MOTHER AND STEP MOTHER.

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE Frank Irwin would have been sadly starved for affection and sympathy, if he had been entirely dependent for both on his step-mother; for, though at times she oppressed him with her caresses, and indulged him even beyond what was wholesome for him, she grew so capricious in her treatment of him, after the death of her infant, that his naturally sweet and trustful temper must have been injured But when they were in the country, which was generally for nine months in the year, Frank found a playfellow and friend in the little daughter of the clergyman, a blue-eyed child, something less than a year his junior.

The rectory was not a quarter of a mile from the gates of Sir Edward's park; and Mr. Birkby, the rector, was a distant relative of the Irwins; so the intimacy of the children was quite natural; and whenever his mamma was busy—whenever Agnese was cross—whenever, in short, anything happened to disquiet him at home—away ran little Frank, to forget his trouble in the company of Kitty Birkby; and many a sunny afternoon did they sit together, under the large apple-tree, in the orchard, or in the shadow of the old cedar, making daisy garlands, and mingling their hearts in innocent prattle.

Frank was a great hero to Kitty. Frank went to London and to all kinds of places with long names, which he knew quite well, and could repeat as easily as she could repeat the names of the field and hedge flowers. Frank went to the theatres, where he saw all sorts of wonderful things, which he described to her with indefatigable patience. There was not a marvellous feat of harlequin that she was not familiar with; and she even dreamt of the fairy—in pink, with silver wings—who always came down in a chariot, drawn by peacocks, just in time to save the prince and princess from the deep-laid plots of the cruel ogre with green hair, a bulbous nose, and a cavernous mouth, who had announced it to be his intention to dine off the prince, and promote the little trembling princess to the honour of Mrs. Ogress. O, with what eloquence did he describe, to the round-eyed, eager auditress, the final scene of the drama, when the fairy, having made the prince and princess happy, and consigned their wicked aunts and uncles to well-merited punishment, ascended out of mortal ken, seated on a many-coloured cloud, which seemed heavily charged with electricity,—a mode of travelling highly unpleasant to any one but a fairy, but which, of course afforded her unalloyed delight, as she took care to communicate to the prince and princess that they must expect nothing further from her: it being her intention to retire into private life, among the stars, where she (very rationally, as the world goes), did not wish to be disturbed.

By the time he had related the story six or seven times to Kitty, Frank became so enamoured of it, that he conceived the bold idea of acting it; he was to be the prince, Kitty the princess, and Sara, her nurse, a particularly solid young woman, the fairy; the other *dramatis personæ* might be imagined.

Kitty took very kindly to being the princess; she stuck a flower in her hair; sat herself down on a bank, and pretended it was a throne; but when Frank tried to induce her to personate the agony of the princess when her lover was torn away from her by the savage ogre, here represented by a crabbed elder tree, he was almost discomfited. Very much urged, Kitty rushed fiercely up to the tree, and beating its knotty stem with her chubby hands, cried, "Naughty ogre, take away my prince!" It was in vain that Frank explained the truculent nature of the ogre, and the timid character of the princess. This, however, was nothing in comparison to the trouble he had with Sara, who was always deeply engaged in reading a dilapidated copy of the Old English Baron, in devouring sour apples, or darning stockings, when she was required to make her graceful descent upon earth.

But there were other things which Frank delighted to impart to Kitty: the grand mystery of *hic, hæc, hoc*, in which he was, at an early age indoctrinated; yet Kitty was no prodigy, at five years old she hardly knew her letters; and if any one had told her, that theearth was like an orange, flattened at the poles, she would have opened her blue eyes in most profound astonishment. Like Frank, she had lost her mother in her infancy, and was in great measure dependent on a maiden sister of her father, who resided with him, and who loved her dearly. But Miss Selina Birkby was now in the winter of her days, and having spent the prime of her life in the dreary state called, in derision, single blessedness, she knew no more of the rearing and training of children than a day-labourer, accustomed to no sort of horticulture but the sowing of turnips, might be supposed to know of the rearing of delicate exotics.

