There are at least twenty. Are they sufficient to satisfy your ladyship?"

"Quite!" with a deep-drawn sigh. "I will not worry you any more about it, Philip. I will go to the ball."

On the evening in question, however, she is not looking her best; and, as Phoebe arrays her in one of her dresses of the past season, she is amazed to find how much her mistress has fallen away about the neck and shoulders, and how broad a tucker she is obliged to insert in order to remedy the evil. But Irene appears blissfully indifferent as to what effect she may produce, and is only anxious to go to the ball and to come back again, and to have it all over. She is terribly nervous of encountering Lord Muiraven (although, from the descriptions of Mary Cavendish, she knows he cannot in any way resemble his younger brother), and yet she dares not forbid her husband to introduce him, for fear of provoking an inquiry on the reason of her request. She arrives at the Glottonbury town-hall, in company with Isabella, at about ten o'clock; and Colonel Mordaunt, as one of the masters of the ceremonies, meets her at the entrance.

"Are you still determined not to dance?" he says, as he leads her to a seat.

"Quite so. Pray don't introduce any one. I feel tired already."

He glances at her.

"You do look both pale and tired. Well, here is a comfortable sofa for you. Perhaps you will feel better by-and-by. I must go now and receive the rest of the company."

"Yes; pray don't mind me. I shall amuse myself sitting here and watching the dancers. O Philip," her eyes glistening with appreciative delight, "do look at that green head-dress with the bird-of-paradise seated on a nest of roses."

"You wicked child! you are always making fun of some one. How I wish I could stay with you! but I must go. I shall look you up again very soon."

He disappears among the crowd as he speaks, and Irene is left by herself, Isabella (to whom any thing like a passing jest on the costume of a fellow-Christian appears quite in the light of a sin) having walked off to the other side of the room. For a while she is sufficiently amused by watching the company, and inwardly smiling at their little eccentricities of dress or manner, their flirtations, and evident curiosity respecting herself. But this sort of entertainment soon palls, and then she begins to question why she cannot feel as happy as they appear to be; and her thoughts wander over her past life, and she sinks into a reverie, during which the lights and flowers, the dancers and the music, are lost or disappear; and virtually she is alone. How long she sits

there, motionless and silent, she cannot afterward account for; but the sound that rouses her from her dream and brings her back to earth again is the voice of Colonel Mordaunt.

"My dear!" he is saying, "I have found a companion for you who is as lazy as yourself. Allow me to introduce to you Lord Muiraven!"

At that name she starts, flushes, and looks up.

But, as her eyes are raised, all the color dies out of her face, and leaves it of a ghastly white. For the man whom her husband has introduced to her as Lord Muiraven is—ERIC KEIR!

CHAPTER IX.

"LORD MUIRAVEN, my love—friend of our new member, staying with Sir John Coote—desires an introduction to you," continues Colonel Mordaunt, in explanation, as he perceives that his wife and her new acquaintance both look awkward, and neither smile at nor address each other, as is usual under similar circumstances. But Irene's head is swimming, and all power of action, or of acting, has deserted her.

She tries to smile, but the effort dies away in a sickly flicker about the corners of her mouth. She tries to speak, but no sound issues from her trembling lips except a nervous cough. She hears the words her husband utters, but her mind is rendered incapable of understanding them.

For, in the first shock of this most unexpected meeting, she remembers nothing, except that Eric Keir is there, and that he is Eric Keir. She forgets the reputed insult cast on her affections; the irreparable injury wrought poor Myra; her mother's misery; the orphanhood of her adopted child; forgets the silence, heartlessness, and shame, that intervenes between them and their last meeting; and remembers only that the friend—the lover—from whose presence she has been exiled for two weary years, has come back to her again.

Muiraven *thinks* no more than she does—the *encounter* falls on him with quite as great a shock as it has done on her—but feeling that he must say something, he stammers forth mechanically the first words that come to his assistance:

"May I have the pleasure of this waltz with you?"

"Most happy!" rising from her seat.

"Going to dance together!" exclaimed Colo-

nel Mordaunt, with unfeigned surprise and a good-tempered laugh; "well, this beats every thing! You come out, Irene, under a vow not to stir from this sofa all the evening; and when, after considerable trouble, I find some one with similar tastes to sit by and talk to you (I have offered to introduce Lord Muiraven to all the prettiest girls in succession, but he refused my good offices), the first thing I hear is that you're going to spin round the room like a couple of *acetotums!*"

"Not if you do not wish it, Philip," says Irene, drawing back, and already repenting of her bewildered acquiescence.

"My dear child, what nonsense! I like nothing better than to see you enjoy yourself. And I think Lord Muiraven pays me a great compliment in choosing my wife for a partner, when he has refused every one else. An old married woman like you, Irene—why, you should feel quite proud!"

"It is I," says Muiraven, looking steadily away from Irene and into the face of her husband, "it is I who have reason to feel proud at Mrs.—Mrs.—Mordaunt's gracious acceptance of me as a partner."

"Oh, very well! settle it between yourselves, my lord. For my part I must be off to find some less fastidious gentleman to accept the honors you declined. No sinecure being master of the ceremonies, I can tell you. It's the first time I ever accepted such a responsibility, and I'll take good care it shall be the last. It is fortunate that I have not more of the ruder sex upon my hands, with *your* idiosyncrasies, my lord!"

"You shall have no further cause to complain of me," replies Muiraven, with an uneasy laugh, as the colonel leaves them; "I will be as tractable as a lamb from this moment." And then the wretched victims are left alone in the crowd, standing opposite each other, and neither daring to lift a glance from off the floor.

"*Trois-temps, or deux-temps?*" inquires Muiraven, in a low voice, as he puts his arm round her waist.

"Whichever you please."

"It must be as *you* like."

"*Trois-temps, then.*"

The dance has been going on for some minutes, and they start at once. But by this time Irene's mind has recovered its balance, and enables her to realize the position in which her sudden nervousness has placed her. Clearly and forcibly she recalls with *whom* she is whirling about in such familiar contiguity; *whose* arm is

firmly clasped about her waist; *whose* hand holds hers—and with the recovered powers of judgment comes the recollection of that cruel day in Brook Street, when the scent of the stock and mignonette and the strains of the "Blue 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!—pray take me back!" 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.

There 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—while he would give the world for courage to seek an explanation with her, or say one word in defense 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 Mor-

daunt 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 characterized by more brusqueness than strangers would have dared to use. A lone 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. These 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 Muiraven 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 Muiraven, 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 his aimless manner at the end of the ballroom. He is the strangest fellow possible, Muiraven, and never does any thing 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 scandalize her if he does. Glottonbury sticks up for the proprieties,” says Irene, quickly.

“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 Muiraven, 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 Muiraven 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 *done* in my life.”

“I suppose he was very much attached to his brother.”

“They are, without exception, the most attached family I ever knew. Muiraven 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, coldly.

“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 ballroom. 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 ballroom, and his departure will consign half the damsels of Glot-tonbury to despair."

"Just like Muiraven. 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 homeward. "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. Phebe 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 servant's 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 you and speak to you. O Philip, do tell me. Have I made you happy?"

She has turned round on her pillow, and set 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 the side of the bed, and folds her tenderly in his arms.

"My dearest Irene, what a question! *Make 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 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 were assured that, whatever happened, it could never be otherwise, and that, if I *did* fail, it would be circumstantial—so very circumstantial—"

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

"O 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, my dear. Then why those 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."

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 aroused by something audible, which in the confusion of his awakening sounds very like another sob.

"Irene, is that you? What is the matter?" she 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 toward his wife's pillow, and, passing it from her shoulder upward, 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 learned he had deceived her till this night; and, though she still knows him 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 down-stairs 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's marriage. There were several people there I had not shaken hands with for years; Sir John Coote 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 button-hole, the same as myself. Holmes is staying with him; so is Lord Muiraven. 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 monopolization 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 *sine qua 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 Muiraven, and of his brother being lost while 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 Muiraven'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 toward 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 Muiraven's attributes, "and finely-cut features.—By-the-way, Irene, that child has fine 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 Muiraven, 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 Coote owes you a debt of gratitude for the manner in which you keep up the country pack. I don't think a luncheon is any thing 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 Coote and I have not been the friendliest of neighbors hitherto, and it has vexed me."

"Then I suppose you are going?"

"Certainly—unless there is any reason that should remain at home. I wish they had asked you too. I tried to get near Lady Coote for the purpose, toward 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 Fenny Court."

"Did you ask him?" says Irene. She is lying on the couch in her bedroom while 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. Muiraven will, though."

"Who?"

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

"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 visit to a few days. Let him have the best bedroom, Irene. I 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—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 authorize 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 himself 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 of 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 remains but for you to play 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 in 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 every thing. 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 any thing like a defiance of my wishes. So I trust we have safely tided over this little difficulty, and that when Lord Muiraven appears

among us he will find his hostess as ready to welcome him as I shall be."

"It is utter bad taste on his part, coming as 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 every thing 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 fulfill), 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, brings 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 impoliteness.

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 ven-

tion 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 among 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 answer 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 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 advantages, 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 a glance of malice—and answers both with a flash of indignant scorn. He interprets her glance rightly, and 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; while Irene, lying sleepless, reviews again and again the scene she has passed through, and wonders 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 while his past conduct remains unexplained, it is impossible she can receive him as any thing but a cruel and deceitful foe.

She comes down the next morning with no kindlier feelings in her breast toward 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 among 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 farther 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 every thing 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 door-way, and, wiggling 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 apologize," 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 every thing. 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 a 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 every thing 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 loath 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 were 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 among 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 aid 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 house-keeping 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 mopy when she's about"

"I think you must be mistaken, Quckett; she was never what is termed boisterously 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, Quckett: she told me so herself."

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

"Mistaken in what?—how?—do explain yourself, Quckett!"

"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. Quckett 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? Isn'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 nor 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—"

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

ists, make my wife low-spirited? Her past is gone and done with, and she is far too good and—"

"Oh! very well, colonel—very well. Let us change the subject; it only came upon me from your being so certain they had never met before—which I'm sure I'm quite willing to believe. He's a handsome man, this new lord, isn't he? Quite the ladies' style. Young and tall, and with such fine eyes; I dare say there are a good many after him."

"I dare say there are."

"Quite a catch for the London ladies. I wonder why he isn't married?"

"There's plenty of time for that, Quckett."

"I don't know, colonel. They say 'better late than never,' but it doesn't apply to marriage; 'no fool like an old fool' is a more appropriate motto for that."

At this home thrust the colonel becomes uneasy, and tries to shift the subject.

"Lord Muiraven will remain here for some days longer, Quckett."

"Ah! will he? Has he ever been in this part of the country before, colonel?"

"Not that I know of; why do you ask?"

"There is an uncommon likeness between him and that little boy there. They're the very moral of each other: everybody's talking of it!"

Colonel Mordaunt flushes angrily.

"What absurd nonsense! I do beg you'll do your best to put such gossip down. If there is any resemblance, it is a mere accident."

"It generally is, colonel."

"Quckett, I thought you had more sense. Do you think for a moment, that even supposing Lord Muiraven had been near Priestley before (which I am sure he has not), a man of his position and standing would lower himself by—"

"Making love to a pretty girl! Yes! I do, colonel! and that's the long and the short of it. However, I don't wish to say any more about it; I only mentioned they were very similar, which no one who looks at them can deny. Good-night, colonel. I hope your lady's spirits will get better; and don't you think too much about them—for thinking never mended heart nor home—and I dare say she'll come round again as natural as possible." With which piece of consolation, Mrs. Quckett leaves her master in the very condition she aspired to create—torn asunder by doubts and suspicions, and racking his brain for a satisfactory solution of them.

Meanwhile Muiraven, who is always on the lookout for a few private words with Irene, which she appears as determined he shall not gain, professes to have conceived an absorbing interest in Tommy, and teases her for particulars concerning his parentage and antecedents.

"I don't know when I met a child that interested me so much as this *protégé* of yours, Mrs. Mordaunt. He doesn't look like a common child. Where *did* you pick him up?"

"You speak of him just as though he were a horse or a dog; why don't you say at once, 'Where did you buy him?'"

"Because I know that the only coin that could purchase him would be your benevolence. But, seriously, does he belong to this part of the country?"

"He belongs nowhere, Lord Muiraven. He is a wretched little waif and stray whose mother was first betrayed and then deserted. A common story, but none the less sad for being common. I think the heaviest penalty for sin must be incurred by those who heartlessly bring such an irretrievable misfortune upon the heads of the unwary and the innocent."

"I quite agree with you," he answers, abruptly.

"How hardened he must be to show no signs of feeling at the allusion!" is her comment as she regards his face, half turned away.

"But to return to Tommy," resumes Muiraven, "do you really intend to bring him up in your own station of life—to rear him as a gentleman?"

"I have not yet decided."

"But if you do not decide shortly, you will injure the child. Having once permitted him to assimilate himself with gentlemen and gentlewomen, it will be cruelty to thrust him into the company of a lower class."

"You misunderstand me. I do not intend that Tommy shall ever again descend to a class from which, at all events on one side, he sprang; but, at the same time, I am not sure that Colonel Mordaunt will permit me to have him educated to enter a profession, or that it would be kindness in us to permit him to do so. He will most probably be brought up to some business."

"Poor child!—not because he is going into business (I often wish I had been apprenticed to some good hard work myself), but because, wherever he goes, the stigma of his birth is sure to rest on him."

"Poor child, indeed!" she repeats, with an angry flash in his direction, which Muiraven is totally at a loss to comprehend; "but so long as

he is under my protection, he shall never feel the cruel injury which has been done him by those who should have been his truest friends."

"You say, 'so long as he is under your protection,' Mrs. Mordaunt; but—forgive me for questioning—suppose any thing should happen to withdraw that protection from him; your death, for instance (we are not children, to be afraid to mention such a probability), or Colonel Mordaunt's disapproval—what would become of Tommy then?"

"God knows," she answers sadly. He is speaking to her so much as he used to speak of old, when they were wont to hold long conversations on topics as far removed from love or matrimony, that she is becoming interested, and has almost forgotten the rôle she has hitherto preserved toward him of haughty indifference.

"I wish you would make me his second guardian," he says, quickly, with an access of color to his face.

"What *do* you mean?"

"That, in case of this child ever being thrown upon the world again, I am willing to carry on the protection you are so nobly according to him now!"

"You!"

"Yes, I—why not? I have no ties, Mrs. Mordaunt—nor am I likely to make any—and I have taken a fancy to this little boy of yours. My own life has been a great mistake—it would be something to guard another life, as fresh as mine was once, from the same errors."

"You—you want to take Tommy from me—O Lord Muiraven! you don't know what you are asking for. I cannot part with him—I have grown so fond of him—pray don't take him away!"

In her surprise and agitation, Irene is forgetting the manner in which the proposal of her companion has brought about; and, only remembering the prior claim he has upon the child, believes for the moment that he is aware of and intends to urge it.

"I will take every care of him," she goes on impulsively, "of course I will, loving him as I do—but leave him with me. He is all I have."

"What *have* I said?" exclaims Muiraven, in astonishment. The question brings her to her senses.

"I—I—thought you—you—wanted to adopt the child!" she says, in much confusion.

"Only in case of his losing his present protectress, which God forbid!" he answers, gravely. "Perhaps I have been impertinent, Mrs. Mor-

daunt, in saying as much as I have done; but I have not been able to help observing, while under your roof, that your husband does not take quite so kindly to this little bantling as you do; and I thought, perhaps, that should any difference ever arise concerning him, you might be glad to think that I was ready to carry on what you have begun—that Tommy, in fact, had another friend besides yourself. But if it was presumptuous, please forgive me!"

"There is nothing to forgive," she answers; sadly; "the thought was kind, and some day, perhaps—"

"Perhaps—what?"

"I will tell you—or write to you the particulars—all that I know, I mean, about the sad-case of this poor child."

"Some day you will write, or tell me, all the particulars about the sad case of this poor child," he repeats, slowly and musingly. "I wonder if, some day, you will let me write, or tell you, all the particulars about a case far sadder than his can be—a case that has wrecked my earthly happiness, and made me careless of my future?"

There is no mistaking the tone in which he says these words: there is a ring of despairing love in it which no laws of propriety can quell or cover over.

"Lord Muiraven!" she cries, indignantly, as she retreats a few paces from him. But he is bold to pursue her and to take her hand.

"Irene! I can endure this misery no longer. It has been pent up in my breast for years, and now it will have its way. I know you have hard thoughts of me; but, if I die for it, I will dispel them. Irene, the time is come, and I must speak to you!"

CHAPTER X.

"Oh! why did you ever come here?" is the first wailing reproach with which she receives his words.

"Because I could not help it! Much as I have suffered since we parted, I would not, knowing how lame any explanation I can make to you must be, have sought you willfully; but when the opportunity was pressed upon me, I could not resist it, and I am here, and you must listen while I speak."

"I need no explanation!" she says, proudly.

"Then you are not the woman that I took you for. You are not the woman who once vowed to

be my friend and counselor. Friends do not condemn their friends unheard, Irene."

"You must not call me by that name," she falters.

"I must, and will! for, as we stand together now, I know you by no other. But do not be afraid that I shall say one word that you need blame me for. It is not a man who speaks to you! It is a fellow-soul calling on you for God's sake to lay aside, for one moment all the hard thoughts you may have cherished of him, and let him say what he can say for himself!"

"Go on," she whispers; but she turns her face away, and, stooping to gather sundry flowers that grow near, weaves them, with trembling fingers, into a little sort of tuft.

It is after breakfast, and they are standing in front of Fen Court watching Tommy play upon the lawn. As the last words leave Irene's lips, Colonel Morдаunt, mounted on his favorite hunter, comes riding toward them from the stables.

"Holloa, Muiraven! I thought you were going over to Chester Farm with me this morning to see that greyhound-litter. My man, thinks we shall be able to spare you a couple, if you take a fancy to the pups."

"You're very good, colonel! I should like to go by all means, but won't you give me half an hour's grace after breakfast? If I had a quarter your constitution, I wouldn't ask for it."

The colonel pretends to laugh at the idea, but he secretly enjoys it.

"And you a bachelor, without a care to interfere with your digestion. Wait till you're married, my lord!"

"That's complimentary to me," says Irene, who is plucking up spirit with the want of notice accorded to her. And then she turns round suddenly, and goes up to her husband's side and fastens the little bouquet she has made into his button-hole.

The small attention pleases him: he feels as though the sun had suddenly come out from behind a cloud, and with his disengaged hand he squeezes the fingers busied with his adornment.

"Thank you, my darling!" he says, fervently.

At that Irene does, what she so seldom does before another, puts up her lips to kiss her husband.

"Don't be away long!" she says, as she embraces him.

Muiraven hears the sentence with a sigh, and watches the action with a frown; he knows so well what they are intended to convey—that, whatever this woman may still think or feel, he

must be loyal to her husband, or she will not listen to him.

"I shall be back within the hour, dear," replies Colonel Mordaunt.—"I have only to ride down to the Long Close and see about the draining there, and then perhaps you will be ready to accompany me to Chester Farm, Muiraven."

"I shall be ready by that time," replies the guest, with careless brevity, as he switches off a bunch of lilac with his cane.

He never intended to say more to Irene than it would be right for her to hear: there was no need of that kiss to remind him of his duty—it has galled him; and, as soon as Colonel Mordaunt's back is turned, he lets her know it.

She is watching the retreating horse and rider, more from nervousness at the coming explanation than regret at her husband's departure, when Muiraven's voice sounds in her ear again.

"If you can spare one moment from your matrimonial rhapsodies, *Mrs. Mordaunt*, perhaps you will fulfill the promise you made just now, and listen to what I have to say."

The sarcastic tone, so unseemly in their relative positions, rouses her to a sense of her own dignity and makes her brave.

"Lord Muiraven, you took me so much by surprise that I hardly knew what to answer. I cannot believe that any explanation can alter matters as they now stand between you and me, nor do I see the necessity of one. But if you are still desirous of speaking to me, I am ready, as I said before, to listen to you. Shall we go indoors, or remain here?"

"Come into the shrubbery," he says, earnestly; and into the shrubbery they go.

When they arrive there, they pace up and down the winding pathway more than once, in utter silence.

"Please say what you have to say," she pleads at last.

"I will! Irene, when your mother spoke to me that day in the library at Brook Street, I felt as though a thunder-bolt had fallen at my feet!"

"Oh, why allude to that? It is all passed and done with. Who cared about it?"

"You did—and so did I. It nearly broke my heart, and yet I was powerless to act in any other manner."

"Then why speak about it? I wish that you would not."

"I *must* speak about it, even at the risk of tearing open my own wounds and yours. You see how coolly I take it for granted that you cared for me, Irene?"

"Your wounds?"

"Yes, mine! Good God, do you suppose that any obstacle short of insuperable would have made me act as I was forced to do? Do you believe that I didn't love you with all my heart and soul, Irene?"

She does not answer him, but draws a deep, long sigh of gratitude. Some of the black cloud that has darkened her existence is cleared away already. *Eric Keir loved her.*

"If I had known it!" she said, at length.

"Would it have made you happier?"

"I could have borne what followed by myself," she answers, simply.

Then a light breaks in upon Muiraven, and he sees what he has done. He understands that this girl has entered upon marriage to save her from the apathy that succeeds despair.

"God forgive me!" he cries aloud. O Irene! I dared not tell you—I dared not tell it to myself until your mother crushed me with her inquiries, and I had no alternative but to preserve a houndish silence and to leave the house that held every thing that was dearest to me in the world. My crime—my madness was to linger near you for so long—when I knew a barrier was raised between us that even time itself might never have the power to pull down. But I did not know my danger, Irene, far less could I guess yours: exonerate me so far, if you can. I was so lonely at that period of my life—so much in need of sympathy and counsel—and the friendship you accorded to me was so sweet, I was wicked enough never to stop to consider what the consequences of the intercourse might be to both of us. O Irene, I will never again insult you by asking you to be my friend, but say that you will try to forgive me for the wrong I did you, and to think less hardly of me than you do."

"The barrier!" she murmurs. Her voice is full of tears, and she dares not trust herself to say another word.

"I will tell you all I can. I will tell you more than I have ever told to any other human creature on the subject. When I was very young—long before I met you—I got myself into a dreadful scrape; so great a scrape that I did not dare—and never have dared yet—to tell my father of it; and this scrape involved consequences that utterly precluded—and preclude still—my ever thinking of marriage."

"But—but I thought I heard—a rumor reached us two years ago that you were engaged to a Miss Robertson."

"Nothing but a rumor, Irene. Your inform-

ant must have meant my brother Cecil, who is to marry Harriet Robertson next month. But to return to ourselves. I know my explanation is a very unsatisfactory one, and that I am presumptuous to hope you may accept it. But I cannot help making it. Will you trust me so far as to believe that I speak the truth?"

"I do believe it!"

"Thank you, a thousand times. Oh, if you knew the load your words have lifted off my breast! Had I followed the dictates of prudence, and of what the world calls propriety, I should have sneaked away whenever I heard your name mentioned, and died, as I have lived, under the ban of your contempt. But I was determined, as soon as ever Fate sent me the opportunity, to try and clear myself in your eyes. It is a very little I can say. I can only throw myself on your compassion, and ask you to believe me, when I swear that I never loved any woman as I loved you; and that had it been in my power to marry you, I should have spared no pains to make you love me in return."

"I do believe you," she repeats again.

He stops, and she stops, and he confronts her on the shrubbery-path.

"You believe—as surely as though I were yourself—that there exists a fatal and insurmountable obstacle to my marrying any one?"

"I do—since you assure me it is so!"

"And that, had that obstacle not existed, I would have sought you, so long as you were single, through all the world, in order to persuade you to become my wife?"

"Since you affirm it—yes!"

"And that, when I asked for your friendship and affection, it was with no base intention to deceive or trifle with your love, but because my own yearning to be associated with you was so deep that I gratefully gathered up the least crumb of consolation without considering what the issue might bring to us?"

"I do!"

"O Irene, if I had but known all this before!"

"It was impossible that you could know it. It is an adverse Fate that has divided us. Be content to learn it now."

"I am content—and deeply grateful for your trust. But, with your trust, shall I regain your friendship?"

She hardly knows what to answer to this question. She is glowing with the excitement of his revelations, but sober enough to be aware that such a friendship as they once promised one

another, can never exist between them in their new relations.

"Lord Muiraven!"—she commences—

"Oh! do not call me by that name. Freshly as it brings back to me my brother's death, it is hateful upon all occasions, and more than ever from your lips."

"I must not call you otherwise," she answers, quickly. "You have been very frank with me, and I will be the same with you. I will acknowledge that your conduct—your supposed indifference—"

"My indifference—O Irene!"

"—Has been the cause, at times, of great pain to me, and that to hear you clear yourself is comfort; and, if I were still single, I might say let us renew the friendship which was so rudely broken: but I am married, Lord Muiraven, and what we promised to be to one another in those old days we can never be now!"

Lord Muiraven receives this announcement with a deep groan.

"I am sure you will see the justice of my remark," she goes on, presently. "The counsel and advice and sympathy which were to form that bond, and which, more often than not, involve fidelity, might not be pleasant to my husband, and—I promised to be frank with you—I love my husband, Lord Muiraven."

"You do?" he says, incredulously.

"I do indeed! Not in the way, perhaps, you think of love, but, anyway, too much to engage in any thing that might distress or wrong him. And you know that a man of his age might well be unhappy and suspicious at his wife having a young and close friend like yourself. So that any thing more than good companionship is utterly denied to us."

"The devil!" says Muiraven, under his breath.

"Hush! don't speak of it so lightly. You know well what I mean. My husband married me when most people would hardly have thought I should have made a pleasant wife, and—"

"Oh! say you love me still," he interposes, eagerly, guessing at the reason of her doubt.

She turns her calm sad eyes on him in silence, and the rebuke is sufficient; he permits her to proceed.

"—Through all my indifference and depression, and often, I am afraid, my ill-temper (for I have not been half grateful to him for his kindness), he has been so patient and attentive and affectionate, that I never could forget it—if I would. And therefore it is that I cannot give you back my friendship, Lord Muiraven. My

sympathy will be always yours; but friendship includes confidence, and I am sure that confidence between me and any other man would give my husband pain."

"Is a married woman never to have any male friends, then?" he says, discontentedly.

"I am not called upon to decide for other women. Some, unfortunately, have no friends in their husbands, and they must judge for themselves; but my husband was my best friend when—when I really seemed to be without one in the world, and I feel bound to return his goodness where I can."

"All right, then! I conclude every thing's over between us. I am sorry I spoke"—in a voice of the direst offense.

"O Eric! don't break my heart!" she cries involuntarily.

"*Break your heart*, when I would lay down my life to save you from a moment's pain! Irene! I am the most miserable man on God's earth. By one fatal mistake I wrecked all my hopes of happiness; and now you consider me unworthy even of the notice you accord to the commonest of your acquaintances."

"I never said that. I shall always think of you, and treat you as a friend; but, under the circumstances, don't you agree with me that there might be danger in a closer intimacy?"

"*Would there be danger?*" he says, joyfully.

Alas for the weakness of human nature! He has just declared he could lay down his life to save her from a moment's pain; and yet it thrills him through with happiness to find that she fears lest nearer intercourse might bring wretchedness for both of them, and he would consent to the nearer intercourse, and the prospect of wretchedness, with the greatest alacrity, and believe firmly that he loves her through it all!

Alas for human nature! Blind, weak, wavering, and selfish. From the crown of its head to the sole of its foot, there is no whole part in it!

"I think I will go in now," says Irene, without taking any apparent notice of his last remark. "I have said all that I can say to you, Lord Muiraven; and further conversation on the subject would be useless. You have made me much happier by what you have told me to-day, for I have had a hard battle sometimes since we parted to reconcile your conduct with the notion I had formed of you. I only wish you had spoken as frankly to my poor mother as you have done to me."

"I should, had Mrs. St. John only given me the opportunity."

"Never mind! It is a thing of the past, and perhaps she sees the reason of it now more clearly than I do. Thank you for telling me as much as you have. But we will not allude, please, to the subject again."

"Must I never speak to you of my troubles?"

"It is better not; and you need not fear I shall forget you or them. I have always prayed for you—I shall do so still."

"God bless you, Irene!" he says, beneath his breath; and at the entrance of the shrubbery they part, he to go toward the stables, she toward the house.

But she has not left his side one minute before a thought flashes across her mind—a thought which never once presented itself throughout the interview.

