## MOTHER AND STEP-MOTHER.

CHAPTER XI.

It was a bright morning; the sky was cloudless, and the genial west wind sweeping over the grass, crisped with hoar frost, seemed to antedate the return of spring. In some sheltered nooks, which Catherine well knew, the violets were already in blossom, and she was returning from an early ramble, with a small buch of these precious flowers, when Edward came bounding along to meet her: now followed, now preceded by his favourite hound, who had caught the joyousness of his master's spirit, and emulated his activity.

"Good news, Kitty!" he cried, as soon as she came within earshot. "Good news, little sister; what will you give me for my news?"

"Have you got your pony?" asked Kate in reply.

"Pony!" retorted Edward, scornfully. "Don't I tell you it's great news—news for you, my darling!" and he flung his arms about her and kissed her.

There was a fluttering motion at Kitty's heart; the colour left her cheeks, and she looked at him trembling.

"Well, why don't you guess? Why don't you laugh, or cry, or do something, Kitty? You couldn't look worse if I had said the news was bad. Come, have n't you a bit of Pandora's curiosity? Must I take my glorious news home again, because you won't give the least touch to the lid?"

"I know you are going to see Frank," said Kitty, tremulously. "Lady Irwin told me about it yesterday morning."

"No, that's not it. Guess again! But there, I won't torture you, dear. Strange, is n't it, Kate, that a man of taste like Frank, should n't like Italy?"

"If that's your news, Edward, I had a shrewd guess of it before."

"Why, of course you had, when he began at the top of the sheet with O! how am I to exist another day without you! and ended at the bottom of the fourth side with—I feel convinced I must expire if I don't see you to morrow—all four sides written close and crossed, and all to the same tune."

"You are a saucy boy, Edward, and want to provoke me to show you Frank's letters. You know well enough he never crosses them, and that there is often room for a great deal more when he finishes."

"With 'Yours till death, eternally and for ever.' Well, I'm sure I don't know what a love-letter is like, and I don't suppose I ever shall. I daresay Frank's letters are just what they should be, or that you think them so—which is quite as good; but I can tell you, you're not likely to have any more of them just at present, so you'd better make the most of what you have. I'll bet you Mad Tom to your father's old cob that he won't write to you for a month to come."

"Have they heard from him at the Hall, then?" said Kate, bewildered.

"Yes, truly, have they. In a most substantial manner has he forced on their astounded minds the fact that he has a good stout will of his own, and that he has no idea of being sent out of the way that people may worry his little bride out of her pretty looks. I'll tell you what, Kitty, Frank has a great deal more spirit than I ever gave him credit for. You ought to be proud of him. He has done the very thing I should have done myself!"

"But what has he done!" cried Catherine, impatiently.

"O you're coming up at last, are you, like a shy bottle of ale when it is held to the fire? Know, O sweet Kitty, that your future lord has shown himself a fine fellow, and won't be hoodwinked by my revered and incomprehensible mamma, and that I came off this morning to impart to you the intelligence, that he came home last night, to the confusion of his enemies, the delight of his affectionate father, of his devoted brother, and his blushing bride. But I say, dear, what's the matter? Kitty, I say, dear Kitty, don't be a little fool please, dear!"

The abrupt announcement of the return of her lover—a joy so sudden, so unlooked for, was indeed too much for Catherine's strength, enfeebled as she was by long separation, and by the wearing sickness of hope deferred; she would have fallen had not the boy caught her in his arms. He bore her with difficulty to the bank at the side of the road, and was running to seek assistance, when his brother, whose impatience had become uncontrollable, and who had wandered thus far in search of his betrothed, came up. A little water, brought from a neighbouring rivulet in Edward's cap, and dashed on Catherine's face, aided in reviving her: the sight of her lover bending over her with a look of earnest solicitude did more. He folded her in his arms, and all the troubled past seemed to vanish like a dream, or only to be remembered to intensify the happiness of the re-union.

There was a long silence. Tears falling like genial rain, and a joy so solemn, that they held their breath as they stood locked hand in hand beneath the arch of the spring heavens.

When the first rapture of their meeting was over, Catherine's anxious eyes detected marks of uncontrollable suffering in her lover's countenance. His eyes, which looked larger and brighter than they were wont to look, were circled with black rings, his hands were parched, and the bronzed hue of his complexion told of fatigue and exposure rather than of health.

