

CHAPTER II.

WHAT SHE THINKS OF IT.

Springdale was one of those beautiful rural towns whose flourishing aspect is a striking exponent of the peculiarities of New-England life. The ride through it presents a refreshing picture of wide, cool, grassy streets, overhung with green arches of elm, with rows of large, handsome houses on either side, each standing back from the street in its own retired square of gardens, green turf, shady trees, and flowering shrubs. It was, so to speak, a little city of country-seats. It spoke of wealth, thrift, leisure, cultivation, quiet, thoughtful habits, and moral tastes.

Some of these mansions were of ancestral reputation, and had been in the family whose name they bore for generations back; a circumstance sometimes occurring even in New-England towns where neither law nor custom unites to perpetuate property in certain family lines.

The Seymour house was a well-known, respected mansion for generations back. Old Judge Seymour, the grandfather, was the lineal descendant of Parson Seymour; the pastor who first came with the little colony of Springdale, when it was founded as a church in the wilderness, amid all the dangers of wild beasts and Indians.

This present Seymour mansion was founded on the spot where the house of the first minister was built by the active hands of his parishioners; and, from generation to generation, order, piety, education, and high respectability had been the tradition of the place.

The reader will come in with us, on this bright June morning, through the grassy front yard, which has only the usual New-England fault of being too densely shaded. The house we enter has a wide, cool hall running through its centre and out into a back garden, now all aglow with every beauty of June. The broad alleys of the garden showed bright stores of all sorts of good old-fashioned flowers, well tended and kept. Clumps of stately hollyhocks and scarlet peonies; roses of every hue, purple, blush, gold-color, and white, were showering down their leaves on the grassy turf; honeysuckles climbed and clambered over arbors; and great, stately tufts of virgin-white lilies exalted their majestic heads in saintly magnificence. The garden was Miss Grace Seymour's delight and pride. Every root in it was fragrant with the invisible blossoms of memory,--memories of the mother who loved and planted and watched them before her, and the grandmother who had cared for them before that. The spirit of these charming old-fashioned gardens is the spirit of family love; and, if ever blessed souls from their better home feel drawn back to any thing on earth, we think it must be to their flower-garden.

Miss Grace had been up early, and now, with her garden hat on, and

scissors in hand, was coming up the steps with her white apron full of roses, white lilies, meadow-sweets, and honeysuckle, for the parlor-vases, when the servant handed her a letter.

"From John," she said, "good fellow;" and then she laid it on the mantel-shelf of the parlor, while she busied herself in arranging her flowers.

"I must get these into water, or they will wilt," she said.

The large parlor was like many that you and I have seen in a certain respectable class of houses,--wide, cool, shady, and with a mellow old tone to every thing in its furniture and belongings. It was a parlor of the past, and not of to-day, yet exquisitely neat and well-kept. The Turkey carpet was faded: it had been part of the wedding furnishing of Grace's mother, years ago. The great, wide, motherly, chintz-covered sofa, which filled a recess commanding the window, was as different as possible from any smart modern article of the name. The heavy, claw-footed, mahogany chairs; the tall clock that ticked in one corner; the footstools and ottomans in faded embroidery,--all spoke of days past. So did the portraits on the wall. One was of a fair, rosy young girl, in a white gown, with powdered hair dressed high over a cushion. It was the portrait of Grace's mother. Another was that of a minister in gown and bands, with black-silk gloved hands holding up conspicuously a large Bible. This was the remote ancestor, the minister. Then there was the picture of

John's father, placed lovingly where the eyes seemed always to be following the slight, white-robed figure of the young wife. The walls were papered with an old-fashioned paper of a peculiar pattern, bought in France seventy-five years before. The vases of India-china that adorned the mantels, the framed engravings of architecture and pictures in Rome, all were memorials of the taste of those long passed away. Yet the room had a fresh, sweet, sociable air. The roses and honeysuckles looked in at the windows; the table covered with books and magazines, and the familiar work-basket of Miss Grace, with its work, gave a sort of impression of modern family household life. It was a wide, open, hospitable, generous-minded room, that seemed to breathe a fragrance of invitation and general sociability; it was a room full of associations and memories, and its daily arrangement and ornamentation made one of the pleasant tasks of Miss Grace's life.

She spread down a newspaper on the large, square centre-table, and, emptying her apronful of flowers upon it, took her vases from the shelf, and with her scissors sat down to the task of clipping and arranging them.