"*The child! What of the child!*"

What of the child, indeed! Is she to restore him to the man who has reinstated himself in her good opinion; or does not the mere fact of his existence render much that Lord Muiraven has said to her in the shrubbery null and void? Is the word of the betrayer of Myra Cray a word to be trusted; or is it certain that Eric Keir was that betrayer? Between excitement and expectation and doubt and uncertainty, Irene becomes quite confused, and the first thing she does on reëntering Fen Court is to take out the packet of letters, the ivory-backed prayer-book, and the photograph, and to examine them carefully again. Somehow they do not seem so thoroughly convincing to her as they did before. Lord Muiraven's proper name is certainly "Eric Hamilton," but the notes are only signed "E. H.," and the name of Hamilton is very common. The initials may stand for Edward Hamilton or Ernest Hamilton. It is rather poor evidence to condemn a man upon a couple of initials. The handwriting she could never positively swear to, because she has never seen that of Lord Muiraven's except in answer to invitations, and these notes have evidently been written hurriedly. They might be the letters of anybody; she will think no more about them. But the photograph, faded as it is, is a more startling witness to his identity. It is not flattering; *caricatures de-visite* seldom are; it is too dark, and he is frowning, and his nose and chin are out of focus. Still, as she twists it about in the clear morning light; she cannot deny that it is like him—or like what he may have been some years ago. Yet it seems hard to accuse a man of so serious a fault upon the evidence of a bit of cardboard! Irene would have twisted that

photograph up and down and round about until she had convinced herself that it was not the least like Lord Muiraven, nor ever could have been; but at this moment the door opens to admit Tommy. Here comes the living witness of his father's frailty to put to shame all the inanimate mementos by which she is trying to delude herself into the notion that Lord Muiraven is an injured man. Here come the dark, wavy locks, the deep-blue eyes, the pointed nose, already showing evidence of the possession of a bridge; the deep chest and sturdy limbs that Tommy's progenitor must certainly have displayed when at the same age as himself. Irene is almost cross with the little fellow for looking so abominably like his father.

"Oh! he must have been the man! it is quite impossible I can be mistaken," she inwardly ejaculates as she throws herself into a chair. "Come here, Tommy! What on earth does Phœbe mean by parting your hair in the middle, just as if you were a girl—it makes you look quite absurd."

"Gentleman has got his hair parted in the middle!" says Tommy, alluding to Lord Muiraven.

"That's no reason you should have it too," replies Irene, quite sharply, as she divides his curls with her fingers, and effects a general disturbance thereof, of which her *protégé* disapproves. "Sit still, can't you? What a dreadful fidget you are!"

"You hurt!" says Tommy, at last, as the tears well up into his eyes at her roughness. At that sight her mood changes.

"Oh, my blessed boy! my own little darling! do you want to go away from your poor mamma, who loves you so?"

"I won't go, mamma," replies Tommy, stoutly. "I will always live with my mamma, and take great care of her, I will."

"My precious! what should I do without you? He would never be so cruel as to take you away. And yet, were he to know the truth, how could he do otherwise? How could I keep you? Oh, what shall I do?"

"I will not give him up in a hurry," she ruminates, presently, as Tommy, having had enough embraces, wriggles off her lap again and runs away to play. "If I am to part with the child, it shall only be upon the most convincing proofs of the relationship between them,"—forgetting that only on the most convincing proofs would Muiraven be likely to acknowledge the responsibility. Brooding on this resolution, however, Irene grows cunning, and, bent on ascertaining the truth, lays little traps wherein to catch her

guest, inwardly triumphing every time they fail. She has many opportunities of laying them, for her spirits are lighter and brighter after the shrubbery *tête-à-tête*, and Muiraven enters more freely into conversation with her. But it puzzles him considerably at this period to discover what motive she can have for continually speaking in parables to him; or why she should drag in subjects irrelevant to the matter in hand, by the head and shoulders, as she is so fond of doing.

"What a beautiful evening," he remarks, casually, as the whole party seat themselves after dinner on chairs upon the lawn. "I consider the evening by far the most enjoyable part of the day at this season of the year."

"If one has a clear conscience," says his hostess, pointedly; "but I think, if I had wronged any one very much in my lifetime, I should never be able to enjoy a summer's evening again. Every thing seems so pure and calm then—one feels so near heaven."

"I am afraid, if every one felt the same as you do, Mrs. Mordaunt, we should have to shut up summer at once. We have all wronged, or been wronged, I suppose, during our lifetime."

"But I mean a *real* wrong!—such as ruining the happiness of another. Don't you think it is the very wickedest thing a person can do, Lord Muiraven?"

"I am not competent to judge. I think I have wronged myself more than anybody else in the world; at all events, intentionally," he adds, with a sigh.

"Have you had your photograph taken lately?" she goes on in the wildest manner.

"My photograph! No! My dear old father insisted upon my sitting for a portrait in oils last autumn. That was bad enough, but nothing to being photographed. Why do you ask?"

"Irene is ambitious to fill that pretentious-looking album that lies on the drawing-room table as quickly as possible," says Colonel Mordaunt, laughing.

"Indeed I am not! I call that album my menagerie. It contains such a set of gorillas. So few people take well. Do you?" addressing Muiraven again.

"I can hardly tell you. It is so long since I was immortalized by the photographic art. Not since—let me see—"

"Since when?" she interposes, eagerly.

"The year before last, I think. The London Stereoscopic Company had the honor of taking me just before I left town, and I never even asked for a proof of the photograph."

"You must have had something very engrossing on your mind just then, Muiraven," remarks the colonel.

"I had indeed."

"What made you sit to them at all?"

"I sat because I hoped the result of my sitting might be acceptable to a friend whom I had at that time, and I neglected to send for the photographs because I found they would not be so; and all interest in them departed with the knowledge."

"A woman, of course, Muiraven? Nothing but a woman, or the wind, could change in so short a time."

"I did not say she changed, colonel."

"Then perhaps it was yourself. He looks fickle—doesn't he, Irene?"

"Then he looks what he is not," rejoins Muiraven. "Can I fetch any thing for you, Mrs. Mordaunt?" as she rises from her chair.

"No, thank you!"

In another minute she is back again with the ivory-bound prayer-book in her hand. She is going to make her first grand experiment with that.

"What have you there, Irene?" says her husband.

"Only a prayer-book. A pretty little thing, isn't, Lord Muiraven?" holding it out for his inspection: he examines it without the slightest change of countenance.

"Well, if you want my candid opinion, Mrs. Mordaunt, you must allow me to say that I do not agree with you. I suppose it is quite a lady's idea of 'pretty;' but it looks very useless to me. Is it a real prayer-book or a hoax?"

"Open it and see. It is any thing but a hoax."

"So I perceive. I thought it might prove to be a *bonbonnière*, or a powder puff-box, or some other little feminine secret. So it is really and truly a prayer-book?"

"Of course! Have you never seen one like that before?"

"Yes; but not so small, I think. What a surprising print! I should have no eyes in a twelvemonth if I used a book like this."

"And you have really never seen an ivory-backed prayer-book before, or bought one?"

"Haven't I! I had to fork out five guineas for a church service for my sister-in-law that is to be, the other day. She took a fancy to it, and Cecil was so stingy, he wouldn't buy it for her, so I was compelled to. It was a very fat one, quite apoplectic, in fact, and bound in ivory and silver. She said she should consider it as a

wedding-present; but I know I shall have to give her another, all the same."

"Well! I can't understand it," says Irene.

"My being generous for once in a way? Oh, Mrs. Mordaunt!"

"Give me back that little prayer-book, please. I am sure you must have seen plenty like it before. They're as common as possible."

"I dare say I have, but—please forgive my country manners, Mrs. Mordaunt—I really don't seem to care if I ever see one like it again. It's a most shockingly attenuated little book; it looks as though it had been reared on water-gruel, and reminds me only of a pale, shriveled-up, sickly old maid. It jars most terribly upon my feelings."

"I don't believe you have any," she answers, quickly; and her husband thinks she is in fun, and laughs at the accusation, in which Muiraven joins him. At this moment Colonel Mordaunt is called away to hold an interview with his bailiff, and in the quickly-falling dusk, alone with their guest (Isabella having crept away some time before), Irene feels bold enough to make another attempt at discovery of the truth.

"I hope you are not annoyed at the disrespectful manner in which I spoke of your exceedingly pretty little prayer-book," says Muiraven, breaking the ice for her.

"It is not mine," she answers, briefly; "it belonged to Tommy's mother. I am keeping it for him."

"Indeed! that makes it interesting. Is it long since she died?"

"Nearly a twelvemonth. I have several of her little possessions—a photograph among the number."

"What, of—the child's father?"

"I conclude so."

"You must take great care of it. It may prove of the utmost use some day in tracing his parentage."

"So I think. His poor mother had been so utterly deserted that the only clew she could give me was the name (which she had discovered to be false) by which the man who betrayed her called himself. I wonder, if I ever meet that man, or discover his identity, whether I should be bound to give the child up to him. What is your opinion, Lord Muiraven?"

"You set me rather a difficult task, Mrs. Mordaunt. It so entirely depends upon whether the father will be anxious to assume his guardianship or not. He could claim the boy, of course, if he could prove his right to do so; but the greater probability is, that he would deny the relation

ship. Had he had any intention of acting the part of a parent to his child, he would never have abandoned the mother."

"You think so—it is your real opinion?" she demands, eagerly.

"I think every one must think so. Poor little Tommy is most fortunate to have fallen into your hands. You may depend upon it, you will never be troubled by a gratuitous application for him?"

"How hard-hearted some men are!" she sighs.

"They are brutes!" replies her companion, determinedly; and Irene is more puzzled than before.

"Lord Muiraven—" she commences again.

"I am all attention, Mrs. Mordaunt."

"If I were to arrive, accidentally, at the knowledge of who is the child's father, and found he was not aware of the fact of his existence, ought I to make it known to him?"

"Certainly!"

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure!—unless you wish to injure both parent and child. However kind and good you may be to him, no one can care for a boy, or advance his interests in life, as a father can; and life, under the most favorable circumstances, will be a serious thing for poor little Tommy. If you are to keep him, I am sorry he is not a girl. I am afraid you will find him troublesome by-and-by."

"I have no fear of that—only of his being taken away from me. Still—if you consider it would be right—"

"Do you know who his father is, then?"

"I think I do; but, please, don't mention it again: it is quite a secret."

"Well, if I were in that man's place, I should think that you were wronging me; but it is a matter of opinion. Tommy's father may—and probably will—be only too glad to leave him in our hands."

"But if it were you?"

"If it were me, I should prefer to look after my own child; I should not feel justified in delegating the duty to another. I should consider the only reparation that lay in my power to make him: and any one who deprived me of it, would rob me of the means of exhibiting my penitence."

This burst of eloquence decides her. Sorely she will mourn his loss, she dares not keep Tommy's parentage a secret any longer. If he belongs to Lord Muiraven, to Lord Muiraven he must go. But she hardly dares think what Fen Court

will look like when both of them are lost to view again.

"How you *have* been crying!" remarks her husband the next day, as she issues from her morning-room, and unexpectedly confronts him.

"It is no matter," she answers, evasively, as she tries to pass him to go up-stairs. She is vexed that he has commented on her appearance, for the house-keeper is standing in the hall at the same time.

"But it does signify," he continues, pertinaciously. "What is the reason of it? Are you ill?"

"Not in the least; but I have been turning over old letters and papers this morning—and it is never a pleasant task to undertake. I shall be all right again by luncheon-time," and she escapes to the shelter of her bedroom.

"Lor, colonel! how inconsiderate you are, questioning madam about the whys and wherefores of every thing!" ejaculates Mrs. Quekett. "As if a lady could turn over her stock of treasures—her little tokens and bits of hair and old love-letters, without bringing the tears to her eyes. You've no knowledge at all of women, colonel, and it seems to me you've quite forgotten you ever were young yourself."

"But to see her eyes so red as that!" exclaims Colonel Mordaunt.

"Bless you! do you think when you marry a woman, you walk at once into all her troubles and secrets, past, present, and to come? Colonel, you've the least discrimination of any man I ever knew. She might just as well expect you to turn out the bundle of *your* past life—and there'd be a pretty kettle of fish if you did—that I know!"

"You have the most extraordinary habit, Quekett, of talking of one's private affairs in public places. I wish you'd remember where you are."

"Very well, colonel: that's a hint for me to go. But I couldn't help putting in a word for Mrs. Mordaunt. You mustn't expect too much of her. She's yours—be content with that. Wiser men than you have found it best, before now, to keep their eyes half shut." And with that, Mrs. Quekett, picking up a thread here, and a scrap of paper there, disappears quite naturally into the morning-room. Irene, meanwhile, is bathing her eyes in cold water. She has really been only occupied in turning over old papers—the papers that concern Tommy—and trying to write a letter to Lord Muiraven on the subject, which shall tell all she wishes him to know, in language not too plain. But she has found the

task more difficult than she anticipated: ugly things look so much more ugly when they are written down in black and white. She has made five or six attempts, and they are all in the waste-paper basket. As she comes down-stairs to luncheon, looking quite herself again, and passes through the morning-room, her eyes catch sight of these same fragmentary records lying lightly one upon the other, and she thinks how foolish it was of her to leave them for any one to read who passed that way. The gong is sounding in the hall, and the gentlemen's voices are heard from the dining-room; so she gathers the torn sheets of paper hastily together, and thrusting them into a drawer of her davenport, turns the key upon them until she shall have an opportunity of destroying them more thoroughly. But she cannot imagine what makes her husband so silent and constrained, during lunch that day—and concludes something must be going wrong with the farm, and trusts Philip is not going to break through his general rule of keeping outdoor worries for outdoor consideration; or that Philip is not going to develop a new talent for indulging in the sulks—which appears to be the likeliest solution of the change at present.

The next day is the one fixed for Lord Muiraven's departure, and the colonel no longer presses him to stay.

As breakfast is concluded and the carriage is ordered round to convey him and his portmanteau to the station, Irene remembers her attempted letter of the day before, and feels sorry that it proved a failure. She foresees a greater difficulty in writing to him through the post, and does not even know where to address him. Colonel Mordaunt has fidgeted off to the stables to worry the grooms into harnessing the horses at least ten minutes before the time that they were ordered to be ready; and (except for Tommy, who interrupts the conversation at every second word) she is left alone with their guest.

"Do you know," she commences, timidly, "I wanted to speak to you, Lord Muiraven, before you went—that is to say, I have something rather particular to tell you."

"Have you? Oh, tell it now!" he exclaims eagerly, his hopes rising at the idea that she has plucked up courage to allude to the past.

"I could not—it would take too much time; besides, it is a subject on which I would much rather write to you."

"Will you write to me?"

"I did write yesterday—only I tore up the letter."

"What a shame! Whatever it was, why did you not let me have it?"

"I could not satisfy myself; it was too hard a task. Only—should I be able to do so—when may I address to you?"

"To the St. James's Club, or Berwick Castle. My letters will always be forwarded from either place."

"Forwarded! Are you not going to London, then?"

"Only for a day or two. I leave England next week for India."

"India! What should take you there?"

"Hopelessness, Irene!"

"Hush!"

"Mamma, why did gentleman call you Rony? interposes Tommy from the folds of her dress.

"Forgive me," he murmurs, "I am very careless. What takes me to India, Mrs. Mordaunt, is idleness and love of change. Last autumn I spent in the United States; this I hope to do pig-sticking in Bengal; and the next will probably find me in Tasmania. What would you have me do? I am independent, and restless, and in need of excitement; and there is nothing to keep me home."

"Your father, Lord Muiraven!"

"My father knows that I am never so little discontented as when I am traveling, and so he consents to it. And he has my brother. And I have—no one."

"But India! such an unhealthy climate. I thought nobody went there for choice."

"On the contrary, to go there for choice is the only way to enjoy the country. I can return whenever I like, you know. And as to the climate, it cannot be worse than that of New York, where the hot weather sweeps off its sixty heads a day."

"And you will return—when?"

"In about six months, I hope, that is when the hot season recommences. I do not go alone. A cousin of my own, and a very jolly fellow of the name of Stratford, go with me. I shall come back so brown, you won't know me.—What shall I bring you home from India, Tommy? A baby elephant?"

"Yes, yes! bring a lum-a-lum.—Mamma, gentleman going to bring Tommy a big lum-a-lum!"

"And you will really be away six months," she says, dreamily. She is thinking that here is a respite from divulging the secret of her adopted

child's parentage, for, if Lord Muiraven's arrangements for leaving the country are all completed, he would hardly thank her for thrusting so onerous a charge upon him as the guardianship of a little child on the very eve of his departure. But he misinterprets the subdued tone; he reads in it, or thinks he reads, a tender regret for his contemplated absence, and is ready to relinquish every plan which he has made upon the spot.

"I thought of being so, Mrs. Mordaunt," he replies, quickly, "but if there were any chance—my hope—if I believed that any one here—oh! you know what I mean so much better than I can express it; if *you* wish me not to go, Irene, say the word, and I will remain in England forever!"

"Gentleman say Reny again," remarks Tommy, as he pulls his adopted mother's skirts and looks up in her face for an explanation of the novelty.

"Bother that child!" exclaims Muiraven, angrily.

"Be quiet, Tommy! Go and play," replies Irene.—"Lord Muiraven, you quite mistake my meaning. I think it is a very good thing for you to go about and travel; and am glad that you would be able to enjoy yourself. I was only thinking of—my letter."

"Send it me. Pray send it to my club. I shall be there to-morrow!"

"I do not think I shall. It was only about—*his child*," in a lower voice. "Do you remember what you said once about being a friend to him if he lost me?"

"Perfectly; and I am ready to redeem my word!"

"Should any thing happen while you are absent, Lord Muiraven, will you take care of him on your return? The letter I spoke of—and which will contain every thing I know about his parentage—I will leave behind me, sealed and addressed to you. Will you promise me to ask for it, and to follow up any clew it may give you faithfully as may be in your power?"

"I promise. But why speak of your death, unless you wish to torture me?"

"Is it so great a misfortune, then, to pass behind all the trouble of this world, and be safely lodged on the other shore?"

"For you—no!—but for myself—I am too selfish to be able even to contemplate such a con-
geny with composure. If I thought it probable, or even possible, nothing should take me from England! You are not ill?"

"Not in the least! I only spoke of death

coming to me as it might come to you, or any one—I do not desire it—I am content to live, or—
—or—"

Her voice breaks.

"Or—*what?* For Heaven's sake, speak!"

"*I was so before we met again!*"

"Good God!" he utters; "why did I not put a bullet through my brains before I was mad enough to come here?"

He walks up to the mantel-piece as though he could not bear to meet her gaze, and she catches up the child and sets him on the embrasured window-sill before her, and looks into his eyes with her own brimming over with tears.

Each has spoken to the other; the pent-up cry of their burdened hearts has broken forth at length; and they stand silent and ashamed and overwhelmed in the presence of Nature. Tommy is the first to recall them to a sense of their equivocal position.

"Mamma is crying," he observes, pointedly. "Naughty gentleman."

His shrill little voice attracts the attention of Mrs. Quekett, who is loitering in the hall (a favorite occupation of hers during that season of the year when the sitting-room doors stand open), and she immediately commences, noiselessly, to rearrange the pieces of old china that ornament the shelves of a carved oak buffet outside the dining-room.

At the sound of the child's words, Muiraven quits his place, and, advancing to Irene, takes her hand.

"Forgive me," he says, earnestly, "for all that I have brought upon you. Say that you forgive me!"

Mrs. Quekett pricks up her ears like a hunter when the dogs give tongue.

"You wrong me by the request," Irene answers. "I cannot think how I forgot myself so far as to say what I did; but I trust you never to take advantage of my words."

"Except in letting their memory lighten my existence, I never will. And I thank you so much for permitting me to feel we have a mutual interest in this child. I see that he is very dear to you."

"He is indeed! I don't think any mother could love a child more than I do him."

"And you will let me love him too. He shall be the link between us; the common ground on which we may meet—the memory left, to whichever goes first, of the affection of the other. Henceforward Tommy shall have a father as well as a mother."

"I will be sure and leave the letter that I spoke of."

"And you will not write to me—not one line to cheer me in any way?"

"I must not; and it would be impossible if I could. When you return—perhaps—"

"If you say that, I shall return to-morrow."

At this moment the carriage-wheels are heard grating on the gravel-drive.

"Here is the colonel, Mrs. Mordaunt!"

Irene starts—flushes—and withdraws her hand quickly from that of Lord Muiraven.

Mrs. Quekett, dusted in hand, is looking in at the open door.

"The colonel!" cries Muiraven, looking at his watch to cover their confusion; "how time flies! it is nearly eleven.—Well, good-by, Mrs. Mordaunt. I shall have shot a real Bengal tiger before we meet again."

"Tiger will eat you," interpolates Tommy, sententiously.

"Oh, take care of yourself," says Irene, with quick alarm.

"I will—believe me! since you ask it!—How big is the lum-a-lum to be, Tommy? Ten feet high?"

"As tall as the house," replies Tommy.

"Are your traps brought down-stairs yet, Muiraven?" demands Colonel Mordaunt, as he enters the room. "We haven't much time to spare, if you're to catch the one-o'clock train.—That fellow William, is shirking his work again, Irene; I found the gray filly with her roller off. I declare there's no getting one's servants to do any thing unless one is constantly at their heels."

"Look what gentleman given me!" says Tommy, who has been occupied with Lord Muiraven at the window.

"Your watch and chain!" exclaims Irene. "Oh, no, Lord Muiraven, indeed you must not. Think how young the child is. You are too generous."

"Generous!" says the colonel; "it's d—d foolish, Muiraven, if you'll excuse my saying so. The boy will never be in a position to use it, and it will be smashed in an hour."

"No! that it shall not be, Philip. I will take care Lord Muiraven's kindness is not abused—only a toy would have been so much better."

"Pray let him keep it, Mrs. Mordaunt. It will be rather a relief to get rid of it. I so much prefer to wear dear old Bob's, that was sent home to me last autumn."

"You certainly must have more watches than you know what to do with," grumbles the colo-

nel.—"Put Lord Muiraven's portmanteaus in the carriage, James. Wait a minute. Let me speak to the coachman."

Irene has taken the watch from the child's hand, and is holding it in her own.

"It is so kind of you," she murmurs.

"Not at all; it is a pleasure to me. Keep it as a pledge of what I have promised in respect of him. And if I thought you sometimes wore it, Irene, in remembrance of our friendship, it would make me so happy."

"I will."

"Thanks—God bless you!" and, with that long look and pressure, he is gone.

Irene takes an opportunity during the succeeding day to examine her behavior and its motives very searchingly, but she thinks that, on the whole, she has acted right. What could Muiraven have done with a young child just as he was starting for a place like India? He could not have taken Tommy with him; and he would have been compelled to leave him in England under the care of strangers; who, in the event of his father dying abroad, would have had him reared and educated without any reference to herself. Yes! she believes she has done what is best for all parties. When Muiraven returns she will tell him the truth, and let him do as he thinks fit; but, until that event occurs, she shall keep the child to herself. And, as the blankness of the knowledge of his departure returns upon her every now and then during that afternoon, she catches up Tommy in her arms and smothers him with kisses, as she reflects with secret joy that she has something of Muiraven left her still. He surprised she would be to compare her present feelings with those with which she first learned the news of the boy's paternity!

The sin and shame of that past folly are no less shocking to her than they were; but the sin has been withdrawn from them. *Eric loves her*. He was not base and cruel and deceitful; it was Fate that kept them separate; and, on the strength of his own word, he is forgiven for every thing—past, present, and to come! What is the woman will not forgive to the man she loves?

Irene almost believes this afternoon that she is but permitted to bring up Tommy to the worthy of his father, so that when he is a man and Eric is still lonely and unmarried, she may present them to each other, and say, "Here is a son to bless and comfort your old age," she desires nothing more to make life happy. And feeling more light-hearted and content than she

has done for many a day—although Muiraven has put miles between them—goes singing about the garden in the evening, like a blithesome bird. Her carolling rather disturbs Colonel Mordaunt, who (with his study-window open) is busy with his farm-accounts; and making small way as it is, with Mrs. Quekett standing at his right hand, and putting in her oar at every second figure.

"Not oats, colonel; it was barley Clayton brought in last week; and if an eye's any thing to go by, ten sacks short, as I'm a living woman."

"How can you tell, Quekett?" replies the colonel, fretfully; "did you see them counted?"

"Counted! Is it my business to watch your stable-men do their work?"

"Of course not; but I suppose Barnes was there; he is generally sharp enough upon Clayton."

"Well, there it is in the granary—easy enough to look at it. It seems short enough measure to me. Perhaps some has been taken since it was unloaded."

"It's very unpleasant to have those doubts. I hate suspecting any one, especially my own servants. Why should they rob me? They have every thing they want."

"Bless you, colonel! as if that made any difference. Of course, they have every thing they want; and it's generally those who are closest to us who play us the dirtiest tricks. A man would get through life easy enough if it weren't for his friends. That's a handsome watch his lordship gave to that brat of Cray's (I hope your lady isn't within ear-shot), isn't it now?"

"It must have cost fifty pounds if it cost five. I can't imagine any one being so simple as to part with his property in that lavish manner, Quekett!"

"Nor I—if he don't know to whom he's parting with it. But Lord Muiraven knows, as sure as my name's Rebecca. He's not such a fool as he looks."

"You are so mysterious, Quekett, with your hints and innuendoes," replies her master, peevishly. "Why can't you speak out, if you have any thing to say?"

"Would you be any the better pleased if I were to speak out?"

"Muiraven's private affairs cannot affect me much, either one way or the other."

"I don't know that, colonel. You wouldn't care to keep the child hanging about here if you thought it was his, I reckon."

"Of course not; but what proofs have you that it belongs to him?"

"Well, he's stamped his signature pretty plainly on the boy's face. All the world can see that; and, whether the child is his own or not, he's safe to get the credit of him."

"A very uncertain proof, Quekett. I should have thought you had had too much experience to accept it. Now, look at the matter sensibly. Is it likely Lord Muiraven could have been to Priestley and courted Myra Cray without our hearing of it?"

"Myra Cray has not always lived at Priestley, colonel. But, putting that aside, how can we be sure that the child *did* belong to Cray?"

"But—I have always understood so," exclaims Colonel Mordaunt, as he pushes his chair away from the table and confronts the house-keeper.

"Ay, perhaps you have; but that's no proof, either. Mrs. Cray always said the boy was a nurse-child of hers; and it was not until Myra's death that Mrs. Mordaunt told you she was his mother."

"Mrs. Mordaunt repeated what the dying woman confided to her."

"Perhaps so," remarks Mrs. Quekett, dryly; "but the fact remains, colonel. And your lady took so kindly to the child from the very first, that I always suspected she knew more of his history than we did."

"Do you mean to insinuate that my wife took this boy under her protection, knowing him to be a son of Lord Muiraven?"

"I don't wish to insinuate—I mean to say I believe it; and, if you'll take the trouble to put two and two together, colonel, you'll believe it too."

"Good God! it is impossible. I tell you Mrs. Mordaunt never saw Lord Muiraven till she met him at the Glottonbury ball."

"I think there must be a mistake somewhere, colonel; for they've been seen together at Lady Baldwin's parties more than once; I had it from her own lips."

"I can't understand it. I am sure Irene told me she did not know him."

"Some things are best kept to ourselves, colonel. Perhaps your lady did it to save you. But if they'd never met before, they got very intimate with one another while he was here."

"How do you mean?"

"In arranging plans for the child's future, and so forth. I heard Mrs. Mordaunt tell his lordship this very morning, just as he was going away, that she should write to him concerning it. And his giving the child that watch looks very much, to my mind, as though he took a special interest in him."

Colonel Mordaunt frowns and turns away from her.

"I cannot believe it; and, if it's true, I wish to God you had never told me, Quekett! Go on with the accounts!—Where is the baker's memorandum for flour? Didn't I order it to be sent in every week?"

"There it is, colonel, right on the top of the others. One would think you had lost your head."

"Lost my head: and isn't it enough to make a man lose his head to hear all the scandal you retail to me? Do you want to make me believe that there is a secret understanding between my wife and Muiraven concerning that child?"

"I don't want you to believe any further than you can see for yourself. If you like to be blind, be blind! It's no matter of mine."

"Is it likely," continues the colonel, shooting beyond the mark in his anxiety to ascertain the truth, "that had she been preacquainted with that man, and preferred his company to mine, she would have been so distant in her manner toward him and so low-spirited during his visit here?"

"I am sure I can't say, colonel; women are riddles to me, as to most. Perhaps your lady didn't care to have his lordship located here for fear of something coming out. Anyway, she seems light-hearted enough now he's gone," as the sound of Irene's voice comes gayly through the open casement.

"I don't believe a word of it, Quekett," says the colonel, loyally, though he wipes the perspiration off his brow as he speaks; "you are hatching up lies for some infernal purpose of your own. This is no business of yours, and I'll listen to no more of it. Go back to your own room, and leave me to settle my accounts by myself."

"Thank you, colonel! Those are rather hard words to use to an old friend who has served you and yours faithfully for the last thirty years; and you can hardly suppose I shall stand them quietly. I may have means of revenging myself, and I may not, but no one offended me yet without repenting of it, and you should know that as well as most. I wish you a very good-night, colonel."

