

CHAPTER VII.

WILL SHE LIKE IT?

"John," said Grace, "when are you going out again to our Sunday school at Spindlewood? They are all asking after you. Do you know it is now two months since they have seen you?"

"I know it," said John. "I am going to-morrow. You see, Gracie, I couldn't well before."

"Oh! I have told them all about it, and I have kept things up; but then there are so many who want to see you, and so many things that you alone could settle and manage."

"Oh, yes! I'll go to-morrow," said John. "And, after this, I shall be steady at it. I wonder if we could get Lillie to go," said he, doubtfully.

Grace did not answer. Lillie was a subject on which it was always embarrassing to her to be appealed to. She was so afraid of appearing jealous or unappreciative; and her opinions were so different from those of her brother, that it was rather difficult to say any thing.

"Do you think she would like it, Grace?"

"Indeed, John, you must know better than I. If anybody could make her take an interest in it, it would be you."

Before his marriage, John had always had the idea that pretty, affectionate little women were religious and self-denying at heart, as matters of course. No matter through what labyrinths of fashionable follies and dissipation they had been wandering, still a talent for saintship was lying dormant in their natures, which it needed only the touch of love to develop. The wings of the angel were always concealed under the fashionable attire of the belle, and would unfold themselves when the hour came. A nearer acquaintance with Lillie, he was forced to confess, had not, so far, confirmed this idea. Though hers was a face so fair and pure that, when he first knew her, it suggested ideas of prayer, and communion with angels, yet he could not disguise from himself that, in all near acquaintance with her, she had proved to be most remarkably "of the earth, earthy." She was alive and fervent about fashionable gossip,--of who is who, and what does what; she was alive to equipages, to dress, to sightseeing, to dancing, to any thing of which the whole stimulus and excitement was earthly and physical. At times, too, he remembered that she had talked a sort of pensive sentimentalism, of a slightly religious nature; but the least idea of a moral purpose in life--of self-denial, and devotion to something higher than immediate self-gratification--seemed never to have entered her head. What is more, John had found his attempts to introduce such topics with her always unsuccessful. Lillie either gaped in his face,

and asked him what time it was; or playfully pulled his whiskers, and asked him why he didn't take to the ministry; or adroitly turned the conversation with kissing and compliments.

Sunday morning came, shining down gloriously through the dewy elm-arches of Springdale. The green turf on either side of the wide streets was mottled and flecked with vivid flashes and glimmers of emerald, like the sheen of a changeable silk, as here and there long arrows of sunlight darted down through the leaves and touched the ground.

The gardens between the great shady houses that flanked the street were full of tall white and crimson phloxes in all the majesty of their summer bloom, and the air was filled with fragrance; and Lillie, after a two hours' toilet, came forth from her chamber fresh and lovely as the bride in the Canticles. "Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee." She was killingly dressed in the rural-simplicity style. All her robes and sashes were of purest white; and a knot of field-daisies and grasses, with French dew-drops on them, twinkled in an infinitesimal bonnet on her little head, and her hair was all *créped* into a filmy golden aureole round her face. In short, dear reader, she was a perfectly got-up angel, and wanted only some tulle clouds and an opening heaven to have gone up at once, as similar angels do from the Parisian stage.

"You like me, don't you?" she said, as she saw the delight in John's

eyes.

John was tempted to lay hold of his plaything.

"Don't, now,--you'll crumple me," she said, fighting him off with a dainty parasol. "Positively you shan't touch me till after church."

John laid the little white hand on his arm with pride, and looked down at her over his shoulder all the way to church. He felt proud of her. They would look at her, and see how pretty she was, he thought. And so they did. Lillie had been used to admiration in church. It was one of her fields of triumph. She had received compliments on her toilet even from young clergymen, who, in the course of their preaching and praying, found leisure to observe the beauties of nature and grace in their congregation. She had been quite used to knowing of young men who got good seats in church simply for the purpose of seeing her; consequently, going to church had not the moral advantages for her that it has for people who go simply to pray and be instructed. John saw the turning of heads, and the little movements and whispers of admiration; and his heart was glad within him. The thought of her mingled with prayer and hymn; even when he closed his eyes, and bowed his head, she was there.

Perhaps this was not exactly as it should be; yet let us hope the angels look tenderly down on the sins of too much love. John felt as if he would be glad of a chance to die for her; and, when he thought

of her in his prayers, it was because he loved her better than himself.

As to Lillie, there was an extraordinary sympathy of sentiment between them at that moment. John was thinking only of her; and she was thinking only of herself, as was her usual habit,--herself, the one object of her life, the one idol of her love.

