

CHAPTER III.

THE SISTER.

Grace Seymour was a specimen of a class of whom we are happy to say New England possesses a great many.

She was a highly cultivated, intelligent, and refined woman, arrived at the full age of mature womanhood unmarried, and with no present thought or prospect of marriage. I presume all my readers, who are in a position to run over the society of our rural New-England towns, can recall to their minds hundreds of such. They are women too thoughtful, too conscientious, too delicate, to marry for any thing but a purely personal affection; and this affection, for various reasons, has not fallen in their way.

The tendency of life in these towns is to throw the young men of the place into distant fields of adventure and enterprise in the far Western and Southern States, leaving at their old homes a population in which the feminine element largely predominates. It is not, generally speaking, the most cultivated or the most attractive of the brethren who remain in the place where they were born. The ardent, the daring, the enterprising, are off to the ends of the earth; and the choice of the sisters who remain at home is, therefore, confined to a restricted list; and so it ends in these delightful rose-gardens of

single women which abound in New England,--women who remain at home as housekeepers to aged parents, and charming persons in society; women over whose graces of conversation and manner the married men in their vicinity go off into raptures of eulogium, which generally end with, "Why hasn't that woman ever got married?"

It often happens to such women to expend on some brother that stock of hero-worship and devotion which it has not come in their way to give to a nearer friend. Alas! it is building on a sandy foundation; for, just as the union of hearts is complete, the chemical affinity which began in the cradle, and strengthens with every year of life, is dissolved by the introduction of that third element which makes of the brother a husband, while the new combination casts out the old,--sometimes with a disagreeable effervescence.

John and Grace Seymour were two only children of a very affectionate family; and they had grown up in the closest habits of intimacy. They had written to each other those long letters in which thoughtful people who live in retired situations delight; letters not of outward events, but of sentiments and opinions, the phases of the inner life. They had studied and pursued courses of reading together. They had together organized and carried on works of benevolence and charity.

The brother and sister had been left joint heirs of a large manufacturing property, employing hundreds of hands, in their vicinity; and the care and cultivation of these work-people, the

education of their children, had been most conscientiously upon their minds. Half of every Sunday they devoted together to labors in the Sunday school of their manufacturing village; and the two worked so harmoniously together in the interests of their life, that Grace had never felt the want of any domestic ties or relations other than those that she had.

Our readers may perhaps, therefore, concede that, among the many claimants for their sympathy in this cross-grained world of ours, some few grains of it may properly be due to Grace.

Things are trials that try us: afflictions are what afflict us; and, under this showing, Grace was both tried and afflicted by the sudden engagement of her brother. When the whole groundwork on which one's daily life is built caves in, and falls into the cellar without one moment's warning, it is not in human nature to pick one's self up, and reconstruct and rearrange in a moment. So Grace thought, at any rate; but she made a hurried effort to dash back her tears, and gulp down a rising in her throat, anxious only not to be selfish, and not to disgust her brother in the outset with any personal egotism.

So she ran to the front door to meet him, and fell into his arms, trying so hard to seem congratulatory and affectionate that she broke out into sobbing.

"My dear Gracie," said John, embracing and kissing her with that

gushing fervor with which newly engaged gentlemen are apt to deluge every creature whom they meet, "you've got my letter. Well, were not you astonished?"

"O John, it was so sudden!" was all poor Grace could say. "And you know, John, since mother died, you and I have been all in all to each other."

"And so we shall be, Gracie. Why, yes, of course we shall," he said, stroking her hair, and playing with her trembling, thin, white hands. "Why, this only makes me love you the more now; and you will love my little Lillie: fact is, you can't help it. We shall both of us be happier for having her here."

"Well, you know, John, I never saw her," said Grace, deprecatingly, "and so you can't wonder."

"Oh, yes, of course! Don't wonder in the least. It comes rather sudden,--and then you haven't seen her. Look, here is her photograph!" said John, producing one from the most orthodox innermost region, directly over his heart. "Look there! isn't it beautiful?"

"It is a very sweet face," said Grace, exerting herself to be sympathetic, and thankful that she could say that much truthfully.