"Stop, Quekett. If I have been hasty, you must forgive me. Think how wretched the doubt you have instilled in my breast will make me. I love my wife better than myself. I would lay down my life to preserve her integrity. And the idea that she may have deceived me is utter misery. I shall brood over it until it eats my heart away. I would rather know the worst at once."

While he is speaking, the house-keeper has drawn a torn sheet of paper from the leather bag she carries on her arm, and is smoothing it carefully between her palms.

"Well, colonel, you had better know the worst," she replies, as she lays the paper on the desk before him; "you will believe your own eyes, perhaps, if you won't believe me; and you may live to be sorry for the words you've spoken. But you shall be deceived no longer, if I can help it."

"Quekett! what is this?"

"Read it, and judge for yourself! It came down-stairs in your lady's waste-paper basket, which she ain't half so careful of as she needs to be. And when you have read it, you'll understand, perhaps, why I've taken upon myself to speak as I have done."

He glances at the first few characters, and turns as white as a sheet.

"Leave me, Quekett," he utters in a faint voice.

"Keep up, colonel," she says, encouragingly, as she retreats. "There's as good fish in the sea, remember, as ever came out of it."

But his only answer is to thrust her quietly from the door and turn the key upon her exit.

The air is full of all the sweet scents and sounds of early summer. A humble-bee, attracted by the honeysuckle that clusters round the window-frame, is singing a drowsy song among its blossoms; the cows in the meadow beyond the lawn, restored to their calves after the evening milking, are lowing with maternal satisfaction; the nestlings, making, beneath their mother's guidance, the first trial of their half-grown wings, are chirping plaintively among the lilac-bushes; and above all is heard Irene's cheerful voice as she chases Tommy round and round the garden flower-beds.

Every thing seems happy and at peace, as he sits down to scan the words which are destined to blot all peace and happiness from his life forevermore. He glances rapidly at the familiar writing, reads it once—twice—three times, and then falls forward on the study-table with a groan.

CHAPTER XI.

THE words which have struck him to the ground are these:

"MY DEAR
has decided me
which has given me
it is very painful to
to it before you, but I
You have taken a great
called Tommy Brown, and
discover who is his father
to let him know of the boy's
will you say if I tell you
he is your own child. Do not
condemned you without proof
my possession, contain your
his mother—your photograph
your hair so that I cannot be
taken. I love the dear child as
he is my own, and it would break
to part with him so you may
costs me to make this known
since he belongs to you I feel
right to him. In the old days I"

And here the letter, which is but a fragment of one of the many epistles which Irene commenced to Lord Muiraven, and then, in her uncertainty, tore up again, comes to an abrupt conclusion.

It lies upon the desk before him, but he has not the courage to lift his eyes and look at it again, nor is there need, for every word is lithographed upon his brain in characters that nothing in this life will have the power to efface.

Colonel Mordaunt has received his death-blow.

And so the wretched man lies where he has fallen, across his study-table, and, regardless of the sweet sights and sounds with which the summer evening has environed him, suffers himself to be led forth by that relentless guide, Suspicion, into the dark mysterious past, and loses hope at every footstep of the way.

It is true, then—he has been fighting the good fight of faith in her innocence and purity in vain. Quekett is right, and he is wrong. His wife and Lord Muiraven have not only met before, but there is a secret understanding between them relative to her adopted child. And why has not she also been admitted to her confidence?

He tries to remember all the incidents that took place at the time of Myra Cray's death and the boy's admission to Fen Court; and he cannot

satisfy his own mind that Irene did not intentionally deceive him. How astonished was every one who knew her at the unusual interest she took in that child's welfare—how distressed she was at the idea of not being allowed to succor him—how she has clung to and indulged and petted him ever since he has been in her possession! What other poor children has Irene been thus partial to? What anxiety does she now evince at the fate of many other little ones left in the same predicament? She knew the boy belonged to Lord Muiraven all the while; and yet she declared at the time of the Glottonbury ball that she had never met him!

God! is it possible that this creature, whom he has almost worshiped for her saint-like purity and truth, can be a mass of deceit—a whited sepulchre—fair to the view without, but inside nothing but rottenness and dead men's bones?

He writhes upon his seat as the idea occurs to him. And yet upon its impulse his thoughts go hurrying madly back into the past, tripping each other up upon the way; but collecting, as they go, a mass of evidence that appalls him. What!—what in Heaven's name was it that her mother said so long ago in Brussels, about Irene's having had a disappointment which compelled her to bring her abroad—about some scoundrel who deceived her, and had broken down her health?

What scoundrel? What disappointment? How much or how little do women mean when they use such ambiguous terms as those? And then Irene herself—did she not confirm her mother's statement, and refuse altogether to marry him until— Ah! what was the reason that made her change her mind so suddenly at the last? Is this another devil sprung up to torture him? Yet she seemed happy enough after he brought her home, until the child came here. Was the child always here? Was it in Priestley when Irene came, or did it follow her? Poor Colonel Mordaunt's head is becoming so confused that he can think of nothing collectedly; but all the events of his married life are being shaken up together like the pieces of colored glass in a kaleidoscope, and working inextricable confusion in his seething brain.

But he is sure of nothing. His wife told him Lord Muiraven was a stranger to her, and yet she writes him private letters concerning this child of his and Myra Cray's. But did the boy belong to Myra Cray? Quekett has discovered the truth in one instance; may she not have done so in the other? He raises his head slowly and sorrow-

fully, and, drawing a long breath, reads through the fragmentary witness to Irene's deception once again.

Heavens! how the faint color deserts his cheek, and his eyes rivet themselves upon the last, line but four, where the words, "he is my own," stand out with fatal perspicuity and want of meaning, except to his distempered vision! He has read the letter over several times already, but his sight and understanding were blurred the while with an undefined dread of what it might reveal to him; and he was unable to do more than read it. But now it seems as though the scales had all at once fallen from his eyes, and he sees men, not "as trees walking," but in their own naked and misshapen humanity. He sees, or thinks he sees it, and rises tottering from his chair with twenty years added to his life, to hide with trembling hands the fatal witness to his wife's degradation in the deepest drawer of his private escritoire. He feels assured that he is not mistaken. He believes now as completely in her guilt as he once did in her innocence; but for the sake of the love, however feigned, she has shown him, and the duty she has faithfully performed, no eye, besides his own, shall henceforward rest upon these proofs of her indiscretion. The shock once over, memories of Irene's goodness and patience and affection for himself come crowding in upon his mind, until, between grief and gratitude, it is reduced to a state of the most maudlin pathos.

"Poor child! poor, unhappy, misguided child," he thinks at one moment, "without a friend to guide her actions, and her own mother her accomplice in deceit; what else could one expect from her than that she should eagerly embrace the first opportunity that presented itself for escape from the dangers with which error had surrounded her? But to deceive me, who would have laid down my life to redeem her: to accept the most valuable gift my heart was capable of offering—the pent-up affection of a lifetime, only to squander and cast it on one side! And yet—God bless her—she never did so. She has been tender and considerate in all her dealings with me, and would have warded off this terrible discovery, even at the expense of incurring my displeasure. Why else should she have shown such remarkable distaste to the idea of that man's being located here?"

"Yet," his evil genius whispers to him, "her objections may have been prompted only by the instinct which dictates self-preservation." This letter proves how easily it comes to her to ad-

dress him in terms of familiarity. And the child too!"

"Good God! if I think of it any longer, I shall go mad. What can I do? What can I say? Shall I go straight to her with this letter in my hand, and accuse her of a crime—too horrible to think of in connection with *my wife*—and see her look of terror and dismay—to be followed, perhaps, by a bold denial—more sin, more guilt upon her poor young head—or by avowal and separation—and for the rest of my days—solitude, and hers—disgrace, with his offspring on her bosom? Oh! no! no!—the happiness of my life is ended—but the deed is done. No accusation, no reproach can mend it—it must remain as it is, now—forever; and I—Heaven pity my weakness—but I cannot live without her! O Irene! Irene!" in a rush of unconquerable tenderness, "my darling, my treasure; would God that the joy of possessing you had killed me before I had learned that you never were mine! But you *are* mine—you shall be mine—no one shall take you from me! I—I—" and here Philip Mordaunt's reflections culminate in a burst of bitter tears that shake his manhood to the core, and a resolution that, however much he may suffer, Irene's shameful secret shall be locked wide in the recesses of his own breast.

He will prevent her ever meeting Lord Muiraven again. He may in time, perhaps, effect severance between her and the child, but she shall never hear from his lips that he has arrived at a knowledge of the truth she has sinned so deeply to conceal from him.

This is the most impolitic resolution which Colonel Mordaunt could register. It is always impolitic for friends who have a grudge against each other to preserve silence on the subject, instead of frankly stating their grievance and affording an opportunity for redress; and impolicy between husband and wife, is little short of madness. Had Colonel Mordaunt, at this juncture gone to Irene and overwhelmed her with the reproaches which he naturally feels, he would have received in answer a full and free confession which would have set his mind at rest forever. But he has not sufficient faith in her to do so. He has too humble an opinion of himself and his powers of attraction, and is too ready to believe his incapacity to win a woman's love, to think it possible that he could ever hold his own against such a man as Muiraven, or even be able to claim sympathy in his disappointment. So, in his pride and misery, he resolves that he will suffer in silence, and the unnatural constraint which he

thus forced to put upon himself, eats like a canker into his loving, honest soul, and kills it. The change is not all at once apparent; but, from the hour Colonel Mordaunt leaves his study on that fatal evening, he is another man from what he has been. Irene, indeed, is much astonished, when, on inquiring later, why her husband does not join her in the drawing-room, she hears that, without a word of warning, he has retired to rest; still more so, when, on seeking his bedside to know if he is ill, or if she can do any thing for him, she receives no sort of explanation of his unusual conduct, and the very shortest answers to her expressions of surprise and sympathy. But, after the first brief feeling of vexation, she does not think much more about it; for Philip's temper has not always been equable of late, and Irene is beginning to take into consideration the fact that her husband is much older than herself, and cannot be expected to be always ready to enter into the spirit of her younger moods and fancies; so, with a little sigh, she goes down-stairs again, and, in the absorbing interest of planning and cutting out master Tommy's first suit of knickerbockers, is soon forgotten all about it. In a few weeks, however, the alteration in her husband's demeanour is palpable enough, and accompanied by such a visible falling-off in outward appearance, that Irene at first ascribes it entirely to want of health. She cannot imagine that she has done any thing to offend him; and so entreats him pathetically to see a doctor. But Colonel Mordaunt is mighty obstinate whenever the subject is mentioned, and curdily informs his wife that she knows nothing at all about it, and bids her hold her tongue. Still, he has an appetite, and strangely variable spirits. Irene sees his health is failing, and sometimes, from his unaccountable manner toward herself, she almost fears his brain must be affected. She becomes thoroughly alarmed, and prays for the presence of Oliver Ralston at Fen Court, that she may have an opportunity of confiding her suspicions to him, and asking his advice about them. But Oliver is working valiantly at his profession, as assistant to a surgeon in a country village miles away from Leicestershire; and, thanks to his own poverty and Mrs. Quekett's continued influence over his uncle, there is little chance of his visiting the Court again for some time to come. So Irene is reduced to confide in Isabella; but, though Miss Mordaunt sees the change, she dares not acknowledge it.

"Oh dear, Mrs. Mordaunt, is it really so? Well, perhaps—but yet I should hardly like to say—and is it wise to notice it?—the toothache

is a distressing complaint, you know—no! I never heard that Philip had the toothache; but still, I think it so much better to leave these things to mend themselves."

So the spring and summer days drag themselves away, and Irene finds herself thrust farther and farther from her husband's confidence and affection, and growing almost accustomed to its being so. His love for her at this time is shown by strange fits and starts. Sometimes he hardly opens his lips for days together, either at meals or when they are alone; at others he will lavish on her passionate caresses that burn at the moment, but seem to leave no warmth behind them. But one thing she sees always. However little her husband cared for her adopted child in the olden days, he never notices him now, except it be to order him out of the way in the same tone of voice that he would use to a dog. For this reason Irene attributes his altered mood in a great measure to the effect of jealousy (which she has heard some men exhibit to the verge of insanity), and, with her usual tact, keeps Tommy as much out of his sight as possible. She institutes a day nursery somewhere at the top of the house, and a playground where the boy can neither be seen nor heard; and lets him take his meals and walks with Phœbe, and visits him almost by stealth, and as if she were committing some evil by the act. It is a sacrifice on her part, but, although she faithfully adheres to it, it does not bring the satisfaction which she hoped for; it makes no difference in the distance which is kept up between her husband's heart and hers.

She follows Colonel Mordaunt's form about the rooms with wistful, anxious eyes that implore him to break down the barriers between them, and be once more what he used to be; but the appeal is made in vain. Her health, too, then commences to give way. There is no such foe to bloom and beauty as a hopeless longing for sympathy which is unattended to; and Irene grows pale and thin, and miserable-looking. At last she feels that she can bear the solitude and the suspense no longer. June, July, and August, have passed away in weary expectation of relief. Muiraven is in India, Oliver at Leamouth. She looks around her, and can find no friend to whom she can tell her distress. One night she has gone to bed in more than usually bad spirits, and laid awake thinking of the sad change that has come over her married life, and crying quietly as she speculates upon the cause. She hears Isabella stealing up-stairs, as though at every step she were asking pardon of the ground for presuming

to tread upon it; and Mrs. Quekett (of whom the poor child can scarcely think without a shudder, so truly does she in some occult manner connect her present unhappiness with the house-keeper's malignant influence) clumping ponderously, as if the world itself were honored by her patronage; and the maids seeking the upper stories, and joking about the men-servants as they go; and then all is silent and profoundly still, and the stable-clock strikes the hour of midnight, and yet her husband does not join her. Irene knows where he is; she can picture to herself—sitting all alone in his study, poring over his accounts, and stopping every other minute to pass his hand wearily across his brow and heave a deep sigh that seems to tear his very heartstrings. Why is it so? Why has she let this all go on so long? Why should she let it last one moment longer? If she has done wrong she will ask his forgiveness; if he has heard tales against her, she will explain them all away. There is nothing stands between them except her pride, and she will sacrifice it for his sake—for the sake of her dear old husband, who has always been so kind to her until this miserable, mysterious cloud rose up between them. Irene is a creature of impulse, and no sooner has her good angel thus spoken to her than she is out of bed, and has thrown a wrapper round her figure and slipped her naked feet into a pair of shoes. She will not even stay to light a candle, for something tells her that, if she deliberates, the time for explanation will have passed away—perhaps forever; but quickly leaves her bedroom and gropes her way down the staircase to the door of her husband's room. A faint streak of light is visible through the key-hole, but all within is silent as the grave; and as Irene grasps the handle she can hear nothing but the throbbing of her own impatient heart.

Colonel Mordaunt is sitting, as she imagined, in his study-chair, not occupied with his accounts, but leaning back, with his eyes closed, and his hands folded before him listlessly, inanimately, miserable. He used to be an unusually hale and young-looking man of his age. Irene thought, upon their first introduction, that he was the finest specimen of an old gentleman she had even seen; but all that is passed now. Life and energy seem as completely to have departed from the shrunken figure and nerveless hand as the appearance of youth has from the wrinkled face. It is about the middle of September, and the next day is the opening of the cub-hunting season—an anniversary which has been generally

kept with many honors at Fen Court. Colonel Mordaunt, who before his marriage held no interest in life beyond the pleasures of the field, and who has reaped laurels far and wide in his capacity as master of the Glottonbury fox-hounds, has been in the habit of throwing open his house to the public, both gentle and simple, on the occurrence of the first meet of the season; and, although the lack of energy which he has displayed of late is a general theme of conversation among the sportsmen of the county, the hospitable custom will not be broken through on this occasion. Preparations on a large scale for the festivity have been arranged and carried out, without the slightest reference to Irene, between himself and Mrs. Quekett; and to-morrow morning every room on the lower floor of the Court will be laid with breakfast for the benefit of the numerous gentlemen and their tenant-farmers who will congregate on Colonel Mordaunt's lawn to celebrate the recommencement of their favorite amusement. At other times how excited and interested has been the master of fox-hounds about every thing connected with the reception of his guests! To night he has permitted the house-keeper to go to bed without making a single inquiry as to whether she is prepared to meet the heavy demands which will be made upon her with the morning light; and though, as a matter of duty, he has visited the kennel, it has been done with such an air of languor as to call forth the remark from the whipper-in that he "shouldn't be in the least surprised if the colonel was breaking up, and this was the last season they would ever hunt together."

And then the poor, heart-broken man creeps back, like a wounded animal, to hide himself in the privacy of his own room, where he now sits alone and miserable, brooding over what has been and what may be, and longing for the time when all shall be over with him, and his sorrows hidden in the secret-keeping grave. He is so absorbed in his own thoughts that he does not hear the sound of Irene's light footsteps, though she blunders against several articles in the dark hall before she reaches him; and the first thing which surprises him of any one's approach is her uncertain handling of the door.

"Who is there?" he demands sharply; for he suspects it may be Mrs. Quekett come to torture him afresh with new tales and doubts against Irene's character.

The only answer he receives is conveyed by another hasty rattle at the handle of the door, and then it is thrown open, and his wife, clad in

a long white dressing-gown, with her fair hair streaming down her back, appears upon the threshold.

He shudders at the sight, and draws a little backward; but he does not speak to her.

"Philip! Philip!" she exclaims, impatiently, and trembling lest all her courage should evaporate before she has had time for explanation, "don't look like that. Speak to me. Tell me what I have done wrong, and I will ask your forgiveness for it."

He does not speak to her even then; but he turns his weary, grief-laden face toward her with silent reproach that cuts her to the heart, and brings her sobbing to his feet.

"What have I said? What have I done?" she questions through her tears, "that you should behave so coldly to me? O Philip, I cannot bear this misery any longer! Only tell me how I have offended you, and I will ask your pardon on my knees."

"Don't kneel, then," he says, in a dry, husky voice, as he tries to edge away from contact with her. "I have not blamed you. I have kept silence, and I have done it for the best. By breaking it I shall but make the matter worse."

"I do not believe it," she says, energetically. "Philip, what is this matter you are so desirous to conceal? If it is shameful, it can be in no wise connected with me."

"So young," he utters, dreamily ("were you nineteen or twenty on your last birthday, Irene?), and yet so full of deceit. Child, how can you look at me and say such things? Do you wish to crowd my heart with still more bitter memories than it holds at present?"

"You are raving, Philip," she answers, "or I have been shamefully traduced to you. Oh, I was sure of it! Why did I not speak before? *That woman*, who has such a hold over you that—"

"Hush, hush!" he says, faintly; "it is not so. I have had better evidence than that; but, for God's sake, don't let us speak of it! I have tried to shield you, Irene. I will shield you still; but while we live the matter must never more be discussed between us, or I cannot answer for the consequences."

"And do you think," she replies, drawing herself up proudly, "that I will live under your protection, and eat your bread, and avail myself of all the privileges which in the name of your wife accrue to me, while there is a dead wall of suspicion and unbelief and silence raised between us, and I am no more your wife, in the true meaning of the word, than that table is? You mistake me,

Philip. I have been open and true with you from the beginning, and I will take nothing less at your hands now. I do not ask it—I demand, *as a right*, to be told what is the secret that separates us; and, if you refuse to tell me, I will leave your house, whatever it may cost me, and live among strangers sooner than with so terrible an enemy."

He raises his eyes, and looks at her defiant figure with the utmost compassion.

"Poor child! you think to brave it out, do you? But where would you go? What door would open to receive you?"

"I am not so friendless as you seem to think," she answers, growing angry under his continued pity. "There are some who love me still and believe in me, and would refuse to listen to accusations which they are ashamed to repeat."

"Would you go to *him*?" he cries, suddenly, as a sharp pang pierces his heart.

As this insulting question strikes her ear, Irene might stand for a model of outraged womanhood—so tall and stately and indignant does she appear.

"To whom do you presume to allude?"

Colonel Mordaunt shrinks before her angry eyes. There is something in them and in her voice which commands him to reply, and he rises from his seat, and goes toward the escritoire.

"I would have saved you from this," he says, mournfully. "I wished to save you, but it has been in vain. O Irene, I have borne it for more than three months by myself! Pity and forgive me that I could not bear it better. I would rather it had killed me than it had come to this."

He takes out the torn and crumpled sheet of note-paper that he has so often wept over in secret, and lays it on the desk before her.

"Don't speak," he continues; "don't try to excuse yourself; it would be useless, for you see that I know all. Only remember that I—I—have forgiven you, Irene—and wish still to watch over and protect you."

She takes the scribbled fragment in her hand and reads it, and colors painfully in the perusal. Then she says shortly.—

"Who gave you this?"

"What signifies who gave it me? You wrote, and I have seen it."

"Very true; but what then? Was it a crime to write it?"

Colonel Mordaunt regards his wife as though she had been demented.

"Was it a crime to write it?" he repeats.

"It is not the letter—it is of what it speaks.

Surely—surely you cannot be so hardened as not to look upon that in the light of a crime?"

"I know it to be a crime, Philip, and a very grievous one; but it has nothing to do with me—except, perhaps, that I should have told you when I found that it was his."

"When you found *what* was his? Irene! you are torturing me. You told me at the Glottonbury ball that you had never met this man Muiraven, with whom I find you correspond in terms of familiarity. What is the secret between you? In God's name speak out now, and tell me the worst! Death would be preferable to the agony of suspense that I am suffering."

"There is no secret between us. I never told Lord Muiraven of what I now see I should have informed you—that I found out from Myra Cray's papers that he is the father of her child."

"The child, then, is Myra Cray's?" he says, with hungry eyes that starve for her reply.

"Whose do you suppose it is?" she demands, with an angry stamp of her foot. Her figure is shaking with excitement; she has struck her clinched hand upon her heart. Beneath her blazing looks he seems to shrink and shrivel into nothing.

"Forgive! oh! forgive me, Irene," he murmurs, as he sinks down into his chair again, and covers his face from view. "But look at the paper—read what it says, and judge what I must have thought of it."

She seizes the letter again, and, running her eye rapidly up and down its characters, gives vent to a sort of groan. But suddenly her face lights up with renewed energy.

"Stop!" she says, commandingly, as she seizes one of the candles off the table and leaves the room. In a few minutes—minutes which seem like ages to him—she is back again, with the corresponding fragment of her mutilated letter (which, it may be remembered, she thrust into her davenport) in her hand. She does not deign to offer any further explanation, but places them side by side upon the desk before him, and stands there, silent and offended, until he shall see how grossly he has wronged her. He reads the unfinished epistle in its entirety now.

"MY DEAR LORD MUIRAVEN:

"What you said this evening has decided me to write to you on a subject which has given me much anxiety of late. It is very painful to me to have to allude to it before you; but I believe it to be my duty. You have taken a great interest in the child called Tommy Brown, and you say

that, should I discover who is his father, I should be bound to let him know of the boy's existence.

"What will you say if I tell you that I firmly believe *he is your own child*? Do you think I have condemned you without proof. The papers in my possession contain your letters to Myra Cray, his mother—your photograph, and a lock of your hair—so that I cannot believe that I am mistaken. I love the dear child as my own; in deed, to all intents and purposes, he is my own, and it would break my heart now to part with him: so that you may think how much it costs me to make this known to you. But, since he belongs to you, I feel you have the better right to him. In the old days I told—"

He arrives at the finish, where Irene's mind came to the conclusion that she could write something better, and induced her to break off and tear her letter into the halves that lie, side by side, before him now. He has read it all, and sees the groundlessness of the suspicion he has entertained against her fair fame, and is ready to sink into the earth with shame, to think he has been base enough to suspect her at all. And he dares not speak to her, even to entreat her pardon, but lets the paper slip from beneath his trembling fingers, and sits there, humiliated even to the dust.

"When I told you that I had never met Lord Muiraven before," rings out through the awful stillness Irene's clear, cold voice, "I said what I believed to be the truth. I had met Eric Keir; but I did not know at that time that he had inherited his brother's title. When I saw him at the ball, and learned my mistake, I tried all I could to dissuade you from asking him to Fen Court. I did not wish to see or meet him again. But when he came, and I saw him and Myra's child together, and heard his opinion on the subject, I thought it would be but just to let him know I had discovered that he was Tommy's father; and I wrote more than one letter to him, but destroyed them all. How that fragment came into your possession I do not know; but of one thing I am certain," continues Irene, with disdain, "that I have never deceived you wittingly; and that when I kept back the knowledge I had gained respecting the child's parentage, it was more from a wish to spare your feelings and my own, than not to repose confidence in you. And when I took the boy under my protection, I had no idea whose child he was. I learned it from some letters which his mother left behind her, and which Mrs. Cray brought to me, weeks after he had come to the Court."

She finishes her confession, as she began.

with an air of conscious virtue mixed with pride; and then she waits to hear what her husband may have to say in reply.

But all the answer she obtains is from the sound of one or two quick, gasping sobs. The man is weeping.

"Oh, my poor love!" she cries, as she flies to fold him in her arms. "How you must have suffered under this cruel doubt! Forgive me for being even the ulterior cause of it. But how could you have thought it of me, Philip—of your poor Irene, who has never been otherwise than true to you?"

"My angel!" is all he can murmur, as they mingle their tears and kisses together.

"Why did you never tell me?" continues Irene. "Why did you keep this miserable secret to yourself for so many weary months?"

"How could I tell you, my child?—What! come boldly and accuse your innocence of that which I blush now to think I could associate with you even in thought? Irene! can you forgive?"

"Not the doubt, the silence—the want of faith," she answers; but then, perceiving how his poor face falls again, quickly follows up the new ground with a remedy. "Oh, yes, my dearest, I can forgive you all, for the sake of the love that prompted it."

"I have loved you," he says, simply; and she answers that she knows it well, and that she had no right to place herself in a position to raise his inquiry. And then they bury themselves anew in one another's arms, and peace is forever cemented between them.

"Let me tell you every thing—from the very beginning," says Irene, as she dries her eyes and seats herself at her husband's knees.

"Nothing that will give you pain, my darling. I am a brute to have mistrusted you for a moment. Henceforward you may do just as you like."

"But I owe it to myself, Philip, and to—to—Lord Muiraven. With respect, then, to having met him before—it is the truth. We knew each other when my mother was alive."

"And you loved each other, Irene," suggests her husband, impatient to be contradicted.

"Yes, we loved each other," she answers, quietly. After the excitement she has just gone through, even this avowal has not the power to disturb her.

Colonel Mordaunt sighs deeply.

"O Philip! do not sigh like that, or I shall not have the courage to be frank with you."

"I was wrong, Irene; for let me tell you that

this portion of your story I have already heard from your mother."

"She told you all?"

"She told me that some one (whom I now conclude to have been this man Muiraven) paid his addresses to you; and, on being asked what were his intentions, veered off in the most scoundrelly manner, and said he had none."

She has not blushed for herself, but she blushes now, rosy red, for *him*.

"Poor mamma was mistaken, Philip. She thought too much of me and of my happiness. She could make no allowances for him. And then it was partly her own fault. I always had my own way with her, and she left us so much together."

"You want to excuse his conduct?"

"In so far that I am sure he had no intention of injuring me. What he said at the time was true. It was out of his power to marry me—or any one. Had he been able to adduce his reasons, it would have saved both my mother and myself much pain; but he could not. He was thoughtless—so were we. I exonerate him from any greater crime."

"He has made you believe this since coming here, Irene."

"Don't say 'made' me believe him, Philip. He only told me the truth; and it was an explanation he owed both to me and himself. Had I thought my listening to it would impugn your honor, I would not have done so."

He squeezes the hand he holds, and she goes on:

"I had no idea that Tommy was his child until I read some papers that Myra Cray had left behind her, and which contained, among other things, his photograph. The discovery shocked me greatly, and I had no wish to meet him afterward. You may remember how earnestly I begged you not to invite him to stay at the Court."

Colonel Mordaunt nods his head, then stoops and kisses her.

"Oh! my dear husband, how could you so mistrust me? When Lord Muiraven came, he seemed to take a great interest in Tommy, and expressed himself so strongly on the subject of my not keeping the boy's birth a secret from his father, should I ever meet him, that it induced me to write the letter you have before you. I love the child dearly; but I felt that, after what had happened, it was a kind of fraud to keep you in ignorance of his parentage, and therefore I had every intention of making him over to his rightful own-

er—and should have done so before now, only that Lord Muiraven is in India."

"I wish you had told me from the first, Irene. I can trust you to tell me the truth. Do you love this man still?"

She grows crimson, but she does not flinch.

"Yes," she says, in a low voice. Colonel Mordaunt groans, and turns his face away.