Kitty, nevertheless, had a most charming little countenance, which changed from smiles to tears with the rapidity of an April day. She was a great favourite with Sir Edward Irwin, who liked to take her on his knee, and to play with her soft curls; but she never pleased Lady Irwin—perhaps because the sight of her wakened the memories of her own lost little girl—perhaps from the increasing jealousy of her disposition, which nothing seemed too small, nothing too innocent, to excite. She wondered what Sir Edward and Frank could see to interest them in a little creature neither remarkable for beauty, nor distinguished for intelligence; and Kitty, for her part, had an instinctive dread of Lady Irwin; she was almost completely silent in her presence, and approached her only with effort and unwillingness.

But if her instinct led her to avoid Lady Irwin, it operated yet more strongly in the case of Agnese. The child absolutely trembled if Agnese touched her; and once, when she insisted on kissing her, she was almost convulsed with terror. Agnese, as may be imagined, was not slow to repay dislike with dislike. She chose to believe, that, being the child of an ecclesiastic, Kitty was peculiarly under the ban of Heaven; for, though destitute of anything like true religion, she clung with pertinacity to the superstitions which she had been taught in childhood, and especially delighted to believe that the marriage of a priest was a sacrilegious thing, and that, therefore, little Kitty was nothing but a foredoomed child of Satan.

CHAPTER V.

FRANK was just nine years old, and in the middle of the veritable history of Pyramus and Thisbe, which he read with Mr. Birkby and duly performed with Kitty, when Lady Irwin again became a mother, the mother of a son of singular promise and beauty. Her heart swelled with joyful pride, but it seemed as if happiness for her was never to be without alloy. A conversation which she overheard between the nurse and Agnese completely damped her pleasure, and awakened discontented thoughts in her bosom.

They were speaking of the child, admiring his beauty, and commenting on the joy of his parents.

"Ah!" cried the old nurse, "Sir Edward's well pleased enough now; but Lord love ye, if you'd seen the fuss there was, when Master Frank was born—he worn't nothing to compare to this here lamb, but then he was the heir—Lord, the ringing of bells and the driving up of carriages! I made nigh twenty pound at the christening—and all the village was invited to dine; there was an ox roasted whole—and, as to the ale, it was quite a sin, to see it flowing about everywhere like water."

Nothing could exceed the tenderness of Sir Edward; he could not have shown more joy at the birth of his eldest son; the inquiries were numerous, the christening splendid; but the old nurse's words rankled in Lady Irwin's heart. She still loved Frank, but she could not at all times bear to see him caress his half-brother, though, if he showed the least indifference, she tortured herself by thinking how much the child's fate depended on his affection. As soon as the baby began to take notice, he showed a very decided affection for Frank; there was only one person whom he preferred, and that person was Kitty Birkby.

With all her passionate affection, Lady Irwin wanted the art to accommodate herself to the weakness of a little child; she could not talk the fond nonsense which the ordinary mother makes the vehicle of her tenderness, and by which she wakes the dimples in her infant's cheek. Kitty, on the other hand, was distinguished by an extraordinary power of sympathy; she seemed to know intuitively what was wanted of her, and with happy and unconscious grace to meet the requirement. She loved all children, so it was very natural that she should feel especial delight in the beautiful child who crowed and clapped his little hands at her appearance.

In spite of her dissatisfaction that her son was not his father's heir, Lady Irwin was made much happier by his birth: the boy was all her own—he had her fitful eyes, her square brow, the shape of his mouth was like hers, with a shadow of his father's smile; and before long it became evident that he inherited her temper. He was wilful and impatient, he never let his mother fret herself for want of excitement; it was never possible to tell in what mood the young autocrat might choose to show himself; he was like a mountain-girdled lake, now laughing to the summer sun, now lashing its crested billows into fury. Kitty Birkby was the only person whose influence with him never failed: his mother might waste her strength in the attempt to storm him down; she never gained her point; he would scream till she was terrified for his health, but he would not yield; yet Kitty, without violence, by some subtle charm in her touch or in her voice, brought back the smiles in five minutes, and won him to obedience.