"I can't imagine," said John, "what ever made her like me. You know

she has refused half the fellows in the country. I hadn't the remotest idea that she would have any thing to say to me; but you see there's no accounting for tastes;" and John plumed himself, as young gentlemen do who have carried off prizes.

"You see," he added, "it's odd, but she took a fancy to me the first time she saw me. Now, you know, Gracie, I never found it easy to get along with ladies at first; but Lillie has the most extraordinary way of putting a fellow at his ease. Why, she made me feel like an old friend the first hour."

"Indeed!"

"Look here," said John, triumphantly drawing out his pocket-book, and producing thence a knot of rose-colored satin ribbon. "Did you ever see such a lovely color as this? It's so exquisite, you see! Well, she always is wearing just such knots of ribbon, the most lovely shades. Why, there isn't one woman in a thousand could wear the things she does. Every thing becomes her. Sometimes it's rose color, or lilac, or pale blue,--just the most trying things to others are what she can wear."

"Dear John, I hope you looked for something deeper than the complexion in a wife," said Grace, driven to moral reflections in spite of herself.

"Oh, of course!" said John: "she has such soft, gentle, winning ways; she is so sympathetic; she's just the wife to make home happy, to be a bond of union to us all. Now, in a wife, what we want is just that. Lillie's mind, for instance, hasn't been cultivated as yours and Letitia's. She isn't at all that sort of girl. She's just a dear, gentle, little confiding creature, that you'll delight in. You'll form her mind, and she'll look up to you. You know she's young yet."

"Young, John! Why, she's seven and twenty," said Grace, with astonishment.

"Oh, no, my dear Gracie! that is all a mistake. She told me herself she's only twenty. You see, the trouble is, she went into company injudiciously early, a mere baby, in fact; and that causes her to have the name of being older than she is. But, I do assure you, she's only twenty. She told me so herself."

"Oh, indeed!" said Grace, prudently choking back the contradiction which she longed to utter. "I know it seems a good many summers since I heard of her as a belle at Newport."

"Ah, yes, exactly! You see she went into company, as a young lady, when she was only thirteen. She told me all about it. Her parents were very injudicious, and they pushed her forward. She regrets it now. She knows that it wasn't the thing at all. She's very sensitive to the defects in her early education; but I made her understand that it was

the heart more than the head that I cared for. I dare say, Gracie, she'll fall into all our little ways without really knowing; and you, in point of fact, will be mistress of the house as much as you ever were. Lillie is delicate, and never has had any care, and will be only too happy to depend on you. She's one of the gentle, dependent sort, you know."

To this statement, Grace did not reply. She only began nervously sweeping together the débris of leaves and flowers which encumbered the table, on which the newly arranged flower-vases were standing. Then she arranged the vases with great precision on the mantel-shelf. As she was doing it, so many memories rushed over her of that room and her mother, and the happy, peaceful family life that had hitherto been led there, that she quite broke down; and, sitting down in the chair, she covered her face, and went off in a good, hearty crying spell.

Poor John was inexpressibly shocked. He loved and revered his sister beyond any thing in the world; and it occurred to him, in a dim wise, that to be suddenly dispossessed and shut out in the cold, when one has hitherto been the first object of affection, is, to make the best of it, a real and sore trial.

But Grace soon recovered herself, and rose up smiling through her tears. "What a fool I am making of myself!" she said. "The fact is, John, I am only a little nervous. You mustn't mind it. You know," she said, laughing, "we old maids are like cats,--we find it hard to be

put out of our old routine. I dare say we shall all of us be happier in the end for this, and I shall try to do all I can to make it so. Perhaps, John, I'd better take that little house of mine on Elm Street, and set up my tent in it, and take all the old furniture and old pictures, and old-time things. You'll be wanting to modernize and make over this house, you know, to suit a young wife."

"Nonsense, Gracie; no such thing!" said John. "Do you suppose I want to leave all the past associations of my life, and strip my home bare of all pleasant memorials, because I bring a little wife here? Why, the very idea of a wife is somebody to sympathize in your tastes; and Lillie will love and appreciate all these dear old things as you and I do. She has such a sympathetic heart! If you want to make me happy, Gracie, stay here, and let us live, as near as may be, as before."

"So we will, John," said Grace, so cheerfully that John considered the whole matter as settled, and rushed upstairs to write his daily letter to Lillie.