"Oh, my dear husband, why did you ask me such a question? I love Muiraven—yes! It was the first romance of my life—and mine is not a nature to forget easily. But I love you also. Have I not been a dutiful and affectionate wife to you? Have I ever disregarded your wishes, or shown aversion to your company? You have been good and loving to me, and I have been faithful to you in thought, word, and deed. Phillip, Phillip—answer me. You married me, knowing that the old wound was unhealed; you have made me as happy as it was possible for me to be. I hope that I have not been ungrateful—that I have not left utterly unrequited your patience and long-suffering."

He opens his arms, and takes her into his embrace, and soothes her as one would soothe a weeping child.

"No!—no, my darling! You have been all that is dearest and truest and best to me. You are right. I knew that the treasure of your heart was not mine. I said that I would accept the smallest crumbs of love you had to spare for me with gratitude; and yet I have been base enough to consider myself wronged, because I find that I do not possess the whole. It is I who should ask your pardon, Irene—as I do, my darling—with my whole heart I say, forgive me for all the pain I have caused you, and let us thank God together that we have fallen into each other's hands. It might have been worse, my dearest, might it not?"

"It might indeed, dear Phillip; and henceforward, I trust, it may be much better than it has been. You know every thing now, and from this evening we will register a vow never to keep a secret from one another again. If you suspect me of any thing, you must come at once and tell me, and I will do the same to you. And, to show you I am in earnest, I will give up—for your sake, Phillip—I will give up"—with a short sob—"Tommy!"

He does not refuse to accept this sacrifice on her part, although he longs to do so. Manlike, he decides on nothing in a hurry.

"I do not know what to say to your proposal, Irene. It is best left for future consideration.

Meanwhile I am determined on one point—Mrs. Quekett leaves my service as soon as ever I can get rid of her."

"Oh! I am so glad; every thing will go right now. It is she, then, who brought you this letter?"

"As she has brought me endless tales and insinuations against yourself, which, while my reason and faith rejected, my memory could not help retaining. That woman is mixed up with all the misery of my youth, and she would have poisoned the happiness of my later years. She grudges me even to die in peace."

"She can never harm us again," says Irene, soothingly.

"She has tried to harm you, poor darling; more than you have any idea of. Her hints and repetitions, and shameful innuendoes so worked upon my evil nature that they corrupted all my sense of justice, and turned my blood to gall. Do you remember my going up to town for a couple of days in the beginning of August, Irene?"

"Yes, Phillip."

"Do you know what I left home for?"

"I have not the least idea. Business, was it not?"

"The devil's business, dear. I went to consult my lawyer about drawing up a new will, and leaving every thing I possess, away from you, to Oliver Ralston."

"Did you?" she said, a little startled.

"I thought to myself," continues Colonel Mordaunt, "that as soon as ever I was dead, you would go and marry Muiraven on my money, and install him here."

"O Phillip!"

"Don't interrupt me, darling, and don't curse me; remember I was mad with jealousy and love of you; so I did it. Yes, Irene, had I died before this explanation took place between us, you would have been left (but for your own little portion) penniless. My will, as it now stands, leaves you nothing but a dishonored name. Thank God who has given me the opportunity to undo this great wrong!"

"I should not have cursed you, dearest," she says, softly.

"But He would. Yet not now—not now. There are two things for me to do to-morrow. One is to dismiss Quekett, and the other to go to town and see Selwyn again."

"You can't go to-morrow, Phillip; it is cub-hunting day."

"Bother the cub-hunting! I must go! I shall not rest until this matter is put right."

"But what will every one say? It will look

so strange. The first meet of the season, and the master absent! Indeed, dear Philip, you must put off your visit to town; one day cannot make much difference."

"It may make all the difference in the world, Irene."

"Nonsense!" she says, playfully, for she knows it will be an immense concession on his part to go. "Now take my advice; wait till the day after to-morrow to accomplish both these changes. When the house is full of company is not the time to choose for dismissing servants or altering wills. Let us spend to-morrow as we intended. You will be hunting all day, you know, and the day after you shall have your own way."

"My sweetest! That I should have done you such an injury. How can I ever forgive myself? What can I do to show my penitence and make amends? I, too, have a story to tell you, Irene—a confession to make, that, but for my cowardice, should have been yours from the very first, but I feared so greatly to lose your esteem. The past life of a man of my age cannot be expected to prove an unwritten page. Yet I believe that even your purity will be able to make some excuse for me."

"Do not tell it me to-night, Philip: you are looking overtired as it is. Come to bed and leave all these vexing questions alone for the present. Why, it is past one, and the breakfast is to be laid at seven. Come, dear Philip, you will be fit for nothing without a good night's rest."

Still he lingers and is doubtful.

"I ought to be as frank to you as you have been to me."

"You shall, at a more fitting moment, dearest. You shall tell me every thing, and I will pardon you before I hear it. But this is not the time; think how much you have to go through to-morrow."

"Irene! I ought to go to town to-morrow; something tells me so."

"And something tells me that the whole country will be talking about it if you do. Why, my dearest Philip, just think of the general dismay when the members of the hunt arrive to find you going or gone! What on earth should I say to them? They would declare you were out of your mind. Indeed, you mustn't think of it."

"Well, I suppose I mustn't; but the first thing on Friday morning I am off. Oh! my child, how different the world looks to me to what it did an hour ago! What a load you have lifted off my heart! And you love me a little still, don't you?"

"I love you a very great deal, Philip; nor would I change your love now for that of any man living. Oh, how wrong it was of you to suspect me, dearest! How thin and haggard it has made you! I believe even you are weaker than you were."

"Turned me into quite an old foggy; hasn't it, my child? Who would think, looking on us now for the first time, that we were man and wife? Though my rose is not so blooming as she used to be either; and it has been all my fault. Never mind; we are happy again once more, and it shall be my endeavor to preserve our peace undisturbed. I shall look only five-and-twenty by the end of next month, Irene."

"I like you best as you are," she whispers softly, and, encircled by each other's arms, they wind up the staircase to their bedchamber, though Colonel Mordaunt cannot resist leaving hold of his wife for one instant to shake his fist at Mrs. Quckett's door.

"You go out of this as soon as ever I have time to kick you," he says, defiantly; "and never more shall you darken threshold of mine.—She has an annuity under my father's will," he continues to Irene, "and she may make the most of it. We shall have one mouth the less to feed, and one room the more to live in on her departure, my dear."

"And an incalculably less amount of mischief, Philip. I don't mind telling you now, dear, that she has been the bane of my married life, and I wish to Heaven I had never seen her."

"Amen! But she has done her worst, my darling, and she shall never harm you more. God forgive me for having let her do so at all!"

So they pass into their own room, and lie down and sleep the restful sleep that comes when souls are satisfied, and hearts are open and content.

The next morning Fen Court is a scene of unusual bustle and confusion. By the time Irene is dressed, the rattling of knives and forks, and the popping of corks is over, the heavy breakfast has come to a close, and the lawn is covered with horsemen and dogs, and the crisp September air is filled with the sound of voices, the yelping of hounds, and the restless stamping of horses, impatient to be off.

She does not leave her room until they have all ridden away; but she watches the gay cavalcade through the open window, and thinks that a meet is one of the prettiest sights she has ever seen. While she is contemplating it, in rushes

her husband, arrayed in pink, looking very excited, very happy, and full of spirits.

"We're off, my own darling," he says; "one kiss before I go," and then he holds her from him and regards her steadfastly. "God bless you, my Irene! God reward you for all your goodness to me! I shall be back by seven."

She embraces him eagerly in return.

"And I shall count the hours till you come home, Philip; though I hope you will have a very successful day. What is that noise, dear?" as a considerable disturbance is heard upon the gravel outside.

Colonel Mordaunt looks through the window-blind.

"Only that brute of a horse of mine; he hasn't had enough exercise lately. What a mess he's made of the drive! I'll take it out of the beast."

"Be careful, Philip."

"What! are you going to coddle me in my old age?" he says, delighted at her caution. "Yes; I'll be careful, darling, and back with my little wife by seven. God bless you, once more!" and, with a final kiss, he tears himself away and runs down-stairs. In another minute he has mounted his rebellious animal, and, in company with some of the principal members of the hunt, taken his way down the drive, followed by the remainder of the horsemen and the dogs. Irene's eyes follow him as long as he is in sight, and she sighs to observe how loosely his coat hangs about him, and how much more he stoops on horseback than he used to do.

"But, please God, we will remedy all that," she thinks, as the last man turns out of the drive-gates, and she quits her post of observation. "As soon as we have settled what is to be done about Quekett and Tommy, I will persuade Philip to take a little change to the sea-side with me, or perhaps to run over to Paris for a month."

At the thought of her adopted child, and the fear that she may have to part with him, the tears well up in her eyes, but she brushes them away.

"I will not cry about it until I am sure. Somehow I fancy, now Philip knows how attached I am to the boy, he will hit on some plan by which I may keep him; and, if not—well, I must do my duty, that's all."

She will not let her thoughts dwell on the subject, but orders the carriage and takes Tommy and Phœbe on a shopping expedition to Glottonbury, and has her luncheon there, and goes to call on several friends. She is anxious to keep

away from the Court as much as possible until Philip comes back again, for fear she should encounter Mrs. Quekett, and not be able to restrain herself from saying what she thinks concerning her. So, on her return, she locks herself up in her bedroom with a book, and falls fast asleep, until her maid rouses her with an intimation that it is past her usual time for dressing.

"The second gong has gone, ma'am, and the dinner's all ready, and only waiting for the colonel, to be sent up."

"Why didn't you wake me before, Phœbe?"

"I knocked at the door several times, ma'am, but it was no use, you were that fast.—Which dress will you please to wear to-night?"

"Oh, any thing that will go on quickest. The old black one, that will do."

"Black is so lugubrious, to my mind," says Phœbe, simpering.

"What nonsense! Give me a colored ribbon, if you like, then. No; not that one, it is unsuitable. Where is the crimson sash I have been in the habit of wearing with it?"

"That's unpicked just at present, ma'am. It wanted turning where you had dropped some gravy on it."

"Oh, never mind, then; let me go as I am," and in her black dress, unrelieved by any color, she descends to the drawing-room.

The clock on the mantel-piece chimes the half-hour as she enters.

"Philip is very late to-night," she thinks. "It's quite dark. They can't be hunting now. He must have gone home with some of his friends."

At the same time it strikes her as strange that, after their conversation of the night before, and his unwillingness to leave her this morning, he should permit any thing to prevent his returning to her side.

The weather has become damp and chilly, and they have commenced fires in the evenings. She sits down before hers now, and shivers slightly.

"I wish I hadn't put on a low dress, it is really growing cold, and this house is draughty. I wonder where Isabella is?—I haven't seen her all day."

Then she rings the bell.

"Where is Miss Mordaunt?"

"In her room, I believe, ma'am."

"I wish you'd send word to her to come down. Say dinner is ready."

"Is dinner to be served, ma'am?"

"No, of course not," rather sharply, and with

another shiver. "Wait for the colonel. Only tell Miss Mordaunt I am feeling lonely, and wish that she would join me."

The servant withdraws to do her bidding, and she still crouches by the fire, in her black dress, shivering.

The door opens, and Miss Mordaunt appears.

"It is very late, Isabella. What can have come to Philip?"

"I'm sure I can't say, Mrs. Mordaunt—that is, of course, Philip is his own master—but still, what do you think?"

"How can I tell?" rather fractiously; "it is what I asked you."

Miss Mordaunt, rebuked, retires in silence to the farther end of the drawing-room, while Irene sits by the fire and fears—she knows not what.

Eight o'clock strikes—half-past eight—a quarter to nine—and they are still alone.

"What can have happened?" exclaims Irene, suddenly, as she springs up from her position, and turns a burning face toward her companion.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt, what can have? But you quite alarm me. Hadn't we better—but, doubtless, you know best."

"Hush!" says Irene, in a voice of authority, as she stands upright to listen.

There is a noise as of many voices, each trying to hush down the other, in the hall.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFUSED voices, some earnest and some quivering, but all low, except one, whose inquiries culminate in a little shriek which makes Irene's blood turn cold to hear. She has advanced to the drawing-room door, and stands there, grasping the handle and shuddering with fear; half-grieving at the coming shadow, but too frightened to go out and meet it, face to face. What are those feet which seem unable to tread otherwise than heavily, yet are accompanied by others stepping upon tiptoe, whose owners keep on whispering caution as they go?

Why is the hall of Fen Court so full of strange sounds and presences? what is it they have brought home so helplessly among them? She knows: the instinct of affection has told her the truth, but she is not yet able to receive it, and stands there listening, with the life-blood frozen in her veins, waiting till the visitation of God shall descend upon her head.

There is no such agony in this world as sus-

pense. When we know for certain that death or treachery, or separation, has come between us and those whom we hold dearest, the pain may be acute, but still the worst is before us; we can measure it and our own strength, and every day we find the difference between the two grow less, until, with a thankful heart, we can acknowledge that, even though it embitter the remainder of our career, it is not unbearable.

But to be kept in suspense; to be kept behind the black veil that reserve, or cruelty, or want of thought, may raise between us and our fellow-creatures; to fluctuate between hope and doubt and despair until our outraged affection sickens and dies of repeated disappointments; this is the most terrible trial the human heart is capable of enduring, compared to which physical torture in its worst shape would appear trifling. And yet at times we inflict it on each other. But I think Heaven will hold the murderer, who strikes down his victim in a fit of rage, as innocent beside the man or woman who, having gained supremacy over another heart, kills it by inches with slow, drawn-out suspense. The nature of the poisoner, who deals out death by infinitesimal grains of powder, is angelic by comparison.

Irene's deepest feelings are not here concerned, but she is torturing herself cruelly by standing at the drawing-room door. She is in the condition of the criminal condemned by martial law, who, his last moment having arrived, awaits with bandaged eyes and almost pulseless heart the volley that is to put him out of his misery. At last she is roused by the sound of Isabella sniffing behind her handkerchief.

"Oh! my dear Mrs. Mordaunt. I really feel quite frightened; do you think it is possible any thing can have happened? I don't want to alarm you, of course; but still—and Philip not having come home, you see—"

She can stand it no longer then, but with an effort dashes open the door and walks out blindly into the passage. The way is barricaded by Phoebe, who has evidently been set to keep guard, and whose eyes, red with crying, and wild with fear, are wandering incessantly from the hall to the drawing-room, and the drawing-room to the hall.

"Oh! my dear lady," she exclaims, as soon as she catches sight of her mistress. "Pray go back again; they don't want you there just now."

"Where? What do you mean? Tell me at once," says Irene, in a tone of authority.

"Oh, it's nothing, my dear lady; indeed, it's

nothing; but they're busy, and they say you must keep in the drawing-room. And, oh! what *am* I to do?" continues the girl, despairingly, as her mistress advances to her without the slightest hesitation.

"It is the colonel! I know it. It's no use your denying it; where have they taken him?"

"Oh! I'm not sure, ma'am—into the morning-room, I think; but do stop and see Mrs. Quekett first."

"Mrs. Quekett!" in a voice of the supremest contempt. "Let me pass, Phæbe; do not attempt to stop me. I should have been told of this at once."

She hurries on—half fainting with fear, but so majestically grand in her right to know the worst, that the servants that line the hall make no effort to bar her progress, but draw back, awe-struck, and look after her with their aprons to their eyes.

The morning-room seems full of people, and the first who make way for her upon the threshold are the whipper-in and her own coachman. About the table are gathered Sir John Coote and several gentlemen in hunting-costume, with Mrs. Quekett and a couple of medical men whom Irene has never seen before. They are all bending forward, but as the crowd divides to let her pass they turn and start.

"Not here—not here—my dear lady," exclaims one of the strangers, as he attempts to intercept her view. "Now, let me entreat you—"

But she pushes past him, and walks up to the table.

There lies her husband, dressed as when she parted with him on that morning, but *dead*—unmistakably dead!

She guessed it from the first—she knew what was awaiting her when she left the drawing-room: she had no hope when she entered this room; yet now that all suspense is over, that she cannot fail to see her suspicions were correct, something will flicker up again before it is laid to rest forever, and cause her trembling lips to form the words—

"Are—are you quite sure?"

"Quite sure, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt; I regret to say. But, indeed, you ought not to be here. Let me conduct you back to your own room."

She shakes him off impatiently (it is Sir John Coote who has been speaking to her), and turns again to the doctor

"How did it happen?"

"I am told—I believe—" he stammers, "Sir John was good enough to inform me it was on

the occasion of the colonel taking the brook down at Chappell's meadows—but all these sad details, my dear madam, would be better kept from you until—"

"Take him up to my room," she says next, in a tone which sounds more like weariness than any thing else.

"Carry the—I think we had best leave it where it is, Mrs. Mordaunt," remonstrates Sir John.

"My servants are here. I do not wish to trouble any one else," she answers, quietly.

"But, of course, if you wish it—"

"I do wish it. I wish him to be carried up-stairs and laid upon our—our—bed," she says, with a slight catching in her voice.

Then half a dozen pairs of arms are placed tenderly beneath the dead body, and it is taken up-stairs and laid where she desired it to be.

When the task is completed, the bearers stand about the bed, not knowing what to do or say next.

"Please leave me," says Irene, after a pause. "I must be alone."

"But is there nothing I can do for you, my dear child?" asks Sir John Coote, losing sight for a moment of deference in pity.

"Yes; please come back to-morrow and tell me all about it. And—perhaps this gentleman," indicating one of the doctors, "will stay here to-night, in case—in case—"

"My dear lady, there is no hope here."

"I know—I know. It is because there is no hope that I must be alone. Good-night."

She waves them to the door as she speaks, and they file out one after another, and leave her with her dead.

All this time Mrs. Quekett has not ventured to speak to her mistress, or intrude herself upon her notice in any way. She is awed by the sudden calamity that has fallen on them, and, perhaps—who knows?—a trifle conscience-smitten for the mischief which she brought about, and will never now have the opportunity of repairing. Ah! could we but foresee events as they will happen, how far more carefully should we pick our way along the rocky path of life. I am not one who considers the curtain drawn between us and futurity as a special proof of providential care. I would count it rather as one of the losses brought upon us by the fall of Adam, which rendered most of the faculties with which the Almighty gifted his first creatures too gross and carnal to exert their original prerogatives. There was a second Adam, of whom the first was a pre-

figuration, who brought a perfect body into the world, the capabilities of which we have no reason to believe we should not also have enjoyed had ours, like his, remained as sinless as they were created. Many people, from sheer cowardice, shrink from hearing what is in store for them, and excuse themselves upon the plea that they have no right to know what the Creator has mercifully hid. They might just as well argue they had no right to use a microscope to aid their sin-bound eyes to discover that which the first man would probably have seen without any artificial help. But our deeds for the most part will not bear the light, and therein lies our dread of an unknown future. We fear to trace the advance of the Nemesis we feel the past deserves.

Mrs. Quekett does not address Irene—their eyes even do not meet in the presence of the dead man whose life has been so much mixed up with both of theirs, and yet the house-keeper intuitively feels that her mistress knows or guesses the part she has taken in her late misery, and is too politic to invite notice which in the first bitterness of Irene's trouble might be most unpleasantly accorded. Besides, Mrs. Quekett believes that the game is in her own hands, and that she can afford to wait. So Irene remains unmolested by the house-keeper's sympathy or advice, and a loud burst of hysterics as soon as Isabella is put in possession of the truth is the only disturbance that reaches her privacy during the hour that she remains by herself, trying to realize the fact that she is once more left alone. As the friends who bore his body up the stairs walk gently down again, as though the sound of their footsteps could arouse the unconscious figure they have left behind them, she turns the key in the door, and advancing to the bedside, falls upon her knees and takes the cold hand in her own.

"Philip!" she whispers softly—"Philip!"

But the dead face remains as it was laid, stiff and quiescent on the pillow, and the dead eyelids neither quiver nor unfold themselves. They are alone now, husband and wife, who have been so close and so familiar, and yet he does not answer her. The utter absence of response or recognition, although she knows that he is dead, seems to make her realize for the first time that *he is gone*.

"Philip," she repeats, half fearfully, "it is I—it is Irene."

"Oh, my God!" she cries, suddenly, to herself; "how full of life and hope he was this morning!"

That recollection—the vision of her husband

as she saw him last, his beaming face, his cheerful voice, his promise to be back with her by seven, all crowd upon her heart and make it natural again.

She begins to weep.

First it is only a tear, which she drives back with the worn-out platitude that he is happy, and so she must not grieve; then her lip quivers and she holds it fast between her teeth and tries to think of paradise, and that it is she alone who will have to suffer: but here steps in the remembrance of how *he* used to sympathize in all her troubles, and pity for herself brings down the tears like rain.

"Oh, my poor love! I shall never hear you speak again. I shall never see your eyes light up when I appear. It is all over. It is all gone forever; and we had so much to make up to one another!"

At this she cries for every thing—for her husband—for herself—for their separation and her future; and in half an hour rises from her knees, wearied with weeping, but with a breast already easier from indulgence.

But she does not hang about the corpse again. Irene's notions with respect to the change which we call Death preclude her clinging with any thing like superstition to the cast-off clothing of a liberated spirit. She knows it is not her husband that is there, nor ever has been; and she will cry as much to-morrow at the sight of the last suit he wore, as she has done over his remains, and for the same reason, because it reminds her of *what was*, and still *is*, though not for her. All her sorrow lies in the fact that the communication which she loved is, for a while, concluded.

When her grief is somewhat abated, she rings the bell for Phœbe. The girl answers it timidly, and, on being bidden to enter, stands shivering just within the threshold of the room, with eyes well averted from the bed.

"Phœbe," said her mistress, weariedly, "I want you to tell me—to advise me—what ought I to do about *this*?"

"Oh, bless you, ma'am, I don't even like to think. Hadn't we better send for Mrs. Quekett?"

"Certainly not, Phœbe! Don't mention Mrs. Quekett's name to me again. This is not her business, and I have no intention of permitting her to enter the room."

"She seems to expect as she's to have the ordering of every thing," says Phœbe, as she blinks away a tear.

"She is mistaken, then," replies Irene. The allusion to Mrs. Quekett has strengthened her

She has no inclination to cry now. Her eyes sparkle, and her breast heaves.

"Is that gentleman—the doctor—here still?" she inquires.

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Fellows, his name is. We've put him in the Blue-Room."

"Ask him to come here."

The young man—a surgeon from a neighboring village—soon makes his appearance, and to his hands Irene confides the charge of every thing connected with the last offices to be performed for her husband, which Mr. Fellows, being much impressed with her beauty and her grief, undertakes without any hesitation, and promises to act for her until the arrival of Oliver Ralston shall set him at liberty again. Upon which she rises and bows to him, and, without another glance toward that which bears so small resemblance to the gallant, fine old man who promised but last night to grow young again for her sake, leaves the room, and creeps away to the side of Tommy's cot, and remains there till the morning, rocking herself backward and forward, and wondering why God should have especially selected herself to suffer such repeated separations.

"First my dear father, and then mother, and now Philip! They all weary of me—they will not wait until I can accompany them. They are too anxious to get free—they forget I shall be left alone.—O Tommy, my darling, stay with me! Don't you go too. And yet, Heaven only knows how long I shall be permitted to keep you either."

She makes herself miserable with such thoughts until the day breaks. How strange to see it dawn, and remember, with a start, that for *him* time is no more! She rises chilled and stiff from her position with the daylight, and performs the duties of dressing mechanically; yet she will not quit the nursery, but sits there hour after hour with her hands crossed upon her lap, listening to Tommy's broken phraseology, or issuing necessary orders in a languid, careless voice from which all hope seems to have evaporated. In the course of the afternoon Sir John Coote asks to see her, and she hears for certain what rumor from the servants' hall has already acquainted her with.

"Always a determined fellow with dogs and horses, poor, dear Mordaunt," says her visitor, in the course of explanation. "I have heard that his intimate friends might twist him round their little fingers, but that's neither here nor there; he would never let an animal get the better of him.—Well, that d—d brute of his—excuse my vehemence, Mrs. Mordaunt, but I can't speak of it with any thing like calmness—was in a temper

from the first of the morning. Mordaunt had a deuce of a trouble to keep him straight at all, and, after two or three hard fights between them, the animal's blood was fairly up, and he began to show vice. It happened at the wide jump by Chappell's farm in Stotway. The brook's very much swollen, and we mostly went round.—'I'll take it out of my brute,' says poor Mordaunt, and put him at it like blazes. The animal refused the water twice, then took it with a rush—fell short of the opposite bank, rolled over, and there was an end of it. And I wish to God, my dear child, I had to tell the story to any one but you."

"Did he speak? Who saw him first?" she asks, with white, trembling lips.

"Not a word; it must have been the work of a second—dislocation of the spinal vertebra, you know. I was next behind him, and off my horse in a moment, but it was no use. I saw that directly. We shall never have such a master of the hounds again, Mrs. Mordaunt. It's the saddest thing that's ever happened to me since I rode to my first meet."

"Thank you for telling me. I would rather know all. And you are sure he did not suffer?"

"Quite sure. You should ask Fellows, he belongs to Stotway, and was on the spot in five minutes; but it might as well have been an hour for all the good he could do. And then we carried him to a farm-house close by, and I sent on Colville to break the news to you; but the fool couldn't go through with it, and slunk home half-way, leaving us quite in the dark as to his proceedings; else you may be sure we would never have startled you in the manner we did by bringing the poor fellow straight home without any previous warning."

"Never mind; it was just as well, perhaps; nothing could have softened it," she says, quietly.

"You bear it like a—like a—like a *Trojan*," exclaims Sir John, unable to find any term more suited to the occasion by which to express his admiration.

"I am *obliged* to bear it," replies Irene; "but it was very sudden, and I don't think I can talk any more about it to-day, please," upon which her visitor takes the hint, and leaves her to herself.

The next day brings Oliver Ralston, full of concern and interest for Irene, as usual, and also not a little grieved at the loss they have mutually sustained.

"He was always so good to me," he says, as soon as the first ice is broken, and Irene has in part confided to him the last interview she had with her husband, "particularly when that old brute Quekett was out of the way."

"Oliver! promise me that I shall never see that woman to speak to again. I feel as though it would be impossible to me—as though I could not trust myself to hear her whining over my husband's death, or offering me her hypocritical condolences, without saying exactly what I think and know of her."

"My dear Irene, why ask me? Surely it will be in your own power to decide what is to become of the whole establishment, and Mother Quekett into the bargain."

"I don't know that, Oliver," she says, with a slight shiver. "I know nothing for certain; but I suppose it will be in my power to settle where I shall live, and I feel that that woman and myself can never continue under the same roof."

"Where should you live but here? You would not abandon the poor old Court? But perhaps you would find it lonely all by yourself."

"Don't let us talk of it until we hear what arrangements Philip may have made for me, Oliver. I shall be content to abide by his decision. But he told me, the night before he died, that he had lately altered his will."

"Not in old Quekett's favor, I trust. Irene, do you think we shall find out the truth about that woman now? Will the secret concerning her (for I am sure there is one) be brought to light with my uncle's will?"

"I have never seen it, Oliver; you must not ask me. For my own part, the only feeling I have upon the subject is, that I may be rid of the sight of her. She has done her best to poison the happiness of my married life, and turn my dear, noble husband's heart against me; and, if I live to be a hundred, I could never forgive her for it. It was sheer malice, and God knows what I have done to provoke it!"

"You came between her and her hope of inheriting my uncle's money; that is all the explanation I can offer you, Irene. It makes me very uneasy to hear you say the will has been altered. What should Uncle Philip have altered it for?"

"Because, after what he heard, he naturally believed me to be unworthy of having the charge of so much property."

"But without ascertaining if his suspicions were correct? I cannot believe it of him. Irene, if he has permitted this old woman to inveigle you out of your legal rights under false pretenses, I shall begin to hate his memory."

He is startled by her burst of distress.

"Hate his memory! O Oliver! for shame! How dare you say so before me? My poor, kind Philip—my dear, generous husband, who would

have laid down his life for my sake; if he was misled in this matter, it was through his great love for me; and I was wrong in not seeking an explanation with him sooner. If—if—things do not turn out exactly as the world may have expected of him, I, for one, will not hear the slightest imputation of blame cast on his memory. My darling Philip (weeping), would God had spared him one short month more to me, that I might have tried, in some measure, to atone for the suffering his suspicions caused him!"

"Irene, you are an angel," says Oliver, impulsively; "but I can't say I see this thing in the same light as you do. However, speculation is useless. We shall know every thing soon. Meanwhile, I suppose it wouldn't be considered decent to kick old Quekett out-of-doors before the funeral has taken place."

"You must do nothing, but be good and quiet, and save me all the trouble you can, Oliver, for the next few days; and after that, when it is all over, we will consult together as to the best course to pursue."