The imprudence with which he had acted was too evident. The marsh fever was still hanging about him when he set out on his hasty journey. The excitement produced by Edward's letter, which cofirmed his worst fears, had rendered him for the time superior and insensible to his bodily infirmity. A troubled night, hardly visited by rare snatches of sleep, at last brought the morning, when he was once again to see her, made so much dearer by absence and by sorrow, borne for his sake. The cold water with which he bathed his burning temples stilled their throbbing for awhile; the fresh air, and the near hope of seeing his beloved, deadened the aching of his limbs and the fever in his throat; but now that the first joy of meeting was over, that he had held her in his arms, and felt her still all his own, he was obliged to succumb to the lassitude that oppressed him, and to acknowledge the too evident fact that he was not well.

He returned home in the hope that a few hour's rest might restore him; but Nature is a stern avenger, and exacts a heavy fine for over taxed or abused powers. The excitement and disquietude in which he had lived for the last eighteen months had gradually undermined his vigorous constitution. The unexpressed displeasure of his stepmother weighed upon his heart with a foreboding which defied all his efforts to shake it off, and filled him with vague and paralysing alarm. During the first few months of his residence abroad the variety of interests which crowded upon him had distracted his attention; Catherine's letters full of hopeful tenderness quieted his anxiety on her account; while Lady Irwin herself, relieved by his absence, wrote with cordiality, almost with affection. But when the novelty of foreign life began to wear off, when Lady Irwin had returned to Swallow-field, and, irritated by Catherine's frequent presence, and by the affection with which Sir Edward treated her, either ceased to write to the traveller, or wrote only letters so hard and dry, that the effort they had cost was too palpable to be mistaken; when Catherine's depression became evident in spite of her attempted cheerfulness; Frank's buoyancy of spirit gave way, and he began to succumb to the effects of the climate, which trying as it is to many English constitutions, did not suit him, and neglected such precautions as might perhaps, have preserved him in health and inured him to it.

So, now the fever, which had been checked, flew to the head: the overtaxed brain ceased to discharge its healthy office; his ravings were wild and incessant; his heart troubles mixing themselves up incongruously with the scenes of foreign adventure; he called often and piteously on the name of his beloved, who seemed to his distempered fancy to be in fearful danger; with wild supplication or stormy menace he sought to protect her from a powerful but unnamed enemy. The whole household was filled with consternation. Sir Edward stood gazing on his fiery vacant eyes with an anguish too big for tears. Poor Edward ran vainly to and fro, overwhelming himself with reproaches for the heedless rashness with which he had communicated his suspicions to his brother. Catherine, pale and tremulous, crept from the Parsonage to the Hall, seeking for tidings she dared not ask for: her still woe-begone countenance, and eager tearless eyes, were not the least grievous sight in all those grievous days. Sir Edward meeting her, lost the recollection of his own sorrow, and wept for the poor child who had no tears for herself.

Strange and strong was the conflict of Lady Irwin's feelings. The moment when the dear wish of her heart would be gratified seemed to have arrived; the life which stood between her son and the inheritance was fluttering on the verge of eternity. Agnese did not fail to offer congratulations, and with dark pupils distending to suggest that a slight mistake in the giving of a potion might make that certain which was already probable. Lady Irwin rejected the suggestion with indignation, and devoted herself with energy to the care of the sufferer; she shrunk from the presence of her confidante, and if by chance they met, she hurried by her as if she had been some venemous creature: above all, she sedulously guarded the approach to the sick man's chamber, gave him his medicines herself, and administering nothing without previously subjecting it to a careful examination.

She seemed insensible to fatigue. Hour after hour, day after day, she went to and fro in the sick room, with pale set features, like one acting under excitement, or afraid to break a spell. She hardly spoke, either in answer to the grateful thanks of her husband, or to the passionate caresses of her son; but one day, when Catherine crept to her, and kissed her hand in token of gratitude she could not speak, Lady Irwin stopped as she was traversing the corridor, and bending her head, pressed her lips on the brow of the trembling girl.

"Poor child," she said, "go and pray, and see if that will comfort thee."