Not that she knew, in so many words, that she, the little, frail bit of dust and ashes that she was, was her own idol, and that she appeared before her Maker, in those solemn walls, to draw to herself the homage and the attention that was due to God alone; but yet it was true that, for years and years, Lillie's unconfessed yet only motive for appearing in church had been the display of herself, and the winning of admiration.

But is she so much worse than others?--than the clergyman who uses the pulpit and the sacred office to show off his talents?--than the singers who sing God's praises to show their voices,--who intone the agonies of their Redeemer, or the glories of the Te Deum, confident on the comments of the newspaper press on their performance the next week? No: Lillie may be a little sinner, but not above others in this matter.

"Lillie," said John to her after dinner, assuming a careless, matter-of-course air, "would you like to drive with me over to

Spindlewood, and see my Sunday school?"

"Your Sunday school, John? Why, bless me! do you teach Sunday school?"

"Certainly I do. Grace and I have a school of two hundred children and young people belonging to our factories. I am superintendent."

"I never did hear of any thing so odd!" said Lillie. "What in the world can you want to take all that trouble for,--go basking over there in the hot sun, and be shut up with a room full of those ill-smelling factory-people? Why, I'm sure it can't be your duty! I wouldn't do it for the world. Nothing would tempt me. Why, gracious, John, you might catch small-pox or something!"

"Pooh! Lillie, child, you don't know any thing about them. They are just as cleanly and respectable as anybody."

"Oh, well! they may be. But these Irish and Germans and Swedes and Danes, and all that low class, do smell so,--you needn't tell me, now!--that working-class smell is a thing that can't be disguised."

"But, Lillie, these are our people. They are the laborers from whose toils our wealth comes; and we owe them something."

"Well! you pay them something, don't you?"

"I mean morally. We owe our efforts to instruct their children, and to elevate and guide them. Lillie, I feel that it is wrong for us to use wealth merely as a means of self-gratification. We ought to labor for those who labor for us. We ought to deny ourselves, and make some sacrifices of ease for their good."

"You dear old preachy creature!" said Lillie. "How good you must be! But, really, I haven't the smallest vocation to be a missionary,--not the smallest. I can't think of any thing that would induce me to take a long, hot ride in the sun, and to sit in that stived-up room with those common creatures."

John looked grave. "Lillie," he said, "you shouldn't speak of any of your fellow-beings in that heartless way."

"Well now, if you are going to scold me, I'm sure I don't want to go. I'm sure, if everybody that stays at home, and has comfortable times, Sundays, instead of going out on missions, is heartless, there are a good many heartless people in the world."

"I beg your pardon, my darling. I didn't mean, dear, that you were heartless, but that what you said sounded so. I knew you didn't really mean it. I didn't ask you, dear, to go to work,--only to be company for me."

"And I ask you to stay at home, and be company for me. I'm sure it is lonesome enough here, and you are off on business almost all your days; and you might stay with me Sundays. You could hire some poor, pious young man to do all the work over there. There are plenty of them, dear knows, that it would be a real charity to help, and that could preach and pray better than you can, I know. I don't think a man that is busy all the week ought to work Sundays. It is breaking the Sabbath."

"But, Lillie, I am interested in my Sunday school. I know all my people, and they know me; and no one else in the world could do for them what I could."

"Well, I should think you might be interested in me: nobody else can do for me what you can, and I want you to stay with me. That's just the way with you men: you don't care any thing about us after you get us."

"Now, Lillie, darling, you know that isn't so."

"It's just so. You care more for your old missionary work, now, than you do for me. I'm sure I never knew that I'd married a home-missionary."

"Darling, please, now, don't laugh at me, and try to make me selfish and worldly. You have such power over me, you ought to be my

inspiration."

"I'll be your common-sense, John. When you get on stilts, and run benevolence into the ground, I'll pull you down. Now, I know it must be bad for a man, that has as much as you do to occupy his mind all the week, to go out and work Sundays; and it's foolish, when you could perfectly well hire somebody else to do it, and stay at home, and have a good time."

"But, Lillie, I need it myself."

"Need it,--what for? I can't imagine."

"To keep me from becoming a mere selfish, worldly man, and living for mere material good and pleasure."

"You dear old Don Quixote! Well, you are altogether in the clouds above me. I can't understand a word of all that."

"Well, good-by, darling," said John, kissing her, and hastening out of the room, to cut short the interview.

Milton has described the peculiar influence of woman over man, in lowering his moral tone, and bringing him down to what he considered the peculiarly womanly level. "You women," he said to his wife, when she tried to induce him to seek favors at court by some concession of

principle,--"you women never care for any thing but to be fine, and to ride in your coaches." In Father Adam's description of the original Eve, he says,--

"All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded; wisdom, in discourse with her,
Loses, discountenanced, and like folly shows."