He sees her every day after this, but not for long at a time; for, strange and unnatural as it may appear to the romantic reader that any woman who loves a man as completely as Irene loves Muiraven should feel almost inclined to despair at the death of a prosy old husband like Colonel Mordaunt, the young widow is, for a time, really overwhelmed with grief. Most of us know, either from experience or observation, what it is to wake up, after many days and nights of fever, to the joys of convalescence—to feel that the burning pain, the restlessness, the unquiet dreams, the utter inability to take any interest in life, have passed away, and that instead we can sleep and taste and understand, breathe God's fresh air, drink in his sunshine, and recognize our friends. How grateful—how good we feel! With what a consciousness of relief we remember the past horrors; and should we relapse and dream of them again, how thankfully we wake to find our hand clasped by some kind, sympathizing nurse, who moistens our parched lips, and smooths our tumbled pillow, and bids us have no fear, since we are watched and tended even when unconscious!

Love for Muiraven was to Irene a fever of the brain. It was so deep and burning that the disappointment of its loss pervaded her whole being, and almost worked its own cure by robbing her of interest in every thing that had preceded it. When she commenced life anew with Colonel Mordaunt she was in the convalescent stage.

She was too weak as yet to care to take any trouble for her own benefit or pleasure; but he took it for her. It was from his hand she first became aware that she could still derive enjoyment from the blessings which Heaven provides equally for its children; his protection and tenderness sheltered all her married life; and if her love is Muiraven's, her gratitude is alone due to her husband. The first feeling makes her shudder even to look back upon—so fraught is it with pain, and heart-burning, and misery; but the second (save for the last sad episode, which Irene attributes more to her own fault than his) provokes no thoughts but such as are associated with peace. Because we have been racked with anguish and delirious with pain, are we to turn against the kind hand that is stretched forth to tend and succor us?

There is no greater mistake in the world than to suppose that a man or woman can only love once; though, luckily, the foolish supposition is chiefly confined to establishments for young ladies, and three-legged stools. We may never love again so ardently as we did at first (though that possibility is an open question); but we may love, and love worthily, half a dozen times, if Heaven is good enough to give us the opportunity; and there are some natures that *must* love, and will go on loving to the end of the chapter. They resemble those plants that only require the topmost shoots to be taken off to make them sprout out again at the bottom. And Irene has never resisted the promptings of youth and Nature to make the most of the happiness the world afforded her. She has not, like some people, sat down in the dark with her lacerated love in her lap, and dared her grief to die by tearing open its wounds as quickly as they closed. On the contrary, her first wild burst of sorrow over, she placed it far behind her, and went out gladly to meet returning sunshine, and thanked God that she retained the power to appreciate it. If she has not enjoyed any vehement transports of delight therefore, during her communion with Philip Mordaunt, she has acknowledged that his affection mitigated her regret; her heart has expanded beneath the influence of his devotion, she has known peace and quiet, and contentment; and she misses it all terribly now that it is gone. She feels that she is once more thrown on the world as she was by her mother's death—unloved, unguarded, and alone—and her sorrow is as genuine and honest as was her affection.

Colonel Mordaunt was lucky enough not to possess many relations, but two or three needy

cousins, hitherto unheard of, crop up during the next few days, in hopes of finding their names mentioned in the will, and the lawyer, all bustle and importance, with the precious document stowed away in his deed-box, comes down the day before the funeral and disgusts Oliver Ralston with his loquacity and pertinacious attempts at confidence.

"You know nothing of this, sir," he says, slapping the roll of parchment which he carries in his hand. "You were not in your late uncle's—yes—yes—of course, *uncle's*—secrets? Well, then, I flatter myself, sir, I have a surprise for you. If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Ralston, I have a little surprise here for every one connected with my late client."

"If you have, I have no desire to anticipate it, Mr. Carter. I don't like surprises at any time, and I consider them particularly out of place at a period like this."

"Ah—good, generous, of course—an admirable sentiment, sir; but these things are not in our hands. Had you any reason to suppose, now, that your late lamented er—er—uncle designed to alter his testamentary bequests in favor of—"

"Mr. Carter," exclaims the young man, abruptly, "I have already told you that I can wait till to-morrow to learn my uncle's last wishes, and I consider your attempt to provoke my curiosity a most irregular proceeding. You were of necessity in Colonel Mordaunt's confidence; be good enough to respect it until the proper moment arrives for its disclosure."

"Oh! very good—very good! just as it should be, of course," replies the ruffled lawyer, "only public surprises are apt to be attended with inconvenience, and I thought, perhaps, that a little preparation—"

But here Mr. Carter indignantly breaks off, leaving Oliver in a most uncomfortable state of mind, and dreading above all things the moment when the will shall be read, and these mysterious innuendoes brought to light.

He is very anxious that Irene shall not be present at the reading, but she is resolute to appear in her proper place, as the mistress of Fen Court.

"If I consulted my own inclinations, Oliver, I should remain up-stairs; but *that woman* shall be present, and I am determined she shall see that I can bear the fate which she has brought upon me without winching. It would be such a triumph to her to think that the mere anticipation had made me too ill to appear."

"Why will you talk in this way, Irene?"

Why prognosticate misfortune which I cannot believe in?"

"Wait and see, Oliver," is all she answers.

It is a bright, cold day when they carry Colonel Mordaunt to his grave in the quiet churchyard of Priestley. Irene is anxious to attend the funeral, but her wish is overruled by Oliver, who foresees that if she does so, his aunt Isabella, and probably Mrs. Quckett, will follow her example, and make a scene during the ceremony. He could trust Irene, but he cannot trust the others; and, like most young men, he has a righteous horror of a scene. So he persuades the young widow to remain at home, and is himself chief mourner. It is not a grand funeral, but it is a very imposing one, followed by almost all the members of the hunt, with Sir John Coote at their head; and it gratifies Irene to see how much her husband was held in consideration by those who knew him most intimately. At last it is over. Oliver is back again; the visitors, with the exception of Sir John, have dispersed, and the family are left to themselves.

Three o'clock has been fixed for the reading of the will, and, as the hour strikes, Irene, dressed in her deep mourning, with Tommy clinging to her hand, comes down-stairs for the first time since her bereavement, and, walking into the dining-room on Oliver Ralston's arm, takes the chair which he wheels forward for her, and seats herself in the centre of the circle. She bows to the company generally as she enters, but she looks at no one but the lawyer, though she is conscious, without seeing it, that Mrs. Quckett is sitting nearly opposite to her, with her elbow resting easily upon the table, and a satisfied, malignant smile of coming triumph fixed upon her countenance. Mr. Carter hums and ha's as he unfolds the parchment.

Why do lawyers always "hum" and "ha" before they read a will? Are they nervous by nature (they ought not to be), or is the peculiarity alluded to supposed to add dignity to their position, or importance to their charge? It is a fact that they always do so.

Mr. Carter, being no exception to the rule, clears his throat until he makes himself quite hoarse, and is obliged to ask for a glass of water. Then he gives two or three final coughs as a wind-up, and proceeds to make the following statement:

"Life is very uncertain," commences Mr. Carter, as he smooths out the creases in the parchment, "in fact, there is nothing certain in life. We are used to great changes in our profession,

and great surprises—very great surprises!—indeed, we are never surprised at any thing we may hear or see—"

"Has this any thing to do with the will?" says Irene, with an imploring glance at Oliver, who immediately addresses the lawyer:

"We are exceedingly obliged for your sentiments, Mr. Carter, but Mrs. Mordaunt would prefer your proceeding to business. You must remember this is the first time she has ventured down-stairs."

"Ah! of course; I have to beg your pardon, madam—and yet, under the circumstances, perhaps— Well, well, then" (with a more cheerful air)—"to business. Not but what my remarks were made with a view in that direction. I have a document here, the contents of which I think are unknown to most present. It will in fact, I fear" (with a glance at Irene over his spectacles), "prove to be one of those surprises to which I alluded on first taking my place among you—"

"It will not prove, perhaps, so great a surprise as you anticipate," says Irene, in a clear cold voice that makes Mrs. Quckett start. "At any rate, we are assembled to hear it."

"As you will, madam—as you will," returns Mr. Carter, somewhat nettled. "I only wished to spare you an unpleasant shock."

"A shock for Mrs. Mordaunt! What can he mean?" exclaims Sir John Coote, quickly.

The house-keeper smiles furtively, and smooths the crape upon her dress-sleeve.

"Sir John, I must entreat you to be quiet and let Mr. Carter proceed," says Irene. "Whatever may be in store for me, be assured that I am quite able to bear it."

Sir John exchanges glances of astonishment with Oliver.

"You are to go on," says the latter roughly, to the lawyer. On which the reading of the will is commenced and finished without further interruption.

It is very brief and very explicit. It commences with a bequest of five thousand pounds to his sister Isabella Mordaunt, and goes on to leave all the remainder of his property, funded and personal—his house and lands, and plate and furniture—to his illegitimate son Oliver, generally known as Oliver Ralston, on condition of his taking the name of Mordaunt. Of Irene, from beginning to end, not a syllable is mentioned!

How do they receive it?

As the words, one after another, drop markedly from the lawyer's lips, the house-keeper may be observed to turn uneasily upon her seat—she

is evidently disappointed; the cousins look miserable; Sir John Cooté grows crimson in the face, and half rises from his chair. To Irene's pale cheeks there mounts a flush of pride, and she draws her adopted child, almost defiantly, closer to her side; and Isabella, as her name is mentioned, weeps loud and openly. But Oliver Ralston demands a paragraph to himself.

As the truth breaks in upon his mind, that Irene has been defrauded of her rights, his teeth set and his hand clinches itself furtively upon the arm of his chair. But as the fatal termination of the will reveals who he is, and the reason why he inherits to her detriment, he looks up quickly, the blood forsakes his face, and he rises tremblingly to his feet.

"*It's a lie!*" he says, striking his hand upon the table.

"Oliver—Oliver, for God's sake, forbear! Think what you are saying!" cries Irene, as she catches hold of his arm.

"Let me go, Irene! I repeat it," he says furiously, "I am *not* his son. It's some infernal lie hatched up by that old harridan for my destruction. Yes," he continues, addressing Mrs. Quekett, who has risen, as though to answer him, "I don't care what you say, nor what you think. You have made the misery of this house for years past. You have held the secrets of my uncle and my uncle's father over their heads until they hardly dared to act without your assistance. But your reign is over. Your last victim is in his grave; and you shall not continue your work of infamy in my behalf."

"But, my dear sir, what has this good lady to do with my late client's bequests?" interrupts the lawyer, soothingly.

"Command yourself, Ralston," urges Sir John.

"*Command myself!* Stand quietly by to see this poor girl robbed of her rights, and my own life branded with a stigma, for which no wealth can atone! I am *not* his son, I tell you—I am his nephew, the child of his sister Mary—"

"His sister's child died before she did, young man. You are the child of my daughter, Mary Quekett; and, if the shame of hearing it kills you, it's no more than it did to my poor girl."

It is the house-keeper that speaks to him.

"I won't believe it," he mutters, as he staggers backward. But he does believe it, for all his bravado.

"You can do as you please about that," continues Mrs. Quekett; "but I can take my Bible-oath that it's the truth. And for what should the colonel go to leave you all his property, if it

wasn't? He was mistaken enough in those that he thought worthy, and though he might have found better than yourself, maybe, to step into his shoes—"

"Silence, woman!" exclaims Oliver, in a voice of thunder. "If this most iniquitous will is allowed to stand, I am master in this house now—and I order you to leave the room."

"*You order me to leave the room!* she who is your nearest of kin—your own mother's mother," she says, breathless, in her surprise.

"Don't mention the fact—don't remind me of it, lest I should do you an injury. If you were twenty times my mother's mother, I should have no compassion for you. Leave the room I say, and rid us of a presence we detest."

"But, my dear sir—" interposes the lawyer unwisely.

"Who are *you* to dictate to me?" exclaims Oliver, turning round on him; "you have come to the end of your infernal parchment, I suppose, and your business here is completed. If you have read it aright, this house is mine, and I shall issue what orders in it I think fit. I command that woman to leave this room, and at once, or I shall put her out of it."

"Oh! you needn't be afraid that I shall start to be laid violent hands on by you, young man, though you are my grandson," replies Mrs. Quekett, tossing her head. "I have my own income, thank Heaven, and no need to be beholden to you or any one.—I think the old gentleman might have done better than choose you for his successor; but, as it is, he did it for my sake more than for your own, and as a recompense for what I've suffered at his hands, though there's few recompenses would make up for it. He led away my poor daughter before she came to her sixteenth year, and has had to pay pretty sharp for it ever since, for I don't believe he's had a quiet home since he passed you off on the world as his sister's son; and the many minds he's been in about it since he married that young woman—"

"*Will you leave the room?*" cries Oliver, again; and this time Mrs. Quekett thinks it more politic to acquiesce.

"Well, as there's nothing more to stay for, I don't see why I shouldn't; but it's not the last you'll hear of me, young man, by a good bit." And so saying, white with envy and malice, she sails away.

"Irene, I *cannot* bear it," exclaims Oliver, as he sinks into a chair and covers his face with his hands. "If it had been any thing but that—"

"My poor boy, I feel it so much for your sake

—Sir John, is there any thing more to do? any reason why we should not be left alone?"

"None whatever, my dear.—Mr. Carter, Mrs. Mordaunt wishes the room cleared. Be good enough to retire with these gentlemen to the next."

So the company, much disappointed at the issue of events, disappear, and Sir John Coote goes with them, and no one is left with the heir of Fen Court but Irene and Isabella and the little child.

Oliver remains where he has thrown himself—miserable, abashed, and silent.

"Oliver," says Irene presently, in her sweet, sad voice, "be comforted. He did you a great injury, but he has tried to atone for it. Remember how kind and loving he always proved himself toward you, and forgive him for the want of courage that prevented his letting you know your real relationship from the first."

"*Forgive him!* when he has robbed you of every thing? When he has disgraced you in the eyes of the world by passing over your name in his will as though you were not worthy to be mentioned, instead of being the most careful, attentive, affectionate wife a man could have! He was not worthy of you. I never thought so little of him as I do now."

"Oh, hush, Oliver! Pray hush! You cannot know how you are wounding me. I do not pretend to be indifferent to the turn affairs have taken. It is a great disappointment and misfortune, and shame to me, but I feel that he is suffering for it now so much more than I am, that I forget my misery in the contemplation of his. And I cannot permit you to blame him before me. When Philip made that will, he thought that he was doing right, and I am very thankful that, as I was not to have it, he should have left his property to you instead of to some public institution."

"I am not thankful at all. I hate the very idea of surplanting you. I never will do it, Irene. I refuse to take advantage of my—my—*uncle's* imbecility, or to accept a trust which is rightfully yours, and which you have done nothing to forfeit. What! Do you think I will reign here while you are starving out in the cold? I will cut my throat first."

"I shall not starve, Oliver; I have my own little income. Philip knew that I was provided for."

"Pshaw!—a hundred a year. How can you live on that, who have been accustomed to every luxury? It is impossible."

"It is quite possible; and I mean to do it."

"My dear Mrs. Mordaunt," here interrupts Isabella, for the first time—"but what—have I understood rightly—why does Oliver speak of your leaving the Court?"

"Did you not listen to your brother's will?" replies Irene, quietly. "He has left every thing to—to his son—"

"His son! Oh, dear! and you know it, then? And I always told Philip it would be so much better to tell at once. But why to his son? I don't think I can have listened properly—these things upset me so. You are not going away, my dear Mrs. Mordaunt?"

"I must go away, Isabella. Dear Philip (you must not blame him, for he thought that he was committing an act of justice) has made Oliver his heir; therefore Fen Court is no longer mine. But I am not ambitious, and I shall do very well, and will not have any of my friends concern themselves on my account."

"If you will not remain at Fen Court, neither will I," interposes Oliver.

"But where will you go?" demands Isabella, excitedly; "and you have so little money."

"Dear Isabella, don't worry yourself about that. I have plenty of places to go to, and kind friends to look after me, and I shall be very happy by-and-by," says Irene, with a sob, as she remembers how little truth there is in what she says.

"But we shall not see you," replies Miss Mordaunt, as she rises and advances to the side of her sister-in-law; "and—and—O Irene!" she goes on, becoming natural in her emotion, "don't go away, don't leave us again. You are the only creature I have loved for years."

"My dear Isabella!" says the young widow, as the tears rise to her eyes at this unexpected proof of affection, "why did you not let me know it before? It would have made me so happy."

"Oh! I couldn't—I didn't like—and then, you know, you had Philip. But now—and to think he could have wronged you so! Oh! my dear girl, *do* take my money—it's very little, but I don't want it. I have the legacy my father left me, and Oliver will let me stay on here. It would make me so much more comfortable to think you had it, and I couldn't touch a halfpenny of it, while things remain as they are."

"Bravo! Aunt Isabella!" exclaims Oliver. "I didn't think you were half such a brick. Live here? of course you shall! You must both live here, or I shall have the place shut up."

"What have I done that you should be so

kind to me?" says Irene, as she bursts into tears of gratitude and surprise. But she has no intention of accepting either of their offers, nevertheless.

"You do not understand my feelings on this subject," she says to Oliver, a few hours later, when they are again discussing the advisability of her departure. "I have been suspected of the grossest crime of which a woman can be guilty; that of marrying an honest man under false pretences; and my husband's feelings concerning it have been made public property; for you can have no doubt that the curiosity which the provisions of his will excited has been already satisfied by Mrs. Quekett's version of the story."

"Can nothing be done to rectify the slander?"

"Nothing. Pray do not attempt it," she says, shrinking from the idea of such an explanation being necessary. "I am conscious of my own integrity. Let me live the scandal down—only it cannot be at Fen Court."

"Why not? Had my uncle lived a few hours longer, this will would have been altered."

"Perhaps so; but I must abide by it as it stands—and I have too much pride, Oliver, to let the world think I would accept a position he didn't think me worthy to maintain. It was a fatal mistake on his part, but it is God's will, and I must suffer for it. I am quite determined to quit the Court."

"Then I shall quit it too. I will not live here in your stead. It would make me wretched."

"Oliver! you cannot mean it. You would never be so foolish. What will become of all this fine property without a master?"

"I don't care a hang what becomes of it. If you will stay and look after it with me, I will remain."

"That would be impossible, Oliver, in any case. You forget what you are talking about."

"Then stay here by yourself."

"Still more impossible. Pray do not torture me by any more entreaties. In plain words, Oliver, this child is supposed to be mine. He is not mine, but I have no intention of parting with him, at all events, at present. Therefore we must go away and hang our humiliated heads somewhere together."

"I wish you had never seen the brat."

"I don't."

"What! not after all he has brought upon you?"

"It is not his fault."

"Poor little devil. I ought to feel for him. O Irene! the bitterest part of it all is the knowledge that I have any of that woman's blood running in my veins. When I think of it I could—I could—" clinching his fist.

"Hush! yes, it is a bitter pill to swallow. But think of the misery it must have caused him. To have her threats of exposure constantly held over his head. Poor Philip! Had we been more confidential, how much unhappiness we might have saved each other. What do you intend to do about Mrs. Quekett?"

"Turn her out of the house!"

"Oh, Oliver! however hard it may be, you should remember now that she is—*your grandmother!*"

But the words are hardly out of her mouth before Irene is frightened at the effect of them.

"*My grandmother!*" he exclaims, rising suddenly to his feet, "it is that fact alone, Irene, that decides me. Had she not been *my grandmother*, I might have made allowances for her infamous conduct. But that she—who brought my mother into the world, and professed to love her—should have systematically tortured *his* life, and done all she could to set him against me, whom he had so fearfully wronged, completely steels my heart against her. Were she an ordinary servant, grasping, authoritative, and contentious, I might have made allowances for her age and length of service, and fidelity; but now I can make none. I am only anxious to rid myself of a presence I have always hated, and now most thoroughly despise. Mrs. Quekett goes to-morrow."

"Have you told her so?"

"I have! We have just enjoyed a most stormy interview; but the old woman knows my mind, and that I am resolute. To-morrow sees her leave Fen Court, never to return, except in my bitterest memory."

"Try to forgive, Oliver."

"Don't ask me that yet, Irene. At present I can neither forgive nor forget. The man who strangles his bastard in the birth is a kinder father than he who permits him to grow up to maturity in ignorance of his misfortune."

The next few days pass quietly enough. The house-keeper is gone, and the Court is deserted. Irene has received a letter from her aunt, Mrs. Cavendish, and announces her intention of taking Tommy to Sydenham with her on a short visit.

"And afterward you will return here, dear Irene," says Oliver; "I can decide on nothing till I know your plans."

"I will write to you on the subject," is all her answer, and they are obliged to let her go, and trust to persuading her to take up her final abode with them more effectually by letter than by word of mouth.

But when she has been at Sydenham for about a week, Irene writes to tell Oliver that he must at once abandon all hope that she will ever return to Fen Court. She has fixed on her future residence, she affirms, but intends for the present to keep its destination a secret, even from her own relations, in order that he may have no excuse for attempting to seek her out. It is a long letter, full of explanation, but written so calmly and resolutely that Oliver feels that there is nothing to be done but acquiesce in her decision. She begs him, however, so earnestly, for her sake and the sake of her dear dead husband, *not* to abandon the property confided to his charge, that he feels bound to follow her wishes and remain where he is. He makes several attempts, nevertheless, to trace her whereabouts, by letters to Mrs. Cavendish and Mr. Walmsley, the solicitor, but the lady appears as distressed at her niece's leaving her in ignorance as he is, and the lawyer is deep and silent as the grave. And so for the nonce Oliver Ralston—or Mordaunt, as he must now be called—tries to make himself contented by wielding the sceptre at Fen Court and devising plans with the sapient Isabella for circumventing the young widow's resolution to remain undiscovered. But all in vain; three months pass, and they are still ignorant of her destination. It is close upon Christmas-day, when one afternoon a card is brought in to Oliver on which is inscribed the name of Lord Muiraven. Now, before Irene's departure she had confided to him all the details of the torn letter, and her last interview with her husband, so that he hopes Lord Muiraven may have seen her or come from her, and goes in to meet him gladly. Two gentlemen await him in the library; one clad in deep mourning, whom he concludes to be Muiraven; the other, a shorter, fairer, less handsome, but more cheerful-looking man, whom we have met once before, but doubtless quite forgotten; who was Muiraven's chum at college, and is now Saville Moxon, Esq., barrister-at-law, and owner of the boldest set of chambers in the Temple.

"Mr. Mordaunt, I believe," says Muiraven, rather stiffly; "the—the nephew of my late friend Colonel Mordaunt."

"I am Mr. Mordaunt; and I have often heard your name from my uncle's wife. Won't you sit down?"

His cordial manner rather overcomes the other's *hauteur*.

"Let me introduce my friend Mr. Moxon," he commences, and then, taking a chair, "We shall not detain you long, Mr. Mordaunt. I was much surprised to learn that Mrs. Mordaunt is not living at the Court. I came here fully expecting to see her. I am anxious to ascertain her address. Will you kindly give it me?"

"I wish I could, Lord Muiraven. I do not know it myself. I was in hopes you brought me news of her."

"Brought you news! How strange! But why is she not here? Is there any mystery about it?"

"No mystery—but much sadness. I am not a man to be envied, Lord Muiraven. I stand here, by my uncle's will, the owner of Fen Court, to the wrong and detriment of one of the noblest and most worthy women God ever made."

"You are right there," exclaims Muiraven, as he seizes the other's hand. "But, pray tell me every thing. My friend here is as my second self. You may speak with impunity before him. For God's sake, put me out of suspense! Where is Irene and the child?"

"If I may speak openly, my lord, that unfortunate child has been the cause of all our misery!"

"But—how—how?"

Then Oliver tells them how, in words that would be but repetition to write down again. He conceals nothing, hoping that Lord Muiraven may see the justice of following up Irene and relieving her of so onerous a charge as the protection of his illegitimate child. But as he proceeds he can perceive no blush of shame upon Muiraven's face; on the contrary, although he grows pale with excitement, his eyes never once flinch before those of his informant. When the story is concluded, he turns round to Moxon, and addresses him.

"Saville, we must leave this as quickly as possible. I must begin the search again in London. I feel as though I could not let an hour pass over my head without doing something. Thanks, Mr. Mordaunt, for your candid explanation. You have done me the greatest service possible.—If Irene is to be found, I will send you news of her."

"But, my lord—excuse my curiosity—but will you be as candid as I have been, and let me know if the suspicions Irene holds with respect to her adopted child are correct?"

"They are so, Mr. Mordaunt, and they are not. The time for concealment is at an end. The boy

whom you have known under the name of Tommy Brown is *my lawful son—and the heir to my father's earldom.*"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN order to explain the foregoing statement to my readers it is necessary that I should take them back to the time when Joel Cray left Priestley.

It seems a hard thing to say, but there is no doubt it is true, that the lower orders, as a rule, do not feel the happiness of loving, nor the misery of losing love, so keenly as their brethren of the upper class. The old-fashioned idea that virtue and simplicity are oftener to be found in the country than the town, and among the poor than the rich, has long since exploded. Simple, the half-heathen villagers may still remain; but it is oftener the hideous simplicity of open vice, so general that its followers have not even the grace left to be ashamed of it, than the innocence that thinks no evil. If the inhabitants of our great towns are vicious, they at least try to hide it. Even with the virtuous poor the idea of love (as we think of love) seldom enters into their calculations on marriage. They see a girl whom they admire, who seems "likely" in their eyes, and, after their rough fashion, they commence to court her, "keep company" with her for a few years, at the end of which time, perhaps, she falls in with a "likelier" young man; and then, if the first suitor has been really in earnest, a few blows are exchanged between the rivals, separation ensues, and he looks out for another partner. The women are even more phlegmatic than the men. They regard marriage simply as a settlement in life, and any one appears to be eligible who can place them in a house of their own. If the first comer is faithless, they cry out about it loudly and publicly for a day or two, and then it is over; and they also are free to choose again. I suppose this state of things has its advantages. They do not love so deeply or intellectually as we do, consequently they separate with greater ease. Disappointment does not rebound on them with so crushing an effect, and I believe for that very reason they make the more faithful wives and husbands of the two. They expect little, and little satisfies them; and they have to work and struggle to procure the necessaries of life. There is no time left to make the worst of their domestic troubles.

Yet we cannot take up the daily papers, and read of the many crimes that are committed through jealousy, without feeling that some of

the class alluded to must be more sensitive than others. A gentleman will suspect his wife of infidelity, and break his heart over it for years, trying to hoodwink himself and tread down unworthy doubts, before he will drag his dishonored name into the light of day, and seek reparation at the hands of law; but a husband of the lower orders has no such delicate consideration. Most of them think a good beating sufficient compensation for their wrongs; but a few, under the sense of outraged honor which they experience, but cannot define, feel that nothing short of blood will satisfy them, and quietly cut their wives' throats from ear to ear. I have always had a sort of admiration for these last-named criminals. They must have valued what they destroy at the risk of, and often in conjunction with, their own lives. The act may be brutal, but it is manly.

Beneath the list of ignorance and butchery we see the powers of mastery and justice, and the hatred of deceit and vice, which in an educated mind would have brought forth such different fruits. But, above all, we recognize the power of sentiment.

Joel Cray was one of these men—a rare instance of sensibility in a class whose whole life and nurture is against the possession of such a feeling. From a boy he had been taught to look upon his cousin Myra as his future wife; and when he believed that Muiraven had betrayed and deserted her, his rage and indignation knew no bounds. For a while he thought that he must see her righted; that it was impossible that any man who had loved Myra in ever so transient a manner—Myra so delicate and pretty, and compared with the other girls of Priestley) so refined—who in Joel's rough sight appeared almost as a lady—could be satisfied to live without searching her out again. But, as time went on, and no persistent seducer appeared upon the scene, his feelings for her regained the ascendancy, and he again began to look upon her as one who was to be his wife. He did not mind the first rebuff she gave him. He had faith in the charm which being replaced in the position of respectability must hold for every woman, and believed that as soon as she had got the better of her illness, the advisability of his proposal would strike her in its true light. He had not the least idea that she was dying; and her subsequent death seemed to kill at one blow both his ambitions. He could neither make her his wife, nor see her made the wife of the man who had deserted her. And there seemed to him but one thing left to be done—to exchange the blows alluded to above.

with the author of all this misfortune, even though they were to death.

"If I can only see that there 'Amilton," he thinks savagely, as he journeys from Priestley, "and break his formed head for him, I shall bide, perhaps, a bit quieter. Whenever I meets him, though, and wherever it may be, it will be a stand-up fight between us. And if he won't own his child and provide for it as a gentleman should, why there'll be another. And small satisfaction, too, with my poor girl a-lying cold in the church-yard." And here, hurried by retrospection beyond all bounds of propriety, he begins to call down the curse of the Almighty upon the luckless head of his unknown enemy.

