MOTHER AND STEP MOTHER.

CHAPTER II.

In spite of the dissatisfaction which Mrs. Wilton Brook had expressed at her brother's marriage, she was by no means deficient in anxiety to see her new sister-in-law, and she appreciated her brother's position too highly, not to be anxious to ingratiate herself with a wife who she felt would exercise a strong influence over him. She accordingly dressed her pretty person in the most approved fashion, and prepared her lips for smiles and compliments, as she drove to visit the bride at Mivart's Hotel.

If her prejudice had been stronger than it was, it must have yielded to the grace and beauty of the stranger. Mrs. Brook, too, could not but be struck by the improvement in her brother's appearance, and she was grateful to her who had effected it; for, though a worldly woman, she was not deficient in natural affection. Sir Edward was her only brother, the head of her family, and she almost forgot poor Ann, when she gazed on his renovated form, and saw the tender pride with which he watched the movements and listened to the words of his young wife.

The appearance of the child awoke the train of old recollections in the mind of his aunt, and when she had admired his growth and caressed his fair long hair, she could not refrain from whispering to his father:

"How like poor Ann!"

Lady Irwin caught the whisper; her lip quivered, and the colour deepened in her cheek; she drew the child closer within the circle of her arm, and said softly—"I think him so like Edward."

"So he is," returned Mrs. Brook. "He is like Edward about the nose and mouth; but he has his mother's eyes."

It did not please Lady Irwin that the child's eyes were so large and tender.

"They are very beautiful," she said, with an anxious, half-fearful look at her husband; but there was no sorrowful recollection in his countenance—nothing but present love and happiness. "You can form no idea, Fanny, of what a mother Frank has in this dear little sister I have brought you. I cannot understand it, such a child as she is. Well might the poet say

'The love of children is a woman's instinct.'

"What! you haven't cured him yet of his abominable habit of quoting what nobody can understand, Helen?"

"O no! I don't wish to do it, either. You will laugh at us, I dare say, when I tell you, that he is to give me regular lessons when we get home. I know a little Latin already, but not enough to be of any use. We have arranged our occupations for the winter. Edward's wife ought not to be a smatterer, you know."

"But I hope you are not going to let him bury you and himself down at Swallowfield. It was bad enough before, but to hide you in the country would be a crying scandal indeed."

"O, we have not the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind—have we, Edward? Do not alarm yourself, dear Mrs. Brook, I am quite as fond of society as you can desire."

"Well, that's some comfort. I only hope and trust that you do not intend to lay yourself out for a literary lady; that will do some twenty years hence; at present, it would be a positive sacrifice. I am not sorry that you are only passing through town now; it would not have done to take off the gloss of your debut by appearing at the end of the season."

"O no! that would be an improvidence indeed," returned Helen, laughing. "I haven't tired Edward out yet, and we intend to live demurely and properly this winter, that I may come out span new with country cheeks next spring. We are going home to-morrow. It sounds so strange to talk of going home to a place one has never seen, but I almost seem to know it, I have made Edward tell me so much about it, from the lime avenue by the river side to the old oak cabinet in his study. I shall soon know the ways of the house, and then I hope you will come and see us."

"That's a very civil speech of yours, my dear," said Mrs. Brook, in high good humour; "and you may trust to my discretion not to break in upon you too soon. But what do you say to leaving me the boy for the present? I will take great care of him, and my girls will be nice playmates for him."

This invitation was declined with thanks, but with a haste which showed that neither Sir Edward nor his wife were inclined to forego the pleasure each derived from the presence of the child. Perhaps Mrs. Brook had given the invitation to test the real state of her sister-in-law's feelings towards her little nephew; certainly she did not seem displeased that it was not accepted, and took her leave, enraptured with the bride, and perfectly reconciled to her brother.

CHAPTER III.