Just then Letitia Ferguson came across the garden, and entered the back door after her, with a knot of choice roses in her hand, and a plate of seed-cakes covered with a hem-stitched napkin. The Fergusons and the Seymours occupied adjoining houses, and were on footing of the most perfect undress intimacy. They crossed each other's gardens, and came without knocking into each other's doors twenty times a day,

apropos to any bit of chit-chat that they might have, a question to ask, a passage in a book to show, a household receipt that they had been trying. Letitia was the most intimate and confidential friend of Grace. In fact, the whole Ferguson family seemed like another portion of the Seymour family. There were two daughters, of whom Letitia was the eldest. Then came the younger Rose, a nice, charming, well-informed, good girl, always cheerful and chatty, and with a decent share of ability at talking lively nonsense. The brothers of the family, like the young men of New-England country towns generally, were off in the world seeking their fortunes. Old Judge Ferguson was a gentleman of the old school,--formal, stately, polite, always complimentary to ladies, and with a pleasant little budget of old-gentlemanly hobbies and prejudices, which it afforded him the greatest pleasure to air in the society of his friends. Old Mrs. Ferguson was a pattern of motherliness, with her quaint, old-fashioned dress, her elaborate caps, her daily and minute inquiries after the health of all her acquaintances, and the tender pityingness of her nature for every thing that lived and breathed in this world of sin and sorrow.

Letitia and Grace, as two older sisters of families, had a peculiar intimacy, and discussed every thing together, from the mode of clearing jelly up to the profoundest problems of science and morals. They were both charming, well-mannered, well-educated, well-read women, and trusted each other to the uttermost with every thought and feeling and purpose of their hearts.

As we have said, Letitia Ferguson came in at the back door without knocking, and, coming softly behind Miss Grace, laid down her bunch of roses among the flowers, and then set down her plate of seed-cakes.

Then she said, "I brought you some specimens of my Souvenir de Malmaison bush, and my first trial of your receipt."

"Oh, thanks!" said Miss Grace: "how charming those roses are! It was too bad to spoil your bush, though."

"No: it does it good to cut them; it will flower all the more. But try one of those cakes,--are they right?"

"Excellent! you have hit it exactly," said Grace; "exactly the right proportion of seeds. I was hurrying," she added, "to get these flowers in water, because a letter from John is waiting to be read."

"A letter! How nice!" said Miss Letitia, looking towards the shelf.

"John is as faithful in writing as if he were your lover."

"He is the best lover a woman can have," said Grace, as she busily sorted and arranged the flowers. "For my part, I ask nothing better than John."

"Let me arrange for you, while you read your letter," said Letitia,

taking the flowers from her friend's hands.

Miss Grace took down the letter from the mantelpiece, opened, and began to read it. Miss Letitia, meanwhile, watched her face, as we often carelessly watch the face of a person reading a letter.

Miss Grace was not technically handsome, but she had an interesting, kindly, sincere face; and her friend saw gradually a dark cloud rising over it, as one watches a shadow on a field.

When she had finished the letter, with a sudden movement she laid her head forward on the table among the flowers, and covered her face with her hands. She seemed not to remember that any one was present.

Letitia came up to her, and, laying her hand gently on hers, said, "What is it, dear?"

Miss Grace lifted her head, and said in a husky voice,--

"Nothing, only it is so sudden! John is engaged!"

"Engaged! to whom?"

"To Lillie Ellis."

"John engaged to Lillie Ellis?" said Miss Ferguson, in a tone of

shocked astonishment.

"So he writes me. He is completely infatuated by her."

"How very sudden!" said Miss Letitia. "Who could have expected it? Lillie Ellis is so entirely out of the line of any of the women he has ever known."

"That's precisely what's the matter," said Miss Grace. "John knows nothing of any but good, noble women; and he thinks he sees all this in Lillie Ellis."

"There's nothing to her but her wonderful complexion," said Miss Ferguson, "and her pretty little coaxing ways; but she is the most utterly selfish, heartless little creature that ever breathed."

"Well, she is to be John's wife," said Miss Grace, sweeping the remainder of the flowers into her apron; "and so ends my life with John. I might have known it would come to this. I must make arrangements at once for another house and home. This house, so much, so dear to me, will be nothing to her; and yet she must be its mistress," she added, looking round on every thing in the room, and then bursting into tears.