He quits Priestley at the very time that Eric Keir is trying to drown his disappointment by running over the United States with his friend Charley Holmes, until the fatal letter announcing his elder brother's death shall call him back to England. Had it not been so, there would have been small chance of his being encountered in the streets of London during the shooting-season by our poor friend Joel. But what should a country lout know of such matters? It is to London that he works his way, feeling assured that in that emporium of wealth and fashion and luxury, sooner or later, he must meet his rival. So far he has reason, and by slow degrees he reaches it, journeying from farm to farm, with a day's job here and a day's job there, until he has gained the site of a suburban railway, on which he gets employment as a porter.

Here, seeing no means of bettering himself, he rests quietly for several months, more resigned and disposed to take interest in life again, perhaps, but still with that one idea firmly fixed in his mind, and eagerly scanning the features or following the footsteps of any one whose face or figure reminds him, in ever so small a degree, of the hated "Amilton." Perhaps it is fortunate for Joel's chances of retaining his situation that he cannot read, else the times he would have been seduced from his allegiance by seeing the mystic name upon a hat-box, or a portmanteau, would have been without number. How many Hamiltons journeyed up and down that line, I wonder, and embarked or disembarked at that station during the three months Joel Cray was porter there? But personal characteristics were all the guides he followed after, and these were often sufficient to insure him a reprimand. At last he heard of a situation in the West End of London, and resigned half his wages to increase his chance of meeting Muiraven.

But Muiraven spent his Christmas and his spring at Berwick Castle, and did not leave home again until he went to Glottonbury and met the Mordaunts.

Meanwhile poor Joel, much disheartened at repeated failures, but with no intention of giving in, searched for him high and low, and kept his wrath boiling, all ready for him when they *should* meet, by a nightly recapitulation of his wrongs.

Muiraven leaves Priestley, and embarks for India. The unfortunate avenger is again baffled.

The season passes, and he has ascertained nothing. Among the "Amiltons" he has met or heard of he can trace no member answering to the description of Myra's betrayer. Many are tall and fair, and many tall and dark; but the white skin, and the blue eyes, and the dark hair, come not, and the poor, honest, faithful heart begins to show signs of weariness. "Who knows?" so he argues—for two years and more Myra had heard nothing of him—"perhaps he may have died in the interim. Oh, if he could only ascertain that he *had!*"

But this search is as futile as the first. By degrees Joel confides his sorrow and his design to others—it is so hard to suffer all by one's self, and his acquaintances are eager to assist him, for there is something irresistibly exciting in a hue-and-cry: but their efforts, though well meant, fall to the ground, and hope and courage begin to slink away together. During this year Joel passes through the various phases of pot-boy, bottle-cleaner, and warehouse porter, until he has worked his way down to the Docks, where his fine-built, muscular frame and capabilities of endurance make him rather a valuable acquisition. He is still in this position when Lord Muiraven returns from the East Indies.

Muiraven left Fen Court in a strangely unsettled state of mind. He did not know if he were happier or more miserable for the discovery he had made. After an awkward and unsatisfactory manner, he had cleared himself in Irene's eyes, and received the assurance of her forgiveness; but how was his position bettered by the circumstance? Love makes us so unreasonable. A twelvemonth ago he would have been ready to affirm that he could bear any thing for the knowledge that the girl whose affection he had been compelled to resign did not utterly despise him. Now he knows that it is true, and thinks the truth but an aggravation of the insurmountable barriers that Fate has raised between them.

"If I were only a worse fellow than I am," he thinks impatiently, as he travels back to town—"if I were as careless as half the fellows that I meet, I should scatter every obstacle to the wind, and make myself happy in my own way; but it would break dad's heart; and on the top of losing dear old Bob, too!"

The question, whether the woman by means of whom he would like to be "happy in his own way" would aid and abet his unholy wishes does not enter into his calculations just then. Had there been any probability of their fulfillment, she might have done so, and Lord Muiraven would have found his level. But it flatters him to think that Irene's virtue and respectability are the magnanimous gifts of his powers of self-control. He forgets that she even forbade his speaking to her on the subject, and feels quite like Sir Galahad, or St. Anthony, or anybody else who was particularly good at resisting temptation (Heaven knows, a place in the Calendar is small enough reward for so rare a virtue!), as he reviews the circumstances of his visit, and willfully consigns poor old Colonel Mordaunt to the realms of eternal frizzling.

How the Shadows of the Past rise up to mock him now, and tell him that, were his wildest speculations realized, there would still remain an obstacle to his asking any woman to become his wife! How he curses that obstacle and his own folly, as he dashes onward to the metropolis! and how many of his fellow-passengers that day may not—had they indulged them—have had similar thoughts to his! It is the misfortune of this miserable, purblind existence that we must either loiter timidly along the road of life, permitting ourselves to be outdistanced at each step, or rush onward with the ruck pell-mell, helper-skelter, stumbling over a stone here, rushing headlong against a dead-wall there—on, on, with scarce a thought to what we have left behind us, and no knowledge as to what lies before—straining, pushing, striving, wrestling—and the devil take the hindmost!

What wonder if we oftener fall than stand, and that the aforesaid gentleman does take a pretty considerable number of us!

Muiraven cannot bear the presence of that Nemesis; and the endeavor to outwit it drives him wild for a few days: after which he runs up to Scotland, startling Lord Norham with his eccentric behavior, until the time arrives for him to cross the Channel with his cousin Stratford and meet the outward-bound steamer at Brindisi. The voyage does him good. There is

no panacea for dispersing miserable thought—like lots of bustle and moving about—and it is very difficult to be lovesick in the company of a set of excellent fellows who will not leave you for a moment to yourself, but keep you smoking, drinking, laughing, and chaffing, from morning till night. There are times, of course, when the remembrance of Irene comes back to him—in his berth, at night, for instance; but Muiraven is no sentimentalist: he loves her dearly, but he feels more disposed to curse than cry when he remembers her—although the only thing he curses is his own fate and hers. He reaches Bengal in safety, and for the next few months his cousin and he are up-country, "pig-sticking," and made much of among those regiments with the members of which they are acquainted. During his absence, Muiraven hears no news except such as is connected with his own family. His brother is married (it was a great cause of offense to the Robertson family that he did not remain in England till the important ceremony was over) and his old father feels lonely without Cecil, and wants his eldest son back again. Muiraven also beginning to feel rather homesick, and, as though he had had enough of India, Christmas finds him once more at Berwick Castle: paler and thinner, perhaps, than he looked on leaving England; but the heat of the climate of Bengal is more than sufficient to account for such trifling changes. He arrives just in time for the anniversary; and a week afterward he wants to return to London, being anxious (so he says) about the fate of certain valuables which he purchased in Calcutta months ago, and sent home round the Cape. Lord Norham suggests that his agent will do all that is necessary concerning them; but Muiraven considers it absolutely important that he should be on the spot himself. The fact is, he is hankering after news of Irene again; the dead silence of the last six months respecting her begins to oppress him like some hideous nightmare; the false excitement is over, and the ruling passion regains its ascendancy. What if any thing should have happened to her in his absence? Notwithstanding her prohibition to the contrary, he sent her a note on his return to England, simply telling the fact, and expressing a hope that they might soon meet again; but to this letter he has received no answer. He becomes restlessly impatient to hear something—any thing, and trusts to the dispatch of a cargo of Indian and Chinese toys, which he has brought home for Tommy, to break again the ice between them. It is this hope that brings him up to

London, determined to see after the arrival of these keys to Irene's heart himself.

They are all safe but one—the very case which he thinks most of, which is crammed to the lid with those wonderful sky-blue elephants, and crimson horses, and spotted dogs, which the natives of Surat turn and color, generation after generation, without entertaining, apparently, the slightest doubt of their fidelity to Nature. It was consigned, among many others, to the care of a Calcutta agent for shipment and address; and Muiraven is at first almost afraid that it has been left behind. His cousin Stratford suggests that they shall go down to the Docks and inquire after it themselves.

"Queer place the Docks, Muiraven! Have you ever been there? It's quite a new sensation, I assure you, to see the heaps of bales and casks and cases, and to hear all the row that goes on among them. Let's go, if you've got nothing else to do, this morning. I know that it'll amuse you."

And so they visit the Docks in company.

There is no trouble about the missing case. It turns up almost as soon as they mention it, and proves to have come to no worse grief than having its direction obliterated by the leakage of a barrel of tar. So, having had their minds set at rest with respect to Tommy's possessions, Muiraven and Stratford link arms and stroll through the Docks together, watching the business going on around them with keen interest. They look rather singular and out of place, these two fashionably-dressed and aristocratic young men, among the rough sailors and porters, the warehouse-men, negroes, and foreigners of all descriptions that crowd the Docks. Many looks are directed after them as they pass by, and many remarks, not all complimentary to their rank, are made as soon as they are considered out of hearing. But as they reach a point which seems devoted to the stowage of bales of cotton or some such goods, a rough-looking young fellow, a porter, apparently, who has a huge bale hoisted on to his shoulders by a companion, with an exclamation of surprise lets it roll backward to the earth again, and stepping forward directly blocks their pathway.

"Now, my good fellow!" says Muiraven, carelessly, as though to warn him that he is intruding.

"What are yer arter?" remonstrates the other workman, who has been knocked over by the receding bale.

"I beg your pardon," says Joel Cray, address-

ing Muiraven (for Joel, of course, it is), "but, if I don't mistake, you goes by the name of 'Amilton.'"

This is by no means the grandiloquent appeal by which he has often dreamed of, figuratively speaking, knocking his adversary over before he goes in without any figure of speech at all, and "settles his hash for him."

But how seldom are events which we have dreamed of fulfilled in their proper course!

That man (or woman) that jilted us! With what a torrent of fiery eloquence did we intend to overwhelm them for their perfidy when first we met them, face to face; and how weakly, in reality, do we accept their proffered hand, and express a hope we see them well! Our ravings are mostly confined to our four-posters. This prosaic nineteenth century affords us so few opportunities of showing off our rhetorical powers!

On Joel's face, although it is January, and he is standing in the teeth of a cold north wind, the sweat has risen; and the hand he dares not raise hangs clinched by his side. Still he is a servant in a public place, surrounded by spectators—and he *may* be mistaken! Which facts flash through his mind in a moment, and keep him quiescent in his rival's path, looking not much more dangerous than any other impatient, half-doubting man might be.

"As sure as I live," he repeats, somewhat huskily, "you goes by the name of 'Amilton,' sir!"

"Is he drunk?" says Muiraven, appealing to the by-standers. "It's rather early in the day for it. Stand out of my way—will you?"

"What do you want with the gentleman?" demands his fellow-workman.

"Satisfaction!" roars Joel, nettled by the manner of his adversary into showing something like the rage he feels. "You're the man, sir! It's no use your denying of it. I've searched for you high and low, and now I've found you, you don't go without answering to me for her ruin. You may be a gentleman, but you haven't acted like one; and I'll have my revenge on you, or die for it!"

A crowd has collected round them now, and things begin to look rather unpleasant.

"We're going to have a row," says Stratford, gleefully, as he prepares to take off his coat.

"Nonsense, Stratford! The fellow's drunk, or mad. I cannot have you mixed up with a crew like this.—If you don't move out of my way and stop your infernal insolence," he continues to Joel Cray, "I'll hand you over to a policeman."

"I am not insolent—I only tell you the truth, and the whole world may know it. Your name is 'Amilton.' You ruined a poor girl, under a promise of marriage, and left her and her child to perish of grief and hunger! And, as sure as there's a God in heaven, I'll make you answer for your wickedness toward 'em!"

"Ugh!" groans the surrounding crowd of navvies, always ready, at the least excuse, to take part against the "bloated hairestocracy."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You must have mistaken me for some one else," replies Muiraven, who cannot resist refuting such an accusation.

"Surely you are not going to parley with the man!" interposes Stratford.

"You don't know of such a place as Hoxford, maybe?" shouts Joel, with an inflamed countenance, and a clinched fist, this time brought well to the front—"nor of such a village as Fretterley?—nor you've never heard tell of such a girl as Myra Cray?—Ah! I thought I'd make you remember!" as Muiraven, turning deadly white, takes a step backward. "Let go, mates—let me have at him, the d—d thief, who took the gal from me first, and ruined her afterward!"

But they hold him back, three or four of them at a time, fearing the consequences of any thing like personal violence.

"Muiraven, speak to him!—What is the matter?" says his cousin, impatiently, as he perceives his consternation.

"I cannot," he replies at first; and then, as though fighting with himself, he stands upright and confronts Joel boldly.

"What have you to tell me of Myra Cray?—Where is she?—What does she want of me?—Why has she kept her hiding-place a secret for so long?"

"Why did you never take the trouble to look after her?" retorts Joel. "Why did you leave her to die of a broken heart? Answer me that!"

"To die! Is she dead?" he says, in a low voice.

"Ay! she's out of your clutches—you needn't be afraid of that, mister—nor will ever be in them again, poor lass! And there's nothing remains to be done now, but to take my satisfaction out of you."

"And how do you propose to take it? Do you wish to fight me?" demands Muiraven, calmly.

"Better not, mate!" says one of his comrades, in a whisper.

"Bleed him!" suggests another, in the same tone.

As for Joel, the quiet question takes him at a disadvantage. He doesn't know what to make of it.

"When a fellow's bin wronged," he begins, awkwardly—

"He demands satisfaction," continues Muiraven. "I quite agree with you. That idea holds good in my class as much as in yours. But you seem to know very little more than the facts of this case. Suppose I can prove to you that the poor girl you speak of was not wronged by me—what then?"

"You've bin a deal too 'asty," whispers one of his friends.

"But your name's 'Amilton'—ain't it?" says Joel, mistily.

"It is one of my names. But that is nothing to the purpose. Far from shirking inquiry, I am very anxious to hear all you can tell me about Myra Cray. When can you come home with me? Now?"

"Muiraven! in Heaven's name—is this one of your infernal little scrapes?" says Stratford.

"In Heaven's name, hold your tongue for the present, and you shall know all.—Is there any reason why this man should not accompany me to my place of residence?" continues Muiraven, addressing one of the by-standers.

"He can go well enough, if he likes to. He's only here by the job."

"Will you come, then?" to Joel.

"I'm sure I don't know what to say," retorts Joel, sheepishly. "'Tain't what I call satisfaction to be going 'ome with a gentleman."

"Come with me first, and then, if I don't give you entire satisfaction with respect to this business, we will fight it out your own way afterward."

"Gentleman can't say fairer than that," is the verdict of the crowd. So Joel Cray, shamefacedly enough, and feeling as though all his grand schemes for revenge had melted into thin air, follows Muiraven and Stratford out of the Docks, while his companions adjourn to drink the health of his enemy in the nearest public-house.

"Where are you going to take him?" demands Stratford, as a couple of hansoms obey his cousin's whistle.

"To Saville Moxon's. You must come with us, Hal. I have been living under a mask for the last five years; but it is time I should be true at last."

"True at last! What humbug, Muiraven! As if all the world didn't know—"

"Hush, Hal!—you pain me. The world

knows as much about me as it does of every one else."

Saville Moxon—now a barrister, who has distinguished himself on more than one occasion—lives in the Temple. Fifteen minutes bring them to his chambers, where they find him hard at work among his papers.

"I feel beastly awkward," says Muiraven, with a conscious laugh, as Moxon is eager to learn the reason of their appearance in such strange company; "but I've got a confession to make, Moxon, and the sooner it's over the better.—Now, my good fellow, pass on."

This last request is addressed to Joel, who, half doubting whether he shall make his cause good after all, recapitulates, in his rough manner, the whole history of Myra's return to Priestley—the birth of her child—her aimless searches after her betrayer—and, lastly, her unexpected death.

Muiraven starts slightly, and changes color as the child is mentioned; but otherwise he hears the sad story through unmoved. The other two men sit by in silence, waiting his leave to express their astonishment at the intelligence.

"Poor, Myra!" says Muiraven, thoughtfully, as Joel, whose voice has been rather shaky toward the end, brings his tale to a conclusion. "I don't wonder you thought badly of me, my friend; but there is something to be said on both sides. I never wronged your cousin—"

"You say that to my face!" commences Joel, his wrath all ready to boil over again at such a supposition.

"Stay! Yes—I repeat it. The person whom I most wronged in the transaction was myself.—Her name was not Myra Cray, but Myra Keir. She was my wife!"

"Your wife!" repeats Joel, staring vacantly.

"Good God!" exclaims Saville Moxon.

"Muiraven! are you mad?" says Stratford.

"My dear fellows, do you think I'd say a thing of this kind for the mere purpose of sneaking out of a scrape? You know what our ideas are on the subject. What man of the world would blame, very deeply, a youthful *liaison* between a college freshman and a pretty bar-maid? But this was no passing frailty of mine. I met this girl, formed an attachment for her, brought her up to London, married her privately in the old church of St. Sepulchre, and settled her at Fretterley, whence she—she—*left me.*"

And Muiraven, leaning back against the mantel-piece, sets his teeth at that remembrance, and looks sternly down upon the hearth-rug, although it all happened so many years ago.

"She left you—yes," cries Joel, "but not before you had near broke her poor 'art with your unkindness, sir. And she came back, poor lamb, to her own people and her own 'ouse, and died there, like a dog in a ditch."

"She left the house I had provided for her with—with—some one else," says Muiraven, frowning.

"She left it with me, sir, her own cousin, who wouldn't have hurt a hair of her 'ead. I searched for her long, and I found her un'appy and wretched, and I persuaded of her to come back 'ome with me; thinking as you had wronged her, for she never said a word of her being married, poor lass, from that day to the day of her death."

"She had sworn to me she would not, knowing how fatal the consequences might be of such a confession. Now, Moxon, you know all. Had my wife remained with me, I might perhaps have summoned up courage before now to tell my father the truth; but she left me—as I thought to disgrace herself—and though I searched for her in every direction, I was unable to obtain any clew to her destination. Then I went abroad—you remember the time—and hoped to forget it all, but the memory has clung to me like a curse ever since, until I met this fellow to-day in the Docks. Else I might have gone on to all eternity, considering myself still fettered by this early *mésalliance*.—And the child died too, you say," turning again to Joel; "was it a boy?"

"The child ain't dead no more than you are," replies Joel, gruffly, for he has been cheated out of his revenge, and no one seems the better for it. "He's a strong chap of four year old, all alive and kicking, and if you're the gentleman you pretend to be, you'll provide for him as a gentleman should."

"Alive! Good Heavens! and four years old! How this complicates matters!—Moxon, that child is my legitimate heir."

"Of course he is, if you were married. But where is he? that's the next thing to ascertain.—With your family, eh?" turning to Joel.

"No, he ain't bin along of 'em since his mother's death, for there was a lady at Priestley—the only creetur as was good to my poor lass when she lay dyin'—and she was real kind, God bless 'er; and the poor gal, she died on her bosom, as they tell me; and afterward Mrs. Mordaunt—that was the lady—she took Tommy along with her up to the Court, and—"

"Tommy! The Court! Good God! do you mean to tell me that the boy you speak of, Myra Cray's child, was adopted by Mrs. Mordaunt

of Fen Court, the wife of Colonel Mordaunt, of—"

"In course, the colonel's lady; and she makes a deal of him, too, so they say. But still, if he's yourn, sir, you're the proper person to look after him, and I sha'n't call it justice if you don't."

"Stratford, you know the box of toys we went after to-day?"

"That you kicked up such a shindy about. Yes."

"It is for that child that I brought them home."

"Did you know of this then?"

"Not a word; but I have stayed with the Mordaunts, and seen him. And to think he should be my own. How extraordinary!"

"Deuced inconvenient, I should say. What do you mean to do next?"

"Go down to Priestley at the earliest opportunity.—You'll come with me, Hal?"

"Better take Moxon, he may be of use. I'm none."

Then Moxon agrees to go; and they talk excitedly together for a few minutes, and almost forget poor Joel, who is anxiously awaiting the upshot of it all.

"Well, are you satisfied, or do you still wish to fight me?" says Muiraven to him presently.

"I suppose I've no call to fight you, sir, if you really married her; but I must say I should like to see the lines."

"You shall see them, Cray, for her sake as well as mine. And, meanwhile, what can I do for you?"

"I want nothing now, sir, but to go home again and look after mother and the little 'uns."

"I cannot talk more to you at present, but you may be sure I shall see that none of her relations want. Here is my address"—giving him a card—"any one will tell you where it is. Come to me there to-morrow evening, and we will consult what I can do to best prove my friendship to you." Upon which Muiraven puts out his hand and grasps Joel's rough palm, and the poor, honest, blundering soul, feeling any thing but victorious, and yet with a load lifted off his bosom, turns to grope his way down-stairs.

"Don't you lose that card," says Stratford, who steps outside the door to show him where to go; "for I am sure his lordship will prove a good friend to you, if you will let him be so."

"His lordship?" repeats Joel, wonderingly; "which be a lord—the little 'un?"

"No, no, the gentleman whom you call Hamil-

ton. His real name is Lord Muiraven; you must not forget that."

"A lord—a real lord—and he was married to my poor lass! No wonder it killed her! And that child, Tommy, a lord's son. Darn it, how little difference there is between 'em when they're covered with dirt!" And the first chuckle that has left Joel's lips for many a long month, breaks from them as he steps carefully down the steep staircase, and ponders on the wonderful truth he has been told. "A lord's son," he repeats, as he gains the street, and proceeds to shuffle back to the Docks again. "That brat a lord's son! Now, I wonder if my poor lass knew it all along; or, if not, if it makes her feel a bit easier to know it now?"

Muiraven and Moxon have a long conversation together as they travel down to Glottonbury.

"I conclude this early marriage of yours was what people call a love-match, eh?" remarks the latter inquisitively.

Muiraven colors.

"Well, yes, I suppose so; but love appears to us in such a different light, you know, when we come to a maturer age."

"Never having had any experience in that respect, can't say I do know."

"You are lucky," with a sigh. "What I mean to say is, that at the time I certainly *thought* I loved her. She was just the style of woman to inflame a boy's first passion—pretty features, perfect shape, and a certain air of *abandon* about her. And then she was several years older than myself!"

"Ah! I understand."

"I was not 'hooked,' if you mean that," says Muiraven, quickly.

"I never knew a fellow yet, my dear boy, who acknowledged that he had been. But when a gentleman, under age—"

"I was two-and-twenty."

"Never mind. You were as green as a school-boy. When a man, in your station of life, I repeat, is drawn into marriage with a woman from a class inferior to his own, and older than himself, *you* may call it what you choose, but the world in general will call it 'hooking.'"

"Well, don't let us talk of it at all, then," says Muiraven.

"All right; we'll change the subject. How beastly cold it is!"

Yet, do what they will, the conversation keeps veering round to the forbidden topic till Muiraven has made a clean breast of it to his friend. An

rived at Glottonbury, they make roundabout inquiries concerning Priestley and the Mordaunts, and there our hero learns, for the first time, of the colonel's death, and the subsequent departure of his widow. So that it is no surprise to Moxon and himself to be received by Oliver only when they present themselves at Fen Court.

Of course the natural astonishment excited by the assertion that Tommy is Lord Muiraven's lawful heir has to be allayed by the explanation given above. And then Oliver, who has received the golden key to the mystery that has puzzled them, and knows much more about it than Saville Moxon, becomes quite friendly and intimate with Muiraven, and wants him to stay at the Court, and when his invitation is declined on the score of his visitor's anxiety to find Mrs. Mordaunt and the boy, shakes hands with him warmly, applauding his zeal, and wishing him all success in his undertaking, with an enthusiasm that awakens the barrister's suspicions.

"What the deuce was that fellow so friendly about?" he inquires, as they journey back to town. "Why is he so anxious you should neither eat, drink, nor sleep, till you get on the track of old Mordaunt's widow?"

"Why, you know perfectly well she has the boy."

"What of that? she won't eat him, I suppose; and what difference can a day, more or less, make to you before you see him?"

"You have evidently not much idea of paternal affection," says Muiraven, as he strikes a fuscus on the heel of his boot.

"Well, where the father has never seen his child, and didn't even know he had got one—I can't say I have."

"I have already told you that I have seen him."

"And liked him?"

"Very much! He is a charming little child!"

"Indeed! How curious! Now, I wonder if your liking for him arose from a natural instinct, or from any extraneous circumstances that may have surrounded him? That question would form rather a neat psychological study."

"I don't follow you, Moxon."

"No? By-the-way, Muiraven, what became of that girl—now what was her name?—Miss—Miss—St. John, wasn't it?—whom you were so keen after, a few seasons ago?"

"Keen after! How you do exaggerate, Moxon! Why she—she is Mrs. Mordaunt. I thought you knew that!"

"Oh!" says Moxon, quietly.

"Pray have you any thing more to say on this subject?" remarks his friend presently, with some degree of pique.

"Nothing whatever, my dear fellow—nothing whatever. Only pray let us do all in our power to get on the track of that *charming child* as soon as possible."

"Moxon, I hate you!" says Muiraven shortly.

But he cannot afford to dispense with his aid nevertheless. The next day finds them at Laburnum Cottage, the residence of Mrs. Cavendish; and even that lady's state of flutter in receiving one of the aristocracy in her tiny drawing-room, cannot prevent her treating them to a burst of indignation at the conduct of her niece.

"So wrong—so very wrong—" she affirms, with just a sufficient chance of breaking down to render it necessary to hold her cambric handkerchief in her hand—"so unusual—so peculiar—so strange of Mrs. Mordaunt to leave us without the slightest clew to her place of residence. And she might die, you know, my lord, or any thing else, and not a soul near her. I'm sure I feel quite ashamed if any one asks after her. And there was not the least occasion for concealment; though, as I always say, we can expect no one to believe it."

"Mrs. Mordaunt has probably her own reasons for acting as she does."

"Oh, you are very good, to make excuses for her, my lord. But she was always willfully inclined. And the colonel, whom we thought so much of, has behaved so badly to her, leaving all his money away to his nephew; and then, to make matters look worse, Irene will continue to keep a dirty little boy whom she picked up in the village, although—"

"That dirty little boy is my son, Mrs. Cavendish."

Mrs. Cavendish turns pale—starts, and puts up her handkerchief to her eyes. It cannot be true; and, if it is, that he should stand there and confess it!

What are the aristocracy coming to? Saville Moxon is so afraid the lady is about to faint, that he rushes to the rescue, giving her the whole story in about two words. Upon which she revives, and becomes as enthusiastic as Oliver was.

"Oh, my lord, I beg a thousand pardons! I used the word 'dirty' most unadvisedly. Of course she has kept him scrupulously clean, and has treated him just like her own child. And I always said—it was the remark of every one—

what an aristocratic-looking boy he was. How surprised—how charmed she will be! Oh, you must find her; I am sure it can not be so difficult. And I believe she's in England, though that horrid old Walmsley will not tell."

"You think he knows her address, then?"

"I am sure of it; but it is no use asking him, I've begged and implored of him to tell me, but the most he will do is to forward my letters; and Irene always answers them through him, and there's an end of it."

"And she is well?" demands Muiraven anxiously.

"Oh, the dear child's quite well, my lord," replies Mrs. Cavendish, mistaking the pronoun; "you need have no fears of that. Her letters are full of nothing but Tommy. She little thinks who she has got the charge of. She will be proud, I am sure."

"I am afraid we must leave you now," says her visitor, rising, "as we must try and see Mr. Walmsley to-day."

"Oh, can't you stay a few minutes longer—just ten? No! Well, then, good-by, my lord, and I hope you will let me know as soon as you have traced my niece."

And Mrs. Cavendish, much to her chagrin, is left alone; for Mary, who has been up-stairs all this time changing her dress, descends to the drawing-room in her new blue merino, all ready to captivate his lordship, just as his lordship's tall figure disappears outside the garden-gate.

"Just a minute too late! What a pity!" thinks Mrs. Cavendish, as she puts up her eye-glass to watch the departure of the two young men. "Well, he certainly is a fine-looking man. And fancy his being a widower! Not but what I think my Mary would be too sensible to object to that. And if the child were in the way, why, I dare say Irene wouldn't mind continuing the charge, as she seems so fond of it. Well, all I hope is, he'll come again, and I'll take good care next time that Mary is ready dressed to receive him. Such a chance to throw away! If he'd only seen her as she looks now, the girl's fortune would have been made."

Old Walmsley, the solicitor, is a tougher customer to deal with than either of them anticipated, and even Saville Moxon finds it beyond his skill to worm out any thing from him that he doesn't choose to tell.

"It's all very well, gentlemen," he says, in answer to their combined entreaties, "but you're asking me to betray the confidence of one of my

clients, which is a thing I've never done during a practice of five-and-thirty years, and which I don't intend to begin doing now."

"But, look here, Mr. Walmsley," says Muiraven, "surely, under the circumstances, I have a right to demand Mrs. Mordaunt's address; she is detaining my child from me."

"Then you can write and demand the child, my lord, and the letter shall be duly forwarded to her."

"But she may not answer it."