It was at the time when the fever was at its height; the doctors, of whom two had been fetched from London, had almost given up hope. The patient's strength seemed exhausted; he lay motionless, almost lifeless, his nervous hands were wan and passive, or convulsed by feeble twitterings; the wavy hair, which used to fall in such comely masses about his face was all gone; his manly beauty withered like the leaves in autumn.

Who can tell what were Lady Irwin's thoughts as she sat through those long nights and days by the wreck of him whom she had taught herself by slow degrees to regard as the enemy of her son? Who can tell how much of her old tenderness to the fair motherless boy returned; how the helplessness of the suffering man recalled the weakness and dependence of the child; how the fever-parched lips awakened memories of the sweet firm lips that had so often pressed hers, and the joyous love of the child's close embrace. Prostrate—helpless—there was nothing antagonistic there. Helen Irwin was of a temper too lofty to war with the powerless.

After a long time there came a dawn of hope. The youthful constitution, the careful tending, the earnest prayers, prevailed, and Death released his prey. Deep thankfulness and silent joy succeeded to despair in Catherine's heart. Sir Edward came out of his study and walked again among his trees; Edward scampered over over hill and dale, to tame the spirit of his horse, wanton with too long idleness. The crisis was past; Frank would recover—slowly, tediously—but he would recover.

With the danger, Lady Irwin's care ceased. No sooner did he open his eyes upon her, animated by intelligence; no sooner did health-bringing sleep return to him than she withdrew from his chamber, leaving him to the attendance of the hired nurses, and only paying occasional visits to his room, which became shorter and rarer as he progressed in his recovery. His convalescence was tedious and wearisome, with many lets and hindrances, much lassitude and frequent suffering; but whatever aid art or science could afford to alleviate the one or remove the other was used unsparingly, and the light of love gladdened him. Catherine seemed to have lost all recollection of her own worn health and spirits in the necessity for encouraging and strengthening him. Full of gratitude for the great mercy vouchsafed to her in his preservation, her joy manifested itself in a sweet and innocent gaiety—a cheerful lovingness of spirit, that shed sunshine over the life of her betrothed, and helped him more than anything else to the recovery of his strength. Her gratitude to Lady Irwin was so warm that it overcame the dread she had been accustomed to feel in her presence; and though Lady Irwin still cold and stately in her manner towards her, Catherine had won something upon her regard. She could no longer look upon her as a being without passion; the feeling she had shown was unmistakable, and just of the kind which Lady Irwin could appreciate. Loud lamentations or stormy grief she would have despised; but she sympathised with the stony agony of her countenance and her voiceless despair. She could no longer think her impassive or commonplace. She might hate, but she could not now despise her.

Her mind at that period was in a struggling, combating, fluctuating condition. Agnese revenged her late slight by almost unbroken silence, which Lady Irwin, too proud to make concessions, repaid with haughty contempt. Sir Edward, charmed out of all suspicion by the extraordinary devotion of her attendance on his son, had returned to something like a lover's tenderness. It seemed almost as if the evil thought which had long nestled in the depths of her heart might be crushed—perhaps, but for the Italian woman, it might have been. But Satan little loves to quit a tenement in which he has been welcomed and cherished: and evil acts are the legitimate offspring of evil thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

It was some two months since the favourable turn had taken place, and Frank had begun to amend, when, coming home from his usual evening stroll to the Parsonage, he met his, father, smoking his cigar, under the lime-trees.

"Well, my boy," said Sir Edward, "you don't look very brilliant yet. A month or so in Devonshire would set you up nicely."

"Indeed, sir, I am perfectly well," returned his son in alarm. "The evening is usually warm, and we walked a little too far. I hope you are not thinking of sending me away again so soon?"

"Why, to tell you the truth, I've been hatching a little plan that I don't think you'll object to. You know there is a small estate in Devonshire, which belonged to your mother. The house is not much more than a cottage, but it is pretty and compact. Captain Martyn, who has rented it for these fifteen years, has been for some time in failing health; and I have this evening received intimation of his death. As I supposed probable, his widow does not wish to continue my tenant; and it has occurred to me that if the house were brigtened up a little—it's very pretty, and the scenery about it splendid—it might not be so bad for you and Kitty, just for a year or two, till my shoes are ready for you. This would make everything smooth. Not that I want to send you away, my dear fellow. God knows, the house will be dull enough without you both!"