For two years longer Frank Irwin pursued his studies at home, under the direction of Mr. Birkby; he was then sent to Rugby, at that time under the wise government of Dr. Arnold. His departure caused Kitty great sorrow, but it made little interruption in her visits to the hall; for Edward, as the boy was named from his father, was growing fast, and became daily more imperious in his demands upon her time. It was not in the nature of things, that Lady Irwin should not feel some touch of tenderness to the sweet child to whom she owed so much; perhaps she regretted that she could not love her, and strove by the lavish profusion of her gifts to atone for the want of real affection. In one respect only did the little girl and the woman sympathise. Lady Irwin possessed a musical genius of a high order; her knowledge of the art was profound, and the harp or piano under her hand produced thrilling or stirring harmonies, the transcript of her state of feeling; she was a poet of sound, and the pulsations of her passionate temperament thus found immediate and ample expression.

Now, Kitty Birkby early evinced great taste for music; her voice was peculiarly clear and sweet; she owed much to the careful instruction of Lady Irwin, who was pleased to have a pupil so docile and so apt in her favorite science. In other respects, Kitty's education was not systematized; her aunt taught her needlework and what she knew of French; while her father instructed her in arithmetic, and formed her taste in literature. His eyes failing him he was often glad to use her younger sight, and thus she learned to read with expression and without fatigue, while she imbibed a fund of general knowledge, which lay in her mind like seed destined to bring forth a rich harvest in future years. And thus her childhood passed in ever-recurring works of tenderness and love. She was so gentle and so modest, that it was only by her absence that her friends knew how much they needed her.

CHAPTER VI.

"MOTHER," cried Edward Irwin, now a fine boy of fourteen, "why does every one think so much more of Frank than of me?"

"He is the heir and has just come of age, and when the heir comes of age, there is always great rejoicing."

"It must be a fine thing to be the heir!" exclaimed Edward, after a pause, fixing his eyes thoughtfully on his mother's face.

"Why do you think so?" inquired she.

"Why? What a question? Why, the world is before you to be sure; you can do exactly what you please, and everybody thinks you a fine fellow."

"It is better to make a fortune than barely to inherit one."

"O yes, of course; but that takes such a time. Just fancy, mother, how splendid it must be for Frank. Every one says how handsome he is, and every one admires his cleverness and his riding, and everything he does. Now I'm every bit as handsome and as clever for my age, and father says, Frank couldn't have ridden Mad Tom before he went to Rugby; yet nobody takes the trouble to find out my perfections."

"Would you rather have been your father's heir than my son?" As Lady Irwin asked the boy the question, her cheek flushed, and her brow, to which a slight frown had become habitual, darkened.

"Why, no, mother, I don't mean that. I'd rather have my own stately mother, for all her fierce looks and angry words, than the pretty pale lady in the picture; but suppose there had been no Lady Irwin before you, I'm sure you're wife enough for one man any day."

"I should never have known your father, if he hadn't come to Florence when he was in sorrow for the loss of Frank's mother."

"Which proves, I suppose, that it didn't please the Fates that I should be an eldest son. I always thought them a stupid set of spinsters. Don't you know any rickety old Earl or Duke who might be coaxed into adopting me?"

"Do not talk so foolishly, Edward," returned his mother, with displeasure, "learn to have some respect for those to whom you owe your being; learn to have some regard for the talents with which you are endowed, the legitimate exercise of which cannot fail to make you known and distinguished."

"In spite of all that," pursued the boy recklessly, "I believe, mother, you would like to see me in Frank's shoes. Only think, this grand old house, the woods, the lands, all mine. But there, don't bring down the thunderclouds! I'm sure, if the old Parcæ have ill-used me in condemning me to be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water, they are ten times more to blame for making you anything but an empress. If they'd only done you justice now, I could have accommodated myself nicely to the character of a royal duke."

"Doubtless, you foolish boy," said his mother, caressing his full dark curls.

"But only fancy, mother, you sweeping along in velvet and diamonds, issuing your commands to your generals and councillors; ordering one man to lose his head, making a governor of a province of another; and me riding about on a cream-coloured Arabian pony, at the head of an army, going to chastise some rebellious barbarians."

"Silly boy!" cried Lady Irwin, "what a shock you will feel when you descend from your Pegasus, and know yourself nothing but plain Edward Irwin, with not a *sou* to help you but what your father or brother may choose to give you."