"I think that very unlikely."

"But I want to see the child."

"I am sure my client will not detain it an hour longer than it is her due."

"But I want to see *her*," he bursts out impetuously.

Old Walmsley looks at him over his spectacles.

"I think you were the Honorable Eric Keir, my lord?"

"What of it?"

"I was in the late Mrs. St. John's entire confidence," Muiraven reddens.

"Well, if you were, you know the reason why I disappointed her. I have just told it you. I was a married man—I *am* a widower!"

"And Mrs. Mordaunt is a widow!"

"Exactly so.—Moxon, for Heaven's sake can't you find something more interesting to stare at than myself?—Now, will you give me her address, Mr. Walmsley?"

"I see no further reason for it, my lord. You can still write."

"This is *too* hard," cries Muiraven, impetuously, as he jumps up from his seat, and commences striding up and down the solicitor's office. "My tongue has been tied for years. I have banished myself from her presence; I have even left home in order to avoid the temptation of speaking to her; and, now that the opportunity presents itself—now that at last I am able to—to—"

"Go on, Muiraven," says Moxon, encouragingly, "to claim my charming child."

"You sha'n't go down with me, wherever it is for one," replies Muiraven, flushing up to the roots of his hair, as he tries to turn off his rhapsody with an uneasy laugh.—"Mr. Walmsley, is there no hope for me?"

"None that I shall betray Mrs. Mordaunt's confidence, my lord."

Muiraven sighs.

"Well, I suppose I must content myself with writing, then."

"But if," continues the old lawyer, slyly—"if

you were to set yourselves to *guess* the place where my client has hidden herself, why—why—”

“What then?” eagerly.

“I should be very much annoyed, my lord—exceedingly annoyed; indeed, with a low chuckle, “were you to guess right, I think I should—I should—”

“What would you do?”

“Get up and leave the room, and slam the door behind me.”

“Come on, Moxon,” says Muiraven gleefully, as he draws a chair to the table again. “Let’s begin and guess all the places in England alphabetically, till we come to the right one.”

“But I don’t know any of them. I’ve forgotten all about my geography,” replies Moxon.

“Oh, nonsense! it’s as easy as can be. Now for A: Aldersgate (oh, no! that’s in London). Aylesbury, Aberdeen, A—, A—. Bother it! which *are* the places that begin with A?”

“Ammersmith,” suggests Moxon; at which old Walmsley laughs.

“If you’re going to play the fool, I give it up,” says Muiraven, sulkily.

“All right, dear old fellow! I thought it did begin with A. Arundel, Aberystwith, Axminster. There are three proper ones for you instead.”

“Alnwick, Alresford, Andover,” continues his friend; and then, after a long pause, “There are no more A’s. Let’s go on to B. Bristol, Brighton, Birmingham, Balmoral, Baltimore—”

“Stay; that’s in America, old boy! Basingstoke, Bath, Beaminster.—Doesn’t it remind one of ‘I love my love with a B, because she is Beautiful? I hate her with a B, because she is Bumptious.’”

“Can’t you be sane for five minutes together, Moxon? If this matter is sport to you, remember it’s death to me.”

“Better give it up, Muiraven, and write instead. You can’t expect to go on at this rate and keep your senses. To go through all the towns in the United Kingdom, alphabetically, would ruin the finest mental constitution. Perhaps Mr. Walmsley could oblige us with a gazetteer.”

“I don’t keep such a thing at my office, sir.”

“Let’s try C, at all events, Moxon, and then I’ll think about writing the letter. Cambridge, Canterbury, Carlisle, Cardiff, Cheltenham, Chester, Chatham—”

“Caistor, Caribee Islands,” interposes Moxon.

“Chichester, Cornwall, Clifton,” goes on Muiraven, with silent contempt; “Croydon, Cocklebury—Holloa! Moxon (starting), *what’s that?*” as

a loud slam of the office-door interrupts his dreamy catalogue.

“Only that Walmsley has rushed out of the room as if the old gentleman were after him.”

“But what did I say?”

“Nothing that I know of. You were jabbering over your towns beginning with C.”

“But the word—the word—was it Croydon or Cocklebury? Don’t you understand? I have hit the right one at last! By Jove! what luck.” He is beaming all over, as he speaks, with *loye* and expectation.

“I suppose you must have; but I’m whipped if I know which it can be.”

“It’s Cocklebury. I’m sure it’s Cocklebury. It can’t be Croydon. No one who wanted to hide would go to Croydon. It must be Cocklebury?”

“And where the deuce is Cocklebury?”

“Down in Hampshire, the most out-of-the-way place in the world. I was there once for a few days’ fishing; but how the name came into my head beats me altogether. It was Providence or inspiration that put it there. But it’s all right now. I don’t care for anything else. I shall go down to Cocklebury to-night.” And leaping up from his chair, Muiraven commences to button his great-coat and draw on his gloves again preparatory to a start.

“Hum!” says Moxon: “You promised to see that man Cray to-night.”

“You can see him for me. You can tell him all I should have done. There is no personal feeling in the matter.”

“Cocklespillbury, or what ever its name is, being an obscure fishing hamlet, there is probably not another train to it to-day.”

“Oh, nonsense! there is a train—there must be a train—there *shall* be a train.”

“All right! And if not, you can have a special. Money’s no object.”

“Moxon, I always thought you were rather a well-meaning fellow; but it strikes me that you’ve not got much feeling in this matter.”

“I always thought you were a man of sense; but it strikes me that you’re going to make an ass of yourself.”

“Do you want to quarrel with me?” says Muiraven, grandly, as he steps opposite to his friend.

“Not in the least, my dear fellow; but if any thing could make us quarrel, it would be to see you acting with so little forethought.”

“Ah, Moxon, you don’t know what it is to—”

“To be the father of ‘a charming child,’ no;

but if I were, I am sure I should defer seeing him till to-morrow."

"Gentlemen, have you left off saying your A B C?" demands old Walmsley, as he puts his head in again at the door.

"My dear sir, I am so *much* obliged to you," exclaims Muiraven, seizing his hand with unnecessary warmth.

"I'm rejoiced to hear it, my lord; but what for?"

"For telling me Mrs. Mordaunt's address."

"I'm sure I never told you that. It's against all my principles to betray a client's confidence."

"But for slamming the door in that delightful manner. It comes to the same thing, you know. Cocklebury in Hampshire. There can't be two Cockleburys. And now I must be off to see if I can get a train down there to-night."

"I can satisfy you on that point, my lord. No train stopping at the nearest station to Cocklebury leaves town after two o'clock."

"The devil!" says Muiraven.

"Come, Muiraven, be reasonable. Keep your appointment with Cray this evening, and don't think of leaving London till to-morrow."

"He can't do it," interposes the solicitor, dryly.

"He is equal to any thing: he will bestride a forty-horse power bicycle if I don't prevent him," replies Moxon, laughing.

But Muiraven does not laugh. All the light seems to have faded out of his face.

"You are right, Moxon," he says, gloomily. "Take me home, and do what you will with me. I am worse than a child."

Old Walmsley sees them go with a sly chuckle and a rub of the hands.

"Hope I haven't departed from my principles," he thinks to himself; "but I couldn't have sent him away without it. Poor young thing. How it will brighten up her dull life to see him! And if it should come right at last—and it looks very much to me as if it *were* coming right—why—why, I hope they'll let me draw up the settlements—that's all."

Joel Cray's untutored mind is vastly astonished by the reception which he receives at Lord Muiraven's hands that evening.

"I hope you understand perfectly," says his host, when, after considerable difficulty, he has induced the rough creature to take a chair, and sit down beside him, "that I had no idea but that my wife had left me with another man, else I should have advertised openly for her, or set

the detective officers to find out her address. But I feared the discovery would only lead to an exposure of my own dishonor, and preferred the silent, solitary life I have adhered to since. Could I have known that Myra was still true to me, I would have risked every thing to place her in the position she had a right to claim."

"She was true to you, sir, and no mistake; for, I don't mind a-telling you now, that I tried hard to make her my wife; but 'twern't of no good. She allays stuck to it that she couldn't forget you; and till strength failed her, she was on her feet a-tramping after you."

"While I was out of the country, trying to forget the disgrace which I thought attached to me. Poor Myra!"

"She's dead and done with, sir. It's no use our a-pipin' nor a-quarrelin' over her any more."

"You speak very sensibly, Cray; but at the same time I am anxious to show you that I regret the past, and should like to make some amends for it, if possible. I cannot let any of Myra's relations want. You tell me you are going back to Priestley. What do you do there?"

"I'm a day-laborer, sir—my lord, I mean, with a touch of his hair.

"And your mother?"

"She takes in washin', my lord, and has five little 'uns to keep on it."

"It is those five little ones I wish to help her and you to maintain; so I have placed with my friend here, Mr. Moxon, who is a lawyer, two thousand pounds to be disposed of as you may think best; either placed in the bank to your credit, or laid out in the purchase of land, or in any way that may most conduce to your comfort."

"Two—thousand—pounds!" repeats Joel with drawn-out, incredulous wonder, as he rises from his chair.

"Yes! that will bring you in about sixty pounds a year; or if you expend it in a little farm—"

"Two—thousand—pounds!" reiterates the laborer slowly, "it ain't true, sir, surely!"

"I would not deceive you, Cray, I give it you, not as compensation for your cousin's blighted life, remember, but as a token that if I could I would have prevented her unhappiness. I loved her, Cray; didn't marry her to desert her. She deserted me."

Joel's dirty, horny hand comes forth, timidly, but steadily, to meet Muiraven's.

"May I do it, sir? God bless you for them words! They're better than all the money to me.

And if the poor gal can hear them too, I believe heaven looks the brighter to her. You're very good, sir. I asks your pardon, humbly, for all my bad thoughts toward you, and I hope as you'll get a good wife and a true wife yet. That'll be neither shame nor blame to you."

"Thank you, Cray. I hope before long you'll do the same, and teach your children that gentlemen have hearts sometimes as well as poorer men. I shall always take an interest in you and your doings, and my friend here will see that the money I spoke of is handed over to you as soon as you are ready to receive it."

"I don't know about the marrying, my lord," says Joel, sheepishly, "for it seems a troublous business at the best to me; but there'll be plenty of prayers going up for you from Priestley, and the worst I wishes for you is that they may bring you all the luck you deserve."

"And to think," he continues to himself as he returns to his own home, "that that there's the chap I swore by my poor gal's grave to bring to judgment for her wrongs!"

The eleven-o'clock train next day takes Muir-aven down to the nearest town to Cocklebury. All by himself: he has positively refused to travel any more in Moxon's company. Two hours bring him to the place, but there is no hotel there, only an old-fashioned inn, with raftered ceilings and diamond-shaped windows, called "The Coach and Horses," where our hero is compelled to put up and dine, while he sends a messenger over to Cocklebury. He has not come down-stairs, for he sat up late last night, writing a long detailed account to Mrs. Mordaunt of his early marriage and his wife's identity, so that the worst may be over before he and Irene meet again. And this letter, which winds up with an entreaty that he may go over at once to Cocklebury to see and claim his child, he dispatches as soon as possible to Irene's residence, striving meanwhile to beguile his impatience by an attempt to masticate the freshly-killed beef which the landlady of the "Coach and Horses" places before him, and which only results in his emptying the flask of cognac he has brought with him, and walking up and down the cold, musty-smelling, unused town, until he has nearly worked himself into a fever with impatience and suspense. How he pictures her feelings on opening that important packet! She will shed a few tears, perhaps, at first, poor darling, to learn he has ever stood in so close a relationship to any other woman; but they will soon dry up beneath the feverish delight with

which she will recognize the truth that he is once more free—that they are both free, at last, to love and comfort one another. Ah! that he could but be on the spot to comfort her now! What is this fool of a messenger about, not to return? It is not half a mile to Cocklebury! Why did he not go himself?

Peace! patience! He knows that he has done what is most right and proper in sending an *avant-courrier* to apprise her of his coming; and it will not—it cannot be long before he holds her in his arms again.

In his arms! God of heaven! how they tremble at the thought—in his arms!—that have seemed so many times to fold her sweet self against his heart, and closed upon the empty air instead! In his arms! *His darling—his Irene*—the one love of his life! He will kiss away her tears; he will pour his protestations of fidelity in her ear—he will have the right now to explain every thing—to atone for every thing—to offer her the rest of his existence as reparation for the past! And she—his injured angel—his dear, suffering martyr—what a vista of happiness will open out before her!—what a— Hark! what was that? A tap at the door.

"Come in! come in!"

His messenger has returned: the landlady appears before him holding forth an envelope.

"Give it me—at once!" He tears it from her hand, impetuously, and she says afterward, with some degree of umbrage, that the gentleman looked more like a hungry wolf at her, than a man who had had his dinner at the "Coach and Horses."

The room is dark and gloomy. He takes the precious letter to the window; his hand shakes, so that he can scarcely open it. At last! yes, it is her dear writing. Before he reads it he presses kisses on the senseless paper.

"MY DEAR LORD MUIRAVEN:

"I HAVE received your letter. I need not tell you that its contents were a great surprise to me. I was aware, from certain papers belonging to his mother, and confided to me after her death, that my adopted child was your son; but I was little prepared to hear that he had been born in wedlock. For his sake, I sincerely rejoice that it should be so. I can fully enter into your natural anxiety to claim and acknowledge him, and I will send him to you with as little delay as possible. But you must forgive me for declining your kind offer to visit me here, for I have literally seen no one since my dear husband's death, and feel quite unequal to the task of receiving visitors. If you

will be so good as to let me know how, and when Tommy is to join you, I will be careful to see your wishes are attended to.

"Believe me yours sincerely,
"IRENE MORDAUNT."

She will not see him—will not receive him at her house. What devil's charm is again at work to circumvent their meeting?

CHAPTER XIV.

It was no affectation of pique or sentiment, or even a morbid sensibility, that made Irene desirous her place of residence should be kept, for the present, a secret from her friends and relations. She was simply sick of the world, and the world's treatment of her; and felt as though she never should recover from this last shock unless she were left alone. She had tried so hard during her married life to do her duty, and win her husband's trust and confidence, that it was a bitter blow to find for her reward that he had not only suspected her virtue as no other man would have dared to do, but had left her for sole legacy a dishonored name—he, for whose sake she had trampled on her thorny love he believed her capable of cherishing, unmindful how much her shrinking flesh bled from the contact so long as she might carry her head erect, her conscience undefiled and pure. She did not realize the extent of the injury done to her fair fame until the grave had closed over the remains of Colonel Mordaunt. Until then her mind had been so much occupied with the grief his loss occasioned her, that it had had no time to dwell on the doubtful position in which she would be placed by the alteration of his will. But afterward she saw it! She read it in Oliver's indignation, Isabella's pity, and Mrs. Quekett's ill-concealed delight. Notwithstanding the good intentions of her sister-in-law and step-son, it hurt her pride that they should press on her as a free-will offering that which should have been her own by right. She could appreciate their affection, but yet it stung her bitterly. She could not remain at Fen Court, where she had reigned supreme, and where the power to reign to her life's end would have been too small a return for the sacrifices she had made there, as a visitor or even as a friend. And then the child—whom she had learned to love so much for his own sake—whom she regarded as a sacred, though unconscious trust, from Eric—who was

about the only creature left whom she could cling to—was she to part with him? Her name had been so cruelly associated with his, she could not keep him at Fen Court, nor even near it; nor should he be dependent on any one but herself or his own father for his maintenance; what alternative, then, remained to her (unless she separated from Tommy and meekly accepted the stigma cast upon them both) but to go away?

Irene was not a humble-spirited, long-suffering Griselda, quietly to accept the indignity that had been offered her: the very fact that her husband's suspicions were unfounded made her the more determined to show the world she snapped her fingers at them, and nothing should induce her to part with the child of her adoption except Muiraven's wishes. She did not feel these things so keenly before the will was read. Her heart had been softened by her last interview with Philip. She had felt so much for his distress, that her own had been, for the while, lost sight of. But when she heard herself defamed, and knew that every servant in her employ was made aware that he had suspected her, her pride rose uppermost: the firmness and decision which had made her what she was came to the front, and had the retention of Tommy Brown blasted the remainder of her life, she would have so blasted it. She had a right to keep the child—she had adopted him with her husband's full consent, and no power on earth but one should part them. She went to Laburnum Cottage, intending there quietly to think over and settle her plans. But when she came to consider, she felt that as long as Oliver knew where to find her, he would never leave her in peace. He would follow, and argue, and plead, and pray, until perhaps he fairly worried her into acting against her own conscience, and to be left in peace was her most ardent desire. She wanted time, and repose, and quiet to enable her to look her future—her blank, cheerless future—steadily in the face. For remember that for Irene still existed that mysterious, inexplicable barrier that had risen up, three years ago, between Muiraven and herself, and she had but one hope concerning him—that he would permit her to retain the guardianship of his, as yet unknown child. To compass the end she had in view, Irene felt her destination must be kept a secret. Her only chance of recovery lay in spending a few quiet months, until the first bitterness of her despair was over, and she had fixed upon her future course of life. Mrs. Cavendish was most anxious she should take lodgings at Sydenham, or remain with her at Laburnum Cottage

So close to London, she might renew acquaintanceship with all her old friends; and then the Crystal Palace, such an advantage! But the prospect of vicinity to flower-shows and cat-shows, concerts, pantomimes, and conjurers, seemed to hold out no charms to our poor heroine. She remained, as her aunt herself expressed it, "as obstinate as a pig," and put in her final claim to the character by going up to town one day with her child and her luggage, and thence writing to inform Mrs. Cavendish that she had fixed on, and was about to proceed to, a distant place, where she hoped and intended to remain *perdu*, and free from the innovations of all well-meaning friends until she should have somewhat recovered from the sudden shock of her late bereavement. But she did not refuse to communicate with her relations, and many letters on the subject passed between them through the mediumship of Mr. Walmsley.

It was strange how Cocklebury happened to become Irene's destination. She had thought of Winchester—indeed, she had gone down to Winchester, hearing it to be a dull, behind-the-world sort of old place, but had found the town fuller and more accessible than she anticipated, and passed on to a little village beyond. There she had experienced much difficulty in finding lodgings, and a certain landlady, in accounting for the want of her apartments, mentioned that they were in great demand. "For only yesterday, mum, a lady, as might be yourself, came over from Cocklebury, which is a good twenty-seven mile to the left of this, all in a flutter for rooms, and would have took these directly, only two wasn't enough for her."

Cocklebury! the name seemed familiar to her; where had she heard it before? She could not tell, and yet it reverberated on her heart as though it held a place there. Doubtless she had heard it in some desultory conversation with Lord Muiraven, but the remembrance had died away. Only from that cursory mention of the fishing-village grew out her final settlement there. She returned to Winchester, and began to make inquiries concerning Cocklebury, and, going to look at the desolate, retired little hole, found two tiny rooms to suit a quarterly balance of five-and-twenty pounds, and engaged them.

It was a dull, lowering autumn day when the young widow removed her boxes and her little boy to their new home. Who is it thinks the country charming all the year round? Many say so, but they belong chiefly to the unfortunate class whose health, business, or profit, renders

such a residence compulsory to them; and it is just as well to make the best of an incurable ill. But for those who are not thus compelled to dwell there! No one denies its advantages in fine weather, and no one can appreciate them like the man whose life is spent generally in the close atmosphere of town. There are moments when brain and body have been overworked, and speculations have failed, and the atmosphere reminds one of that fabulous pandemonium where we should like to consign all who have disappointed us; when the thought only of cool green fields, and waving boughs, and murmuring brooks, is enough to make us forswear brick walls, gas, hurry, dust, and lies, forever: but does it last? We rush to the green fields; we lounge beneath the waving boughs; we are deliciously lazy and useless, and altogether demoralized for a few days of complete inaction; and then the brain springs up again, the mind wants food, the fields pall, the trees pall, the waters pall; we demand men and women, and conversation: we are again sharpening the mental scythe with which we mow down our adversaries; and if it is beyond our power, or our principles, to rush back again pell-mell into the arena of business and of work, we begin to hate the monotony we are unaccustomed to! But what of the country—that paradise of city-men—in autumn and in winter; what of the leafless boughs, the filthy, muddy lanes, the barren gardens, the evenings spent, night after night, at home, with your next-door neighbor five miles away, and no resource but to read the papers till you go to sleep? A country-house always feels cold and damp in winter. If it is a large one, it has long corridors full of draughts; and if it is small, it possesses horrid glass doors which open to the garden, through which one sees a panorama of sodden leaves that makes one shudder to look at. People in the country, too, get in the habit of leaving all the doors open in summer, and do not get out of it as completely as they should do in the severer season. Generally speaking, also, their chimneys smoke, and their passages are not half lighted or warmed: and, altogether, give me a house in town. A cozy house at the West End—not too large, for size implies grandeur, and grandeur entails care; but well carpeted, well curtained, and sufficiently ~~convenient~~ mental, not to render it incommodious—a house where privacy and publicity are alike attainable—where each and every one is free to come or to go—where the only rules are one's own inclinations, and the only rest a change of occupation.

Light it well, warm it thoroughly, maintain it

with an income not large enough to render work unnecessary, fill it with the daily food required by the nineteenth-century intellect, place in it the people you love best—but no! I won't go on. Could I conjure up such a lot as that, I should never want to go to heaven!

Fancy such a house on a dark winter's evening: bright, light, and warm, filled with the sound of wit and laughter, the voice of music, the deeper tones of argument; or, if such things are not forthcoming (and with continuity even their glory would depart), why, "*Let's go to the theatre!*"

A blessing upon blissful ignorance! If every one knew and felt these things as we do, who would live in the country? And it's quite impossible that we can all live in town. I begin to wish I had not said any thing about it.

Poor Irene felt it terribly when she first went down to Cocklebury. Imagine turning out of a place like Fen Court, where she had been enjoying an income of several thousands, to begin life anew on a hundred pounds, a year, in two meagre little rooms in an ill-built cottage in the country! She had no heart left, poor girl, with which to bear it bravely, and she felt as downcast and humiliated as though she were really guilty of what she had been accused. Master Tommy, too, did not tend to lighten her burden at this particular moment. Children, as a rule, do not take kindly to any violent changes; and this young gentleman's character had developed in a marvelous way of late. He had no recollection left now of his mother nor the poverty in which he had been reared; but quite thought—if ever he thought at all—that he was Irene's child, and the luxuries of Fen Court had always been his own. He liked to sleep in his mamma's bed, and was proud that she should wash and dress him instead of Phœbe; but he grumbled dreadfully at the loss of his pleasures, and the inconveniences he was forced to undergo. "I don't like that ugly basin!" he would say, the first thing in the morning. "I won't be washed in it, mamma! It is like a servant's basin. I want the pretty one I used to have with the little roses on it. And why can't I have jam for breakfast now? Where is the jam we had at Priestley? why couldn't you bring it away with us, mamma? I don't like this new place. There is no garden here to run in, and no carriage, and the woman has no donkey—and when I asked her why she had no donkey, she said, if I wanted all those things, why did I come to Cocklebury?"

"O Tommy! you mustn't talk like that. What did you say to her?"

"I told her not to speak to me that I'm a gentleman and the master of the fox-hounds, and I shall go back to the Court and get my donkey. Let us go back to-day, mamma! I don't like this nasty place; there are only cabbages in the garden."

"My darling!" said Irene, as she took the child upon her lap, "you wouldn't like to go away from your mamma—would you?"

"No! You must come, too."

"I can't go, Tommy. I am never going back to the Court again, and my little boy must try to be happy here."

"Don't cry, mamma! I will be happy. I will get the little broom and sweep up all the crumbs. I like doing that much better than the donkey. And I will get your boots, and put them inside the fender, and then they will be warm when you go out walking. And I—I—" continued the child, looking all round the room to see what he could do, "and I will do lots of things, mamma, if you don't cry." And then he would bring his mite of a pocket-handkerchief, and scrub her eyes until he had made her laugh in spite of herself, and think, while this affection was spared to her, she could never be entirely unhappy. But a hundred pounds a year is *very, very* little on which to keep two people—it is hardly enough to feed them. With clothing they were, of course, amply stocked; but Irene (who was any thing but ignorant of the value of money) found it hard enough to provide herself and the child with the common necessities of life, even in such an out-of-the-way place as Cocklebury.

It was a wonderful little village, dedicated, apparently, to the nurture of old maids—who, one and all, called upon Mrs. Mordaunt and offered their assistance to her; but, though she was no ungracious, she declined all advances. She was not going to have it said afterward by these rituous maidens that she came among them upon false pretenses; and if they had but known, etc. etc.

She could imagine, if any rumors of her unfortunate story reached their ears, how they would turn up their virginal noses at her and a poor little Tommy, and declare they had suspected it from the very first. So she kept to herself in those miserable little lodgings, and made them all the duller and less pleasant for the fact. She was devoted to the child—to his baby-lessons and baby-pleasures, and waited on him like a faithful nurse from morning until night. She knew that it could not be long now before Lord Muiraven returned to England; and then, if she

kept to her resolution, she must inform him of his son's existence: but she still cherished the hope that he would not deprive her of him. She felt so desperate in her loneliness, that she meant to throw herself on his compassion, and entreat him not to take the boy away, but let her bring him up, as she had designed to do, and feel that she had something left still to render the future not all dark to her. And so she has been living for nearly four months when Muiraven lands at the "Coach and Horses," and dispatches his messenger with the intelligence that is to shatter all her hopes. It is a cold day in January: the air is keen and frosty, and the ponds about Cocklebury are frozen over. Irene has just come in from a long walk with her little man, who is very anxious—like all high-spirited children—to be allowed to go on the ice and slide; and she has been at some pains to explain to him how dangerous sliding is, and how some little boys tumble down and break their noses, and others tumble in and are drowned. But her dreadful stories do not appear to have much effect on Tommy.

"I wouldn't be drowned!" he says, confidently. "I would get out of the hole again, and run back as quick as I could to my mamma."

"And your mamma would give you a good whipping for being such a naughty boy," returns Irene, laughing, as she divests him of his comforter and warm coat. "No, Tommy, darling, I've got something much nicer for you than sliding on the ice. Guess what it is!"

"A pudding!" says Tommy.

"Yes! a pudding for dinner—a nice little round pudding stuck full of plums, all for yourself. Make haste and brush your hair and come and eat it."

The child has already forgotten the luxuries of Fen Court, and is as eager and excited over the pudding "stuck full of plums" as though pudding had never been an every-day occurrence. And yet Irene had to think twice before she ordered it for him.

It is two o'clock, their dinner-hour, and when the meat is removed, she sits by the fire and watches the young, rosy-cheeked rebel gormandizing his pudding, and feels quite happy and content to do so. She has so identified herself of late with this child—so accommodated her conversation and ideas to his, and schooled herself to believe that there exists no one else in the world for her but him, that she is beginning to feel lonely when he is out of her sight. So she sits by, smiling while he eats and talks to her,

when Muiraven's letter is put into her hand. The recognition of the writing makes her tremble; but, when she has opened and read it, the news which it conveys makes her tremble still more.

She cannot believe it—Muiraven close at hand, ready to come at once and claim his child—his child, born in lawful wedlock, and heir to his titles and estates—*her child*, which under these circumstances she can never hope to be allowed to keep. *Her child*, who for the last two years she has brought up and nourished as her own, and grown to love as she believes that she could never love another, to be taken away—to be reared, educated, and sent forth into the world without her having the right to offer even an opinion on the subject! She reads through the letter twice, and then she gets up, and, walking blindly into the adjoining room, throws herself upon the bed in a paroxysm of despair.

Oh, it is too hard! it is too bitterly, cruelly hard, that this too should come upon her! that, turn where she will, God will not leave one loophole by which she can escape from utter desolation! She is weary of it all—this continued struggle with misfortune—this fighting against Fate, which only results in bruises and heart-sickness. She throws up the game—she will strive no more—she will never attempt to build up another affection for herself. Let him take his child and rear it as he will—the farther away, the better, for she will never trust herself to see him or to think of him again. He *was* hers, and he *is* Muiraven's. His father must accept the entire responsibility of him henceforth, for she cannot halve nor share him—she must have him altogether, or not at all!

"Mamma—mamma! may I have the rest of the pudding?" The piping voice is close by her side, and the little hand is pulling sturdily at her petticoats.

She raises herself languidly and looks at him—at the dark-blue eyes, the waving hair, the *tout ensemble* so like the man whose love has spoiled her life. But this is no longer the little out-cast—the poor, nameless, base-born child, whom, spite of evil tongues, she has so fondly cherished. It is the heir presumptive to one of the oldest earldoms in England that stands before her—the hope of a noble house—the legitimate son of the Right Honorable the Lord Viscount Muiraven—the—the—*Honorable Thomas Keir*.

At the thought, miserable as she is, she laughs. The Honorable Thomas is reassured.