A few weeks saw Sir Edward Irwin and his lady established for the winter in their handsome country mansion. When the pleasant task of showing his estates to his wife was over, and the excitement of returning in joy to the home which he had left in sorrow and weakness, had subsided, Sir Edward resumed his old, but long interrupted pursuits; and his wife, true to her intention, entered on a course of study which should enable her to share them. Nor did her energies flag after a few weeks of strenuous exertion; her mind, vigorous and enquiring, demanded a pursuit which called its powers into action, and her proud spirit rose with the difficulties which presented themselves. Her husband smiled at her eagerness, and was delighted at her intelligence; so that the hours he spent in assisting her in the severe studies she undertook, were the pleasantest of his day.

And Lady Irwin was happy. Her husband had no thought beyond her, the boy throve and loved her; but yet her happiness was not perfect. Mere passion never brings happiness; it is of the earth, earthy, and bears the elements of corruption in itself. The love that does not come from Heaven, that does not look to Heaven for its perfection, cannot raise, cannot purify the heart—it is a restless wind that stirs the troubled soul, and will not let it be at peace—it is unquiet and ingenious as self-torture. So it was with Helen Irwin; between her and her happiness came a shadow, the phantom of one who had ceased to be.

The picture of the first Lady Irwin hung in the drawing-room, and she would sit and gaze at it until the canvas seemed to glow, and the sweet thoughtful face to live, smiling down upon her in secure triumph. She tortured herself by imagining the tenderness with which those large gray eyes had hung upon her husband, the loving words which those lips had uttered. If at any time his eyes dwelt on the picture, or if he involuntarily compared the features of his son with it, she could hardly control her impatience; and she would break from the boy in the midst of his caresses, if the resemblance he bore to his mother happened to strike her.

So time passed, till a little girl was born to her, and the disquiet of her soul was hushed for awhile; the infant stole the trouble from its mother's heart, and awakened in her bosom strange yearnings for something better and purer than she had yet known. The great mystery of that new life, made so dear by suffering, and still so dependent on her, stirred her to meditation on the great mystery of our being—the weakness incidental to her condition, while it humbled her pride, softened her heart to receive with meekness the only doctrine that can explain it. But in a few months the frail infant sickened and died. No tear wetted the mother's cheek, she endured in silence the affliction to which she would not submit, impiously arraigning the Hand that sent it, and the vague conception of religious truth which she had begun to entertain vanished, and darkness closed in upon her soul.

She had her child buried in a quiet corner of the churchyard, away from the vault where Lady Irwin lay, and thither she would wander at lonely hours, and sit on the little mound with dry eyes and an angry heart. The harebells that grew spontaneously about it she plucked and bore away, but she hung no garlands on the stone and planted no flowers over the place of her infant's rest.

Her studies, which she had rather neglected during the little one's life, she now resumed with increased ardour, seeking distraction for her aching heart in mental exercise. Her husband aware that all was not as it should be, though far from apprehending the true nature of the grief of which she never spoke, willingly lent her his aid, hoping that the pursuits which yielded him such satisfaction would act with medicinal virtue upon her. Her mind thus acquired strength, but her heart did not keep pace with its progress; the circle of her affections narrowed, no interchange of friendly sympathies with her equals drew her from herself, no tender acts of personal charity to the poor about her softened her sorrow. She became cold and stately, and proud of her secret grief unprofaned by common pity and unlike that of any other.

A young woman in the village who had been married shortly after Lady Irwin's arrival at Swallowfield, lost her baby soon after the death of Helen's daughter. She was a simple creature, and the affliction lay sore upon her, for her husband was often rough, sometimes unkind to her, and, being from a distant part of the country, she had few friends in the village. Many a summer evening did she spend in the churchyard, and many a tasteful garland of wild flowers did she weave to dress her baby's grave. More than once Lady Irwin passed her in the gloaming, but her heart never softened with a feeling of kindred sorrow; she rather despised the grief which could find relief in such childish demonstrations, and the poor woman—with the one thing that loved her laid in the dust, with clothes barely sufficient to cover her and a cold hearth at home—was richer and happier than the beautiful lady whose costly robes brushed her as she passed, for, in the depth of her desolation, she could look to One, who had promised to bear her sorrow, in the light of whose presence she might hope to be reunited to her darling.