"We cannot expect you to make such a sacrifice for us, sir," said Frank, his cheek glowing with surprise and pleasure.

"O, as to that, the less we say of that, the better. The property was your mother's; so it is a matter of mere justice. My idea is, that if I allow you three hundred a-year, you may manage to live quietly down there. The estate itself is not unproductive, and might be improved if any one were resident upon it who would undertake to study agriculture as a science. So much is doing in that way now, that extraordinary obstinacy and stupidity may soon cease to be regarded as necessary qualifications for a farmer."

This scheme had been maturing for some time in Sir Edward's mind. The anxiety he had during his son's illness, and during his rather slow recovery, had determined him to expedite a marriage which he saw to be indispensible to his happiness. It had been his purpose to communicate his project to his wife, and to obtain her concurrence before mentioning it to his son; but coming unexpectedly on Frank just when he had received intelligence of the removal of the only obstacle that stood in his way, he had yielded to the impulse of the moment, and had spoken to him of a plan which he knew would give him extreme pleasure, and which, he hoped, would accelerate his recovery.

When they had discussed the subject for a little while, Sir Edward went in search of his wife, while Frank retired to his chamber. Lady Irwin sat by the fire, drawing. She drew finely, and she loved the art. Sir Edward stood over her for a while, and admired the design, pointing out at the same time some defects in the execution; then, turning to the fire, he stood some time in silence, and, taking up a book, seemed lost in the perusal of it, till at last he suddenly said, not without a slight tremor in his voice.

"By the way, Helen, did I tell you Martyn was dead?"

Lady Irwin answered in the negative; but she did not feel sufficient interest in the intelligence to interrupt her occupation.

"Yes, poor fellow! he is gone at last," continued Sir Edward. "It is surprising that he lasted so long, considering the rough usage the French gave him in the last war. He must have been nearly eighty. He was a bit of true British oak, tough to the last chip. Of course, Mrs. Martyn does not stay at Elington. Her nephew writes me word that she wishes to give it up at once, which is fortunate, for I could not well have turned her out."

"Do you think you are likely to get a higher rent for the place, then?"

"O, no! the rent Martyn paid was well enough. I have been thinking it would do for Frank and Kitty. To be sure, the house is small, and I dare say will want something done to it; but it is a snug little place, and Devonshire will probably suit Frank, now that terrible fever has made him delicate. You know it is, in a manner, his native air. His mother was born and brought up there."

Lady Irwin bent lower over her drawing. Sir Edward continued speaking, fast, but with a sense of growing uneasiness.

"I know that you are as anxious as I am to promote his happiness; and it is very fortunate that we are able to gratify him without trenching materially on our income. For my own part, I acknowledge that at first I did not feel the necessity of a second establishment. But I dare say you were right, and I am sure you will share my satisfaction in an arrangement which meets all the requirements of the case."

"They cannot live there without an income," said Lady Irwin, after a long pause.

"As to that, I should wish to consult you; for you know so much better than I do what would be necessary. I do not think they will require more than two hundred and fifty or three hundred at first; for Frank must take care of himself; and Kitty has no extravagant notions. I suppose they can stay with us when they come to town."

Lady Irwin made no reply. Her husband, oppressed by the omnious silence, drew his chair closer to the hearth, and stirred the fire with an attempt to seem unconcerned. There was something irresistibly overwhelming in Lady Irwin's silence, and in the continued but irregular movement of her pencil. After some minutes, she gathered her drawing-materials together, and was leaving the room, when Sir Edward, taking her by the hand, looked up in her face with an attempta at smile, saying,

"Come, sit down, Helen, and let us talk it over."

"There can be no need to talk over what you have already arranged," she returned, coldly disengaging her hand; and without another word, or a backward look, she left the room.

"Here's a pretty storm," muttered Sir Edward. "If Helen did but know how like Tisiphone she looks in that angry mood of her's she would not be angry so often. Who could have anticipated such a reception of a plan which sets everything to rights? O, woman, woman, incomprehensible, irrational, contradictory!"

So saying, or rather so thinking, he turned