"Mamma! I want more pudding. Your

little Tommay-boy wants more pudding!" he repeats confidently, reading acquiescence in the nervous sound.

"You are not my little Tommy-boy," she commences bravely—but her memory, like a dark wave, sweeps over her and blots out all her courage.

"Oh! I cannot—I cannot part with you!" she cries, vehemently, and thereupon becomes horribly feminine and goes off into a burst of hysterics. The sobbing and the shrill laughter penetrate to the lower regions and bring up the landlady, with, to use her own expression, "her heart in her mouth."

"Lord sakes, my dear lady; and whatever is the matter? there's the poor young gentleman frightened out of his senses, and the messenger below-stairs waiting for an answer, which, he says, he had orders to go back to the 'Coach and Horses' as soon as possible."

In a moment Irene is herself again.

"Oh! I am so sorry—I am so grieved! I must have overwalked myself.—Tommy, my darling, don't look so frightened; naughty mamma is well again now. Go and eat your pudding, my child.—And, Mrs. Wells, if you will come up again in—in—ten minutes, the letter shall be ready for the messenger."

She drags herself off the bed as she speaks, and dashes her face in cold water, and will not give herself time to think. She is ashamed of her weakness in breaking down before a servant and a child.

The Hon. Tommy, reinstated in his chair, and consuming the remainder of the pudding, as though nothing had happened to disturb his pleasure, affords her the leisure she requires once more to peruse Muiraven's letter. There is no question about what she must do; there is no option permitted her of judgment or choice; she is simply required to give up the child to his rightful guardian, and, whatever it cost her, he must go! But she cannot meet Muiraven. Every misery of her life is connected with this man; he may even have been told the stigma that rests upon her for his sake. She feels as if she should sink into the earth with shame if she should see him. She is sore still and quivering from the effect of the constant shafts Fate loves to drive at her: her flesh and spirit alike recoil from the idea of discovering her misery to him—or receiving his sympathy and condolences. What good can his friendship do her? Each time they meet increases the pain of parting. It has pleased Providence to strip her of every thing. Let it do

its worst. She gives up love, friendship, all—thenceforward she will live and die—alone. So she sits down and pens the note which has been already given to my readers; which tells Muiraven that the child shall be sent to him when and in what manner he may choose to intimate, but that she is as yet too little recovered from her late bereavement to permit of her receiving visitors.

Muiraven does not know what to make of her letter. He supposes that, having informed Irene that her adopted child is the result of an imprudent marriage between himself and the laundress's niece, and that he has but lately come to a knowledge of the truth, is sufficient of itself to convince her that *this* was the obstacle which prevented him from coming forward as a suitor for her own hand. But the fact is, our heroine had never associated that obstacle with the idea of any early entanglement, and was so occupied with the principal object of his letter, namely, his intention to reclaim the child, that she never guessed that Myra's death had broken down the barrier between them. She only remembered that the man who had assured her, six short months ago, that nothing short of the impossibility of their union would have made him behave as he had done, and who was likely to prove a far more dangerous friend in her present condition than he had been before, desired a personal interview with her in order to deprive her of her last pleasure, and she could not grant it him.

She could not stand face to face with Ed Keir (as in her heart she always termed him), and cover the desolation of her spirit with a smile. And so she would rather not look upon his face at all.

But he is an impetuous, energetic sort of a fellow, whose patience does not rank among his highest virtues, and he can conceive no reason for Irene's reticence, except that she has ceased to care for him. Perhaps she never *did* care for him. Perhaps she mistook her feelings all along, and her real affection had, after all, been given to this immaculate Colonel Mordaunt, the remembrance of whose excellences, after four months' burial, was still so redolent of sanctity as to forbid her showing ordinary politeness to an old friend who had traveled so far to see her. It was such a horrid time of the year, too! Added to being obliged to put up with all the *desagrédos* of such a God-forsaken hovel as the "Coach and Horses."

Upon his word! what, in the way of sacrifice does Mrs. Mordaunt require further? But women

are so exigent, the more you do for them the more they want. When he was beyond her reach, she appeared all devotion to him; now that she can have him any day, he supposes she will keep him philandering after her for ten years before she will make up her mind to take him or to leave him!

Why on earth can't he forget her and have done with it? Hasn't he had enough of women, that the moment he finds he has got out of one scrape with the sex, he must do his best to plunge into another?

So he says, and so he swears, as he marches incontinently up and down the parlor of the "Coach and Horses," wearing out his temper and his shoe-leather to no avail.

At first he resolves he will go over to Cocklebury himself to-night, and try if he can see Irene, but, on second thoughts, he abandons the idea. After her note it would not be kind—it would hardly be gentlemanly to attempt to violate her privacy so soon. He will wait till to-morrow to storm the citadel in person. Meanwhile he goes to bed, sleeps but indifferently, and is up at a most unusual hour for him the next morning, making great havoc (notwithstanding his anxiety) in the breakfast his landlady has provided for him, before he turns out in the cold, frosty air, and takes his way toward Cocklebury.

Irene, too, gets little rest that night. There is nothing like a sore heart or an anxious mind for keeping one awake. It beats green tea hollow. She had sat up till a late hour the evening before, looking over and arranging Tommy's wardrobe, and dropping hot tears upon each little article which she had ordered and planned, if not made with her own hands, before she laid it in the box which is to accompany him upon his journey. And, when every thing is ready for his departure, she crept into bed and took the rosy child into her arms, and watched until dawn, by the flickering night-light, the dark curly head of hair that rose and fell with the heaving of her bosom, only using her free hand every now and then to wipe away the tears that coursed down her face. Her restlessness, perhaps, or the instinctive knowledge that he is watched, makes Tommy wake early. She is generally the one to be roused by his imperative demands for stories or breakfast, and the first thing he does now, as consciousness returns to him, is to pat her cheek with his little hand.

"Mamma, mamma! wake up and tell Tommy-boy about Elisha and the big bears."

But he is surprised to find on this occasion that his mamma does not require to have her eyes violently picked open before she complies with his request, but commences at once, in an unusually low and subdued voice, to relate all his favorite tales, and does not discontinue until the dark January morning has resolved itself into something like daylight, and the child becomes eager to get up and be dressed.

Irene would like to postpone the moment of rising; she feels, with a shudder, that this may be the last time she shall ever hold her adopted darling in her arms, but the young tyrant's orders are imperative; in fact, he won't lie still any longer.

"There are beautiful little ice trees all over the windows, mamma, and I made a nice warm house for three of my snails under a cabbage-leaf yesterday, and I want to see if they're happy and comfortable. Dress me quick, mamma, and let me go into the garden and look for my snails, and if they feel cold I shall bring them all in and warm them by the fire."

She rises languidly and puts a match to her fire, and washes and dresses Muiraven's child as if she had been his nurse-maid. She, who was the belle of the London season, who has been the envied mistress of Fen Court, kneels, shivering in her dressing-gown on that winter's morning, and waits as humbly as a hireling, as lovingly as a mother, on her lover's heir. She buttons up his boots, still muddy from the dirt of yesterday, and carefully wraps over the great-coat and the comforter upon his little chest. And then she takes his chubby cheeks between her hands and kisses them fervently over and over again, and lets him out of the sitting-room door with a caution to Mrs. Wells to see him safe into the garden, and goes back to her bedroom, and cries quietly to herself with her face buried in the pillow.

God only knows what it is for a mother to part with a child, whether hers by right or by adoption. We talk a great deal about the "divine passion," but there is no divinity in an affection based on selfishness; and love, in its ordinary sense (that is, passion), has but one desire—to secure the object for itself. Whereas a mother knows from the commencement that she brings up her child for another. And it is that reason, perhaps, that makes maternal love so generous and expansive that, where it is true, it can afford to extend itself even to those whom its child holds dear. It is the only unselfish love the world can boast of. It is, therefore, the only passion that can claim a title to divinity.

Irene feels all this, even as she cries. She is miserable at the thought of parting with the child, but she would not advance one argument in her own favor that should deprive his father or himself of the enjoyment of their natural rights. She only hopes that, as it *must be*, it will be soon over, and herself put out of the misery of anticipation. She lies on her bed for some time, lost in thought, and then, hearing the clatter of cups and saucers in the adjoining room, starts up to find that it is nine o'clock, and she has not yet commenced to dress.

There is no particular hurry, however, and she makes a dawdling, untidy sort of toilet (women never care about their appearance when they are miserable), wondering the while how soon Muiraven's messenger will return with the answer to her letter. When she enters the sitting-room the breakfast has been laid and the little black kettle is boiling over on the fire. She makes the tea, and glances indifferently at the time. A quarter to ten! She had no idea it was so late. How cold and hungry her child will be!

She throws open the door at once, and, advancing to the head of the stairs, calls—

"Tommy!—Tommy!" in a loud voice; but no one answers her.

"Tommy, darling!" she repeats; "breakfast is ready. Make haste, and come in." Still there is no reply. He must be digging at the bottom of the long slip of uncultivated ground he calls the garden.

Irene walks down-stairs, and stands at the open back door, with the cold, frosty air playing about the long, rippling hair that lies upon her shoulders. "Tommy! I want you. Come and have your breakfast," she repeats; but the child is neither to be seen nor heard.

"Mrs. Wells!" from the top of the kitchen-stairs, "is master Tommy with you?"

"Bless you, no, ma'am. Ain't he a-gamboling at the back?"

"I can't see him anywhere."

"I'm sure he was there half an hour ago."

"He must have run down the road. How naughty of him! What shall I do?"

"I'll send my Charley after him, ma'am. He'll bring him 'ome in no time.—Here, Charley, jest you get up, and go after the young gentleman, and bring him back to his breakfast. Now, look sharp, will you?"

"All right! Which way be I to go?"

"Why, both ways, in course. Go down to the village first. I dare say he's run off to the sweet-shop. He said he'd a mind to yesterday."

"How tiresome of him!" says Irene, but without any alarm. (What harm could come to a sturdy fellow like Tommy on a broad country road?) "I'm sorry to give you the trouble, Mrs. Wells; but he really is *such* a child!"

"You'll have your poor hands full with him before another twelvemonth's over, ma'am; and that's the truth," replies the woman, good-temperedly; and Irene's face blanches as she walks back to the sitting-room and remembers that before twelve hours are over she will probably have nothing more to do with her troublesome little darling.

Lord Muiraven finds the walk to Cocklebury pleasanter than he anticipated. There is something so exhilarating in the air of a keen frosty morning that our troubles are apt to appear smaller or more bearable beneath its influence; and, as he traverses the short distance that lies between him and Irene, the probability of seeing her again is of itself sufficient to make the world look brighter to him. He recalls their early affection, and the interviews they had at Fen Court, and, being gifted with as much capability of self-appreciation as the generality of his sex, feels almost confident of his power to overcome, by argument or persuasion, whatever scruples may have dictated her last letter to him. The leafless hedges either side the road are garnished with hoar-frost, the ground beneath his feet springs crisp and cheerily; and as Muiraven, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar between his teeth, strides quickly along, he is in Cocklebury before he knows it. On the outskirts of the village lie several farm-houses, with their surrounding meadows—in one of which, close to the road, is a large pond, just frozen over with a two days' frost.

"Halloa!" he thinks, as his eye falls upon it; "that looks well. Another couple such nights as the last, and it will bear. By Jove, though, that won't do;" and, coming suddenly to a stand-still, he regards something over the hedge. The object that has attracted his attention is the figure of a child, none other, indeed, than the recreant Tommy, who, having escaped from the cabbage-garden and the snails, has bethought him of revisiting the pond which excited his envy so much the day before. On he plods steadily through the wet grass, with footsteps evidently bent on trying the treacherous ice. Muiraven for the first moment sees only a child in danger of a ducking, and calls out a loud warning from where he stands; and his voice, although unheeded, has the effect of making Tommy raise his head before

he steps upon the ice. As he does so, he is recognized.

The fearless, saucy little face, the wide-open eyes, the curling hair, no less than the high-bred air of the child, and the manner in which he is attired, all combine to make Muiraven recognize his son, and as he does so, and realizes his probable danger, an anxious dread which has never had covert there before, rises up in his heart and makes him feel that he is a father. Without a moment's hesitation, he leaps over the field-gate, and runs through the grass to save the child. But Tommy is not to be outdone. He sees that he is pursued, guesses his sport is to be spoilt, and, with all the energy that has characterized the Norham blood for so many generations past, determines that he will not be punished for nothing. One slide he will have first—one delicious, dangerous slide, as he has seen the boys of the village take down the frozen gutters; so, running defiantly on to the forbidden playground, he sets his darling little legs as wide apart as possible, and goes gallantly down the pond—only for about a hundred yards, however, when, meeting with some obstacle, his equilibrium is disturbed; he tumbles head over heels, and in another moment is floundering among the broken ice. Muiraven, arrived at the brink of the pond, with all the haste he can walk straight in after him, crushing and dispersing the ice right and left as he goes.

The water is not deep, and the child is easily recovered, but as Muiraven brings him to the bank he is frightened to perceive he does not stir.

His eyes are closed, his mouth is half open, and from a cut across his forehead the blood is trickling down his face in a thin red stream.

The father's heart stands still.

What is the matter? What on earth should have occasioned this? Can he be dead?

He folds the boy closer in his arms as the horrible thought strikes him, and hurries onward to the village. The dripping state of Tommy's clothes and his own nether garments, wet up to the thighs, excite the curiosity of the Cockleburians, and he is soon surrounded by a little crowd of men and women all ready and anxious to direct him to Irene's lodgings.

"Is there a doctor here?" he demands hurriedly.

"Bless you, no, sir. We've no parish doctor nearer than the town; and he only comes over Mondays and Thursdays."

"Run on, then—any of you—as quick as you

can to Mrs. Mordaunt, and tell her to have hot water and blankets ready for the child."

In his anxiety for Tommy's well-doing, Muiraven does not consider the agony with which his intelligence will be received by Irene, and half a dozen villagers, eager for a reward, tear helter-skelter into Mrs. Wells's presence, to tell her "the young gentleman's been drowned, and she's to get a hot bath ready to put him in."

Irene, who is getting fidgety about the child's continued absence, is standing in the staircase when the message is delivered. It strikes upon her heart like a bolt of ice.

"What!" she says in a voice of horror. "What?"

"Oh, my dear lady, don't take on!" exclaims Mrs. Wells, wringing her hands and "taking on," herself as much as is possible on so short a notice; "but the poor dear child has got hisself in the pond, they're a-bringing him 'ome to 'you. Lord a' mercy! but here they are!"

Irene does not scream—she does not even speak; but all the color forsakes her face as she stands there for a moment, with her hand pressed on her heart, as though, till that chooses to go on again, she could neither think nor act. Then she makes one or two feeble steps forward to meet Muiraven, who comes quickly up the narrow, creaking staircase with the boy in his arms.

"Give—give—" she says faintly, as she encounters him, and, without a word of explanation, she presses his unconscious burden to her breast.

She carries it, slowly but firmly, to the light, and then sinks down upon the floor in a kneeling posture, with the child stretched across her knees.

"Oh, my lamb!—my own lamb!" she cries, in a voice of anguish that might pierce the heavens, "no one has the power to take you from me now!"

And Muiraven, standing by her, hears the words.

"Mamma," says Tommy, languidly, as though in answer to her appeal—"don't cry, mamma."

Irene stares at the child. His eyes are open—a faint color is returning to his lips—he is once more conscious. She screams with joy.

"He is not dead!" with rapid utterance. "Who said he was drowned? Look!—he smiles—he speaks to me.—Oh! my child—my baby—my own darling! God could not have had the heart to take you away."

And thereupon she reeks him backward and forward violently in her arms, and cries a plentiful shower of tears above him that relieves her excited brain.

"Lor' bless you, my dear lady," says the sympathizing Mrs. Wells, "the dear young gentleman's no more drowned than I am! See how he's a-trying to raise hisself, the pretty dear! Let me take him from you, ma'am. He must be a deal too heavy for your arms."

"Let me place him in the bed," says Muiraven, gently.

"No! no! I am quite able to carry him," Irene answers, staggering to her feet. "Mrs. Wells, let me have the hot bath at once, or he may take a chill.—Make up the fire, Susan, and boil his bread-and-milk.—And mamma will undress you, Tommy," she continues, in soft, cooing accents to the child. "Mamma will take all these wet clothes off her little Tommy-boy, and put him in a nice warm bed, and tell him stories all day long. Oh, my love! my baby!—what should I have done if I had lost you!"

And so, murmuring, she passes with her burden from Muiraven's view into the adjoining apartment, whence he is made cognizant, without partaking of the nursery mysteries that ensue, and result in Master Tommy being tucked up very dry and warm and comfortable in bed, and apparently without any more injury than is conveyed by a strip of diachylon-plaster across his forehead.

It is nearly an hour before Irene appears again, and Muiraven cannot help thinking she has made her absence longer than was necessary. As she enters the sitting-room she looks pale, harassed, and weary. All her fire has departed, to be replaced by a nervous tremor that will hardly permit her to look him in the face.

He meets her, holding out his hand.

"At last, I suppose I may say, Mrs. Mordaunt, that I hope I see you well."

"I am afraid I must have appeared very rude," she stammers; "but the shock—the fright of this accident—"

"Pray don't think it necessary to apologize. I can make every allowance for your forgetfulness. It is fortunate I was on the spot."

"Then it was you! I have heard nothing, remember. I have had no time even to inquire."

"Oh, it was undoubtedly me. I was taking a constitutional along the Coeklebury high-road this morning, when I came upon the young rebel about to make an experiment in sliding. I shouted to him to stop; but it was no use. He would have his own way, so I had to go after him. It's lucky the water was not very deep nor the ice very strong, or I might not have fished him out in time. As it was, breaking the ice head-fore-

most stunned him; and had there not been help at hand, I don't suppose you would have seen the young gentleman again."

He speaks indifferently, as though the matter were not of much consequence to either of them; but she is trembling all over with gratitude.

"Oh, how can I thank you sufficiently!—how can I say all I feel at the child's recovery! I shall never forget it as long as I live." Then she remembers that the boy is his, and not hers, and blushes at what may seem presumption.

"You must be very thankful too," she adds, timidly.

"Oh, of course—of course," he says, turning away.

He is so bitterly disappointed at her reception of him. It seems as though she had forgotten every thing that has ever taken place between them. But it is coming back upon her now only too vividly.

"I—I—have not offered you any thing, Lord Muiraven," she says, glancing at the teapot and the toast-rack. "Have you breakfasted?"

"Yes—thanks."

"Won't you take another cup of tea or a glass of wine?"

"I don't care for wine so early; but, if I might venture to ask—if you have such a thing in the house as a little brandy?"

His teeth chatter as he speaks. She looks up quickly.

"Are you not well?"

"I feel slightly chilled—rather *damp* about the extremities, in fact."

She glances at his habiliments, and sees with horror that his trousers are soaked through up to the waist.

"Good Heavens! Lord Muiraven. How did that happen? Did you—you—fall in too?"

"Not exactly; but you can hardly expect a man to fish a child out of four feet of iced water and keep warm and dry at the same time."

"And I never thought to ask if you required any thing!"

Her face turns red with shame, and with a deeper feeling, that is half self-reproach and half anxiety lest he should come to harm through her neglect.

"Oh, never mind me," he answers, laconically. "I shall do well enough; and I didn't expect that you would think about it."

"Lord Muiraven, please don't say that. What can I do for you now? You ought not to remain in those wet clothes. I know it is very danger-

jus. Shall I send a man to the 'Coach and Horses' for a change?"

"No, thank you. I think I'd better walk back myself. If you will give me a glass of brandy—" But he is shivering as he speaks.

She flies to the bell all excitement and eagerness again, and orders the servant to bring what he desires.

"But that is not sufficient!" she exclaims as he drinks the brandy—"I am sure that is not sufficient. And I am so helpless to do more for you. Lord Muiraven, *do* go home! It seems inhospitable to say so; but I am sure it will be the safest thing to do. Go and get dry clothes on you at once—oh! how you are trembling!—and go to bed, or do any thing that is necessary. You should take care of yourself for—everybody's sake."

He turns and looks at her.

"If I go, may I come again?"

"For the child?"—nervously. "Oh, yes, of course; but he had better wait until to-morrow now, had he not?"

"I should not think of moving him to-day. Till to-morrow, certainly; and perhaps I shall see you before then. Good-morning."

He walks down-stairs almost abruptly, and leaves her to herself. As soon as he is gone she sits down and drinks her tea, and feels as though she had but just wakened from some fearful midnight dream to find that it was morning.

Tommy sleeps quietly for half the day, and is miraculously good the other half. The cut upon his forehead has made his head ache, and he is disinclined for any thing but to lie still and hear Irene read to him; and when he is wearied of that, and closes his eyes in sleep, she sits beside him offering up thanks to Heaven for his preservation, and thinking, not without some qualms of self-reproach, of the man whose claims to sympathy she had almost ignored in her alarm about his son, but who is nevertheless, though she will not acknowledge it, ten thousand times dearer to her than Tommy can ever hope to be. As she sits in the darkened room recalling his features and the sad air with which he greeted her, her heart pleads for him and for herself; and she speaks his name in a fond low whisper, while she entreats him not to think hardly of her for her reception of him. "If you only knew, Eric!—if you only knew!" she keeps on repeating, until her fancied colloquy resolves itself into tears.

In the evening, when Tommy has finished his tea, sitting wrapped up in a shawl upon her knee

by the drawing-room fire, and has been carried back to bed again, her heart leaps to hear Muiraven's step upon the stairs. "How foolish of me," she thinks, as she bolts into the bedroom to recover herself, "when we shall never, never be any thing but friends. O Eric! O, my love!" And then she falls to kissing Tommy till she nearly wakes him up again.

"Mrs. Mordaunt!" says Muiraven through the half-closed door.

"I am coming, Lord Muiraven!" And in a minute she appears before him. "I hope you have taken no harm from your immersion this morning. I have been reproaching myself for my carelessness ever since; but I never thought that you were wet."

"Pray don't think about it again. I am all right. How is the boy?"

"Quite well, thank you. He is asleep. Would you like to see him?" She leads the way into the next room, and they stand beside the bed together looking at the sleeping child. Presently Muiraven stoops down, and kisses him upon the forehead.

"Poor little chap!" he says, softly.

"Lucky little chap, you mean," replies Irene, speaking far more cheerfully than she feels.

"To have you to love him and look after him. Yes."

"He will not have that long. By-the-way, Lord Muiraven," as they return to the sitting-room, "please tell me—I would rather know at once—are you going to take him away to-morrow or the next day?"

"I don't want to take him away at all."

"But under the circumstances, considering that he is—"

"Do you love him very much, Irene?"

"O Lord Muiraven, you need not ask me that! You know—you *must* know—" Tears prevent her finishing the sentence.

"Then keep the child. I have no wish to part you."

She looks up in astonishment with sweet, wet eyes that make him tremble with eagerness to fold her in his arms; but he only moves his chair a little nearer to her own.

"Keep him! But how can I, knowing he is your lawful son? It could not be for long, you see; in a very few years his education, his welfare, his station in life, every thing would combine to part us; and I—forgive me for saying so—but I have had so many partings, I feel as if I could not undergo another. No; it is best it should be as you first intended. He is your heir.

Take him away, and rear him to be a comfort to you. I have no longer lot nor part in him."

"Irene! Irene! I cannot bear these tears."

"I am very weak to let them flow. I didn't mean it; but you know how hard it is for a woman to restrain them. Don't let us discuss the matter any more. His clothes are all packed and ready to go, and I—I am ready to resign him."

"You love him almost as well as if you were his mother."

"I think almost as well."

"You have kept and looked after him for two long years, during which, without your care he might have died; and do you think that I will part you now? Never! Irene, you have acted as a mother toward my child. Don't give him up. Be his real mother now."

He has come quite close to her, and got possession of her hand; but the face she turns to his is pained with doubt and misconception.

"Eric, what do you mean?"

"I mean that the barrier that has spoiled both our loves is broken down, Irene: that you and I are free to love."

"Good God!"

"Have you not guessed it? Don't you not understand that the obstacle that kept me years ago from asking you to be my wife was this same marriage-tie which was broken, but not disannulled; which from shame I had kept a secret from the world and my own father, and dared not divulge even to yourself? And can you wonder, after what has passed between us, that, finding myself once more free, you find me here?"

He has clasped both arms around her waist, and flung himself upon the ground before her; and she has placed her hands upon his hair, and, with blurred and misty sight, is gazing blindly into the depths of the violet eyes that are fixed so passionately upon her own.

"Irene, my darling, my angel, answer me. Are you to be mine?"

"Yours?" she says, dreamingly.

"Yes, mine—my wife—my very own forever! Think of the years I have been waiting for this happiness, and don't keep me in suspense."

But she startles him by suddenly leaping from her chair like one possessed.

"Oh, I never thought! I never dreamed," she says rapidly, in a kind of feverish delirium, "that it was *that* that separated us.—Tommy, Tommy, we shall never part again!" and thereupon she leaves her lover standing by himself, and, running to the next room, falls weeping on his child.

Muiraven, with a comical look of disappointment on his face, follows and stands beside her.

"I've not had an answer to my question," he says, presently.

She turns in all her frank, glowing womanhood, and throws herself into his arms.

"O Eric!" she sighs contentedly, "what need of answer? *Why have I loved this child?*"

Have you ever watched the process of knitting one of your own socks? I appeal, of course, to my masculine readers. If you have, I am sure it appeared a very incomprehensible sort of business to you, and, until the work came to an end, and the sock appeared in its proper person, you would have been puzzled to decide how on earth it was ever going to turn into a sock at all. The first few rows, with the exception of a stitch added here or decreased there, go smoothly enough; but when it comes to the toe and heel crisis it is apparently all inextricable confusion, until the last stitch is knitted and the worker *casts off*. Knitting a sock and unraveling the plot of a sensational novel, are two very similar things. It has been difficult at times, I dare say, to trace the reason of some of the actions in this present story, and the "toe and heel crisis" was, I think, a "regular stumper;" but I trust that all has been explained to the satisfaction of the reader. And now the last stitch is knitted, and I am about to cast off, I should like to leave my tale just where it is, and my hero and heroine just where they are; for, since anticipation is invariably better than reality, I am sure they have reached their climax of happiness. But there are other people connected with this story, in whom perhaps some interest may have been awakened, and therefore I will throw myself into the highest condition (all novelists are clairvoyants), and tell you what I see happening in a year to come.

Oliver Mordaunt is living at Fen Court with his aunt Isabella, and they really get on wonderfully together. Since Irene has lived at Berwick Castle he has conquered his antipathy to holding Colonel Mordaunt's property; yet he declares that he shall never marry, but leave it to his eldest son. *Nous verrons*. Doubtless it is not the first vow that Fen Court has seen registered and broken. One thing is certain, however, Mrs. Quekett's baneful presence will darken its walls no more. The house-keeper is still living upon her dear Lady Baldwin, and other fashionable patronesses, of whose secrets she has become possessed, and will not let them forget the circum-

stance. Painful as the revelation of his birth proved to him, Oliver would not take back his former ignorance, were it to be coupled with a servant's tyranny. He has laid that ghost, once and forever, for the Leicestershire Mordaunts.

Joel Cray is married, and the possessor of a very neat little farm on the outskirts of Priestley, where his mother and her family live with him. His love for his cousin was true enough while it lasted; but, with the discovery that she had not been more wronged than her husband, some of his chivalry died out. Does that fact lower him in the opinion of my readers? He had a large and generous heart—why should its affections be all wasted on the dead, while the living lived to benefit by them?

It did not take long to secure Lord Norham's forgiveness for his son's delinquency, and he welcomed Irene with all the affection of a father, and the pride of a nobleman who rejoices in the prospect of seeing his ancient line carried on by a woman who would adorn any station in life.

The Honorable Tommy, much spoiled, passes his life with his grandfather at Berwick Castle; but Lord and Lady Muiraven spend much of their time in London, or in visiting their friends and re-

lations, making up in fact, for the long and weary widowhood during which they were divided.

Are they happy?

Ah! my friends, is anybody happy in this world? Don't try to peer too closely into Irene's second married life, lest you should be disappointed. You expect so much for your characters of fiction—so little (if you are reasonable) for yourselves. She loves her husband as devotedly as it is possible for one human being to love another—she would not have him in any particular different from what he is—she could not imagine the horror of having her life separated from his own. And yet—

And yet (if there have not already been) I have no doubt there often will be times when she will wonder how she could have made herself so utterly miserable without him. The fact is, no creature in the world is worth the misery of another creature's life. We pine for them, we rave after them, we strain every muscle—sometimes we commit every sin to attain them—and when the gold lies in our hand, it turns to ashes and dead leaves.

Ah! mortals, take love when it comes to you—thankfully—admiringly, if you will; but never sin to grasp it.

The only love which satisfies in the attainment is the love in whose presence sin must not be named.

THE END.