Now, Miss Grace was not one of the crying sort, and so this emotion went to her friend's heart. Miss Letitia went up and put her arms

round her.

"Come, Gracie," she said, "you must not take it so seriously. John is a noble, manly fellow. He loves you, and he will always be master of his own house."

"No, he won't,--no married man ever is," said Miss Grace, wiping her eyes, and sitting up very straight. "No man, that is a gentleman, is ever master in his own house. He has only such rights there as his wife chooses to give him; and this woman won't like me, I'm sure."

"Perhaps she will," said Letitia, in a faltering voice.

"No, she won't; because I have no faculty for lying, or playing the hypocrite in any way, and I shan't approve of her. These soft, slippery, pretty little fibbing women have always been my abomination."

"Oh, my dear Grace!" said Miss Ferguson, "do let us make the best of it."

"I did think," said Miss Grace, wiping her eyes, "that John had some sense. I wasn't such a fool, nor so selfish, as to want him always to live for me. I wanted him to marry; and if he had got engaged to your Rose, for instance ... O Letitia! I always did so hope that he and Rose would like each other."

"We can't choose for our brothers," said Miss Letitia, "and, hard as it is, we must make up our minds to love those they bring to us. Who knows what good influences may do for poor Lillie Ellis? She never has had any yet. Her family are extremely common sort of people, without any culture or breeding, and only her wonderful beauty brought them into notice; and they have always used that as a sort of stock in trade."

"And John says, in this letter, that she reminds him of our mother," said Miss Grace; "and he thinks that naturally she was very much such a character. Just think of that, now!"

"He must be far gone," said Miss Ferguson; "but then, you see, she is distractingly pretty. She has just the most exquisitely pearly, pure, delicate, saint-like look, at times, that you ever saw; and then she knows exactly how she does look, and just how to use her looks; and John can't be blamed for believing in her. I, who know all about her, am sometimes taken in by her."

"Well," said Miss Grace, "Mrs. Lennox was at Newport last summer at the time that she was there, and she told me all about her. I think her an artful, unscrupulous, unprincipled woman, and her being made mistress of this house just breaks up our pleasant sociable life here. She has no literary tastes; she does not care for reading or study; she won't like our set here, and she will gradually drive them from

the house. She won't like me, and she will want to alienate John from me,--so there is just the situation."

"You may read that letter," added Miss Grace, wiping her eyes, and tossing her brother's letter into Miss Letitia's lap. Miss Letitia took the letter and read it. "Good fellow!" she exclaimed warmly, "you see just what I say,--his heart is all with you."

"Oh, John's heart is all light enough!" said Miss Grace; "and I don't doubt his love. He's the best, noblest, most affectionate fellow in the world. I only think he reckons without his host, in thinking he can keep all our old relations unbroken, when he puts a new mistress into the house, and such a mistress."

"But if she really loves him"--

"Pshaw! she don't. That kind of woman can't love. They are like cats, that want to be stroked and caressed, and to be petted, and to lie soft and warm; and they will purr to any one that will pet them,--that's all. As for love that leads to any self-sacrifice, they don't begin to know any thing about it."

"Gracie dear," said Miss Ferguson, "this sort of thing will never do. If you meet your brother in this way, you will throw him off, and, maybe, make a fatal breach. Meet it like a good Christian, as you are. You know," she said gently, "where we have a right to carry our

troubles, and of whom we should ask guidance."

"Oh, I do know, 'Titia!" said Miss Grace; "but I am letting myself be wicked just a little, you know, to relieve my mind. I ought to put myself to school to make the best of it; but it came on me so very suddenly. Yes," she added, "I am going to take a course of my Bible and Fénelon before I see John,--poor fellow."

"And try to have faith for her," said Miss Letitia.

"Well, I'll try to have faith," said Miss Grace; "but I do trust it will be some days before John comes down on me with his raptures,--men in love are such fools."

"But, dear me!" said Miss Letitia, as her head accidentally turned towards the window; "who is this riding up? Gracie, as sure as you live, it is John himself!"

"John himself!" repeated Miss Grace, becoming pale.

"Now do, dear, be careful," said Miss Letitia. "I'll just run out this back door and leave you alone;" and just as Miss Letitia's light heels were heard going down the back steps, John's heavy footsteps were coming up the front ones.