The world, as it is called, occupied a due share of Lady Irwin's time and attention: her tastes inclined her to magnificence, her beauty and her talents to display, while her husband's fortune justified her in assuming a leading position in society. No parties were more brilliant, no dinners better appointed than hers. Science, literature, and art were duly honoured at her house, her husband was an accomplished conversationalist, and she herself possessed the rarer virtue of being an excellent listener. Thus her house was the resort of men of the highest intellectual attainments in town, and when at Swallowfield, she was rarely without visitors whose names were known and honoured.

But though Lady Irwin had many admirers she had no friends; she asked no sympathy, and had none to give—none, at least, for the sorrows and joys of daily life—she was self-contained. In a man such a character is hard and sad—how much harder, how much sadder, in a woman, whose vocation it is to temper the stern realities of life, who, to be strong, must have some touch of weakness, who, if by too easy credulity, she opened the way to sin and death, should also point that road to life by faith perfected in the sense of her infirmity.

Aware of the violence of her passions, and falsely believing that unsubdued vigour of natural instinct was a proof of greatness of character, there was nothing of which Lady Irwin stood in such dread as the compassion of people of a tamer temperament. She, therefore, learnt, not indeed to govern her feelings, but to repress all outward manifestation of them, and to hide the tumult of her bosom under a cold and stately bearing. She became silent and inclined to solitude, or to the dangerous intimacy of Agnese, a waiting-woman who had followed her from Italy, and to whom more than to any other creature, she was in the habit of unveiling her emotions.

It seems to be an imperative law of our nature that the heart should unburthen itself to some one. When he whom we trust is indeed a friend, faithful in counsel and strong in comfort, obedience to this law is the sweetest solace of our earthly pilgrimage, but when we hide the ugly portions of our character from those who love us, and expose them only to those of whose judgment we stand in no awe, who, our inferiors in intellect and station, pander to our passions and foster our evil tendencies, there is no perverted blessing which may be turned to more deadly account.

Agnese Pistorella was the natural daughter of a Venetian nobleman, who had been assassinated by her mother in a fit of jealous despair. Having accomplished her crime, the murderess was overwhelmed with remorse, and, far from attempting to make her escape, herself sent to summon the officers of justice, and lay with her loosened hair falling like a pall over her victim till they arrived Her youth, her beauty, and the violence of her passions, drew much attention to her case, but she was executed—submitting to her fate with the constancy of one who knew it to be the natural consequence of her deed, the compensation due to the Manes of her lover. The child she left was completely abandoned by its father's friends, and became dependent on its maternal grandmother—a woman of infamous character Taking advantage of the interest excited by her daughter, this woman made a loathsome traffic by exhibiting her child; but curiosity soon died away—the sooner, as the grandmother thought, that the girl inherited the swarthy countenance and beetling brows of her father. Nursed early and often with the terrible story of her parents, and tutored to assume a look of melancholy, Agnese gradually acquired that low cunning with which Nature arms the oppressed, passing from infancy to womanhood subject to the caprices of the abandoned old woman who, even in her dotage meditated crime.

A deep-lying love for her mother was the poetry of Agnese's life; whatever was sweet or soft in her memories gathered round the image of the beautiful, sumptuously-apparelled woman dwelling in luxurious chambers, who had fondled and caressed her; of those sunny, far-off times she had a vague recollection, but well did she remember the last time her mother's arms were folded about her—well did she remember the bare dungeon walls, the darkness, the bloodshot eyes, the pale, haggard cheeks, and the long, lingering kiss of the white tremulous lips.

On her gradmother's death, she was forced to seek the means of living, and accident placed her in the family of Mrs Macdonald, where she filled one of the lowest grades in the household. Here her haughty silence, while it made her unpopular among the servants, but excited the interest of Helen, who, in the loneliness of spirit engendered by the absence of confidence between herself and her mother, readily turned her thoughts to the outcast, and made it her earnest request, that the girl might be given to her as her special attendant—a request which her mother, ever careless of her true interests, and blamably lax where her discipline should have been the strictest, never thought of denying her. The kindness thus unexpectedly shown to her, Agnese repaid with blind devotion. To Helen, in the dark twilight of a winter night, she told the story of her parents, lingering with fond minuteness over all the details with which her memory was stored. It was a story Helen well loved to hear; she never pointed out the heinous sin, and how the last evil was the fruit of the first,—neither for herself nor for the poor orphan did she read this lesson.