"Considering the state of the case, mother, I think you might have let me give the reins to my fancy a little longer, I wish you hadn't pulled me up with such a jerk. I declare I felt the Arab under me, and the air fanning my cheek, and you and all your court-ladies looking down from your balcony. It was too bad to bring me down with such a thump into this seedy old room, with nothing out of doors but that wet blanket of a sky. I don't believe it ever intends to leave off raining, till all the branches are washed off the trees. Why, if there isn't Kitty! Only think, mother, of her coming all through this rain. See how daintily she holds up her dress, and what little pools of water her pretty pattering feet leave every step she takes. She's worth my cloud-palace, Arab pony and all! There's a smile, now, would make sunshine anywhere. O mother, stir the fire and make it blaze, while I run down and help her off with her cloak."

Away he ran, leaving his mother sunk in gloomy meditation. The impatience he had expressed, and forgotten as soon as expressed, awakened the discontent in her own heart, and roused the old bitterness and jealousy that slumbered in her bosom. She was essentially an ambitious woman; her very love partook of the passion by which the angels fell; and the beauty and promise of her son, while it increased the idolatrous affection which she bore him, aggravated her discontent at the inferior position to which he was destined. But the fire smouldered in her own bosom, and even Agnese knew not into how fierce a blaze a little breath might kindle it.

When Edward returned, bringing in Catherine Birkby, despoiled of her wet garments, and glowing with exercise, the cloud had passed from Lady Irwin's countenance, if not from her spirit, and she welcomed her young visitor with courtesy, even with kindness.

"And now, mother," said Edward, when he had established the guest in a warm corner of a sofa, and supplied her with a footstool and all imaginable comforts; "and now, mother, would you like to know what has brought my princess out this fine November morning? It's a good story, and I'll tell Frank as sure as fate."

"Suppose you begin by telling me," said his mother, smiling.

"You tell her, Kitty. Doesn't she look a nice tutor, now? Just look at her; she wants nothing but a pair of spectacles and a stout cane."

"The boy's distracted," said Lady Irwin. "He is so delighted that you are come to break the dull téte-à-téte with his prosy old mother. Kate, that he can't speak an intelligible word."

"Well then, mother—neither prosy nor old, much younger than Kitty, I'll be bound—would you believe it? the abominable creature has come out through this weather to bring me my Arnold's Exercise book."

"She is a great deal too good to you, sir; and we must get Mr. Birkby to be more strict with you, if you continue so careless."

"But only think of her malignity, mother, when I had forgotten the stupid book so cleverly, and persuaded myself that it would be cruel to send Brade and the ragged old pony for it, she must come through the cold and wet for no other purpose than to make me ashamed of myself. There's only one thing to be said for her; she never did Arnold herself, and so she doesn't know what a tremendous bore he is."

"Now I have brought the book, I hope you intend to do the exercise," said Kitty, smiling.

"Well, that depends. You must fold the paper and mend the pens, and look out the words in the index."

"But no, let's go and have a game at billiards."

"I'll play no billiards till you've done your excercise.,'

"Well, we can play without you, you know."

"You will have to play by yourself then," said his mother. "You'll find no one here to play with you, if you are rude to Kitty."

"Rude to Kitty!" repeated the boy, the colour flushing to his cheek. "Rude to Kitty, whom I love better than anything in the whole world? I don't know what you mean, mother."

"He only wanted to show me that I was not quite so important as I thought myself," said Kate, apologetically. "Come, Edward, let us go into the school-room; the exercise won't take half an hour, and there will be plenty of time for billiards afterwards."

The boy obeyed, but his cheek still glowed. He got together what was necessary for his work in silence, and wrote quickly and attentively for some time; then suddenly flinging down his pen, he threw himself on the floor, and hiding his face on Catherine's knees, burst into tears.

"Hush, Edward, is this right—is this Christian?" remonstrated Kitty.

"Rude to you, my own dearest Kitty?" sobbed the boy. "If I was, I didn't mean it. Of course you know we can't play without you—at least, I can't; and I'm sure Frank wouldn't. O, you don't know, how dull and stupid the house is when you are not here. Father sits in his study, making discoveries about meteoric phenomena or something or other; and Frank thinks he's doing a great deal with Plato, though I believe half the time he does nothing but smoke and dream; and mother and I talk ourselves into a horrible dislike of everything. O Kitty, I hate myself so sometimes, and you would hate me too, if you knew what wicked thoughts come into my head."

"Wicked thoughts come to all of us, Edward; and you know there is only one mode of driving them away."

"If I were only Frank, now," said the boy, "I should be quite happy."