Something like this effect was always produced on John's mind when he tried to settle questions relating to his higher nature with Lillie. He seemed, somehow, always to get the worst of it. All her womanly graces and fascinations, so powerful over his senses and imagination, arrayed themselves formidably against him, and for the time seemed to strike him dumb. What he believed, and believed with enthusiasm, when he was alone, or with Grace, seemed to drizzle away, and be belittled, when he undertook to convince her of it. Lest John should be called a muff and a spoon for this peculiarity, we cite once more the high authority aforesaid, where Milton makes poor Adam tell the angel,--

"Yet when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best."

John went out from Lillie's presence rather humbled and over-crowed.

When the woman that a man loves laughs at his moral enthusiasms, it is like a black frost on the delicate tips of budding trees. It is up-hill work, as we all know, to battle with indolence and selfishness, and self-seeking and hard-hearted worldliness. Then the highest and holiest part of our nature has a bashfulness of its own. It is a heavenly stranger, and easily shamed. A nimble-tongued, skilful woman can so easily show the ridiculous side of what seemed heroism; and what is called common-sense, so generally, is only some neatly put phase of selfishness. Poor John needed the angel at his elbow, to give him the caution which he is represented as giving to Father Adam:--

"What transports thee so?
An outside?--fair, no doubt, and worthy well
Thy cherishing, thy honor, and thy love,
Not thy subjection. Weigh her with thyself,
Then value. Oft-times nothing profits more
Than self-esteem, grounded on just and right
Well managed: of that skill the more them knowest,
The more she will acknowledge thee her head,
And to realities yield all her shows."

But John had no angel at his elbow. He was a fellow with a great heart,--good as gold,--with upward aspirations, but with slow speech; and, when not sympathized with, he became confused and incoherent, and even dumb. So his only way with his little pink and white empress was

immediate and precipitate flight.

Lillie ran to the window when he was gone, and saw him and Grace get into the carriage together; and then she saw them drive to the old Ferguson House, and Rose Ferguson came out and got in with them. "Well," she said to herself, "he shan't do that many times more,--I'm resolved."

No, she did not say it. It would be well for us all if we did put into words, plain and explicit, many instinctive resolves and purposes that arise in our hearts, and which, for want of being so expressed, influence us undetected and unchallenged. If we would say out boldly, "I don't care for right or wrong, or good or evil, or anybody's rights or anybody's happiness, or the general good, or God himself,--all I care for, or feel the least interest in, is to have a good time myself, and I mean to do it, come what may,"--we should be only expressing a feeling which often lies in the dark back-room of the human heart; and saying it might alarm us from the drugged sleep of life. It might rouse us to shake off the slow, creeping paralysis of selfishness and sin before it is for ever too late.

But Lillie was a creature who had lost the power of self-knowledge. She was, my dear sir, what you suppose the true woman to be,--a bundle of blind instincts; and among these the strongest was that of property in her husband, and power over him. She had lived in her power over men; it was her field of ambition. She knew them thoroughly. Women are

called ivy; and the ivy has a hundred little fingers in every inch of its length, that strike at every flaw and crack and weak place in the strong wall they mean to overgrow; and so had Lillie. She saw, at a glance, that the sober, thoughtful, Christian life of Springdale was wholly opposed to the life she wanted to lead, and in which John was to be her instrument. She saw that, if such women as Grace and Rose had power with him, she should not have; and her husband should be hers alone. He should do her will, and be her subject,--so she thought, smiling at herself as she looked in the looking-glass, and then curled herself peacefully and languidly down in the corner of the sofa, and drew forth the French novel that was her usual Sunday companion.

Lillie liked French novels. There was an atmosphere of things in them that suited her. The young married women had lovers and admirers; and there was the constant stimulus of being courted and adored, under the safe protection of a good-natured "mari."

In France, the flirting is all done after marriage, and the young girl looks forward to it as her introduction to a career of conquest. In America, so great is our democratic liberality, that we think of uniting the two systems. We are getting on in that way fast. A knowledge of French is beginning to be considered as the pearl of great price, to gain which, all else must be sold. The girls must go to the French theatre, and be stared at by French *débauchées*, who laugh at them while they pretend they understand what, thank Heaven,

they cannot. Then we are to have series of French novels, carefully translated, and puffed and praised even by the religious press, written by the corps of French female reformers, which will show them exactly how the naughty French women manage their cards; so that, by and by, we shall have the latest phase of eclecticism,--the union of American and French manners. The girl will flirt till twenty à l'Américaine, and then marry and flirt till forty à la Française. This was about Lillie's plan of life. Could she hope to carry it out in Springdale?