Through Helen's courtship, Agnese had watched, with jealous care, for the smallest sign of faithlessness in Sir Edward, resolved, if need were, to prove her devotion to her mistress by sacrificing herself to avenge her; but the need did not arise. He had loved before—dearly loved, it was said; but she and Helen were both persuaded that true passion was now, for the first time, awakened in his bosom. When they were married, and Sir Edward gradually relapsed into his old habits, the ascendency which his wife exercised over him left no room for jealousy, however much she might fret at the evenness and placidity of his temper.

How mutually injurious these two women were, may easily be conjectured. Neither acted as corrective to the other; but each strengthened and confirmed the other's evil tendencies.

(To be continued.)

GLEANINGS FROM LATE PAPERS.

A Russianised Englishman.—Among some troops recently embaked for the Crimea is Corporal Cumpton, of the 77th Regiment, who has been seventeen years in Russia as a civil engineer, and in almost every important place in the empire. He had in his knapsack ten Russian (good) characters from officers and departments in which he has been employed. He is a native of Maidstone, a fine, hale, stalwart fellow, and says he has 2000 dollars in a Russian bank. He asserts he was three days in one of the battalions of British Guards three months ago, but not entered, because the colonel suspected him of being a Russian spy—he speaks and writes Russian so perfectly; he was consequently rejected, and has only been enlisted in England three months. He came over from Parkhurst depot, with, the detachment of the 77th. He is a wellspoken, respectable-looking soldier, and bears a good character among those whom he has recently joined.

Hospital Comforts.—A letter received from a private soldier, named Hugh Fisher, a native of Sarbolton, states—"Although I am now lying in a hospital, I could not be better off though I was at home—indeed, I could not be so well, because you could not afford to give me the treatment I get here. I have for each day's allowance a pound of splendid white bread We get our tea at eight in the morning. I get two eggs then, and I get plenty of arrow root and sago, mixed with wine. I have two gills of wine, chocolate, and lemonade to drink. About one o'clock I have a basin of mutton broth, and then about two I get my chicken soup and chickens.—After that, I can get either rice pudding, which is made of rice, eggs, and sugar, or flour pudding. I also get one pint of excellent milk. Then for my supper I get butter and bread; and so if I don't get fat, it's not for want of good feeding and plenty of it."

EASTER SUNDAY AT JERUSALEM.

The usual fighting among the Latin and Greek pilgrims took place at Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, and Turkish soldiers have to be stationed within the Holy Sepulchre to preserve order. The Duke and Duchess de Brabant and several travellers who were at Jerusalem, received the most extraordinary privilege of visiting the Mosque of Omar, the site of the Temple, which the Mahometans hold to be so sacred, that until this occasion all Christians were most rigorously excluded from it. The Pasha of Jerusalem, to protect the visitors from annoyance, had all the guards of the Temple and the Mahometan devotees who resort there put under arrest during the time of their visit. One fanatic, howevr, escaped from custody and signified his disapprobation of the sacrilege by loud shrieks. The Mosque is a most gorgeous edifice, built in the octagon form, covered with colored tiles, and the dome bears marks of having been gilt. In the centre is a large rock, which is railed in, and considered very holy, and underneath there is a chamber where they show the tombs of Solomon, Elias, and Abraham. The number of Christians who went in was very large; they were all very orderly, and seemed much impressed with the holiness of the ground on which they stood.—*Letter from Constantinople.*

CROPS IN IRELAND.

We are glad to state that the crops in Ireland give every indication of prosperity, although there has been a long continuance of searching weather, accompanied by severe frosts at night. Grass however, is expected to be defective if rain does not fall soon. Oats and wheat are looking remarkable well; and a larger quantity of potatoes has been got in than for some years previous—indeed it is considered that the disease has altogether vanished.

John B. Gough, with bodily frame greatly weakened by too long continued and too arduous exertion, is about to seek in the quiet of his own home that re-invigoration—bodily and mentally—which can only be found in repose and recreation. The Scottish Temperance League presented him with an unusually flattering address at a public meeting held in the City Hall, Glas-