

CHAPTER XXVI.

MOTHERHOOD.

It is supposed by some that to become a mother is of itself a healing and saving dispensation; that of course the reign of selfishness ends, and the reign of better things begins, with the commencement of maternity.

But old things do not pass away and all things become new by any such rapid process of conversion. A whole life spent in self-seeking and self-pleasing is no preparation for the most august and austere of woman's sufferings and duties; and it is not to be wondered at if the untrained, untaught, and self-indulgent shrink from this ordeal, as Lillie did.

The next spring, while the gables of the new cottage on Elm Street were looking picturesquely through the blossoming cherry-trees, and the smoke was curling up from the chimneys where Grace and her husband were cosily settled down together, there came to John's house another little Lillie.

The little creature came in terror and trembling. For the mother had trifled fearfully with the great laws of her being before its birth; and the very shadow of death hung over her at the time the little new

life began.

Lillie's mother, now a widow, was sent for, and by this event installed as a fixture in her daughter's dwelling; and for weeks the sympathies of all the neighborhood were concentrated upon the sufferer. Flowers and fruits were left daily at the door. Every one was forward in offering those kindly attentions which spring up so gracefully in rural neighborhoods. Everybody was interested for her. She was little and pretty and suffering; and people even forgot to blame her for the levities that had made her present trial more severe. As to John, he watched over her day and night with anxious assiduity, forgetting every fault and foible. She was now more than the wife of his youth; she was the mother of his child, enthroned and glorified in his eyes by the wonderful and mysterious experiences which had given this new little treasure to their dwelling.

To say the truth, Lillie was too sick and suffering for sentiment. It requires a certain amount of bodily strength and soundness to feel emotions of love; and, for a long time, the little Lillie had to be banished from the mother's apartment, as she lay weary in her darkened room, with only a consciousness of a varied succession of disagreeables and discomforts. Her general impression about herself was, that she was a much abused and most unfortunate woman; and that all that could ever be done by the utmost devotion of everybody in the house was insufficient to make up for such trials as had come upon her.

A nursing mother was found for the little Lillie in the person of a goodly Irish woman, fair, fat, and loving; and the real mother had none of those awakening influences, from the resting of the little head in her bosom, and the pressure of the little helpless fingers, which magnetize into existence the blessed power of love.

She had wasted in years of fashionable folly, and in a life led only for excitement and self-gratification, all the womanly power, all the capability of motherly giving and motherly loving that are the glory of womanhood. Kathleen, the white-armed, the gentle-bosomed, had all the simple pleasures, the tendernesses, the poetry of motherhood; while poor, faded, fretful Lillie had all the prose--the sad, hard, weary prose--of sickness and pain, unglorified by love.

John did not well know what to do with himself in Lillie's darkened room; where it seemed to him he was always in the way, always doing something wrong; where his feet always seemed too large and heavy, and his voice too loud; and where he was sure, in his anxious desire to be still and gentle, to upset something, or bring about some general catastrophe, and to go out feeling more like a criminal than ever.

The mother and the nurse, stationed there like a pair of chief mourners, spoke in tones which experienced feminine experts seem to keep for occasions like these, and which, as Hawthorne has said, give an effect as if the voice had been dyed black. It was a comfort and

relief to pass from the funeral gloom to the little pink-ruffled chamber among the cherry-trees, where the birds were singing and the summer breezes blowing, and the pretty Kathleen was crooning her Irish songs, and invoking the holy virgin and all the saints to bless the "darlin'" baby.

"An' it's a blessin' they brings wid 'em to a house, sir; the angels comes down wid 'em. We can't see 'em, sir; but, bless the darlin', she can. And she smiles in her sleep when she sees 'em."

Rose and Grace came often to this bower with kisses and gifts and offerings, like a pair of nice fairy godmothers. They hung over the pretty little waxen miracle as she opened her great blue eyes with a silent, mysterious wonder; but, alas! all these delicious moments, this artless love of the new baby life, was not for the mother. She was not strong enough to enjoy it. Its cries made her nervous; and so she kept the uncheered solitude of her room without the blessing of the little angel.

People may mourn in lugubrious phrase about the Irish blood in our country. For our own part, we think the rich, tender, motherly nature of the Irish girl an element a thousand times more hopeful in our population than the faded, washed-out indifferentism of fashionable women, who have danced and flirted away all their womanly attributes, till there is neither warmth nor richness nor maternal fulness left in them,--mere paper-dolls, without milk in their bosoms or blood

in their veins. Give us rich, tender, warm-hearted Bridgets and Kathleens, whose instincts teach them the real poetry of motherhood; who can love unto death, and bear trials and pains cheerfully for the joy that is set before them. We are not afraid for the republican citizens that such mothers will bear to us. They are the ones that will come to high places in our land, and that will possess the earth by right of the strongest.

Motherhood, to the woman who has lived only to be petted, and to be herself the centre of all things, is a virtual dethronement. Something weaker, fairer, more delicate than herself comes,--something for her to serve and to care for more than herself.

It would sometimes seem as if motherhood were a lovely artifice of the great Father, to wean the heart from selfishness by a peaceful and gradual process. The babe is self in another form. It is so interwoven and identified with the mother's life, that she passes by almost insensible gradations from herself to it; and day by day the distinctive love of self wanes as the child-love waxes, filling the heart with a thousand new springs of tenderness.

But that this benignant transformation of nature may be perfected, it must be wrought out in Nature's own way. Any artificial arrangement that takes the child away from the mother interrupts that wonderful system of contrivances whereby the mother's nature and being shade off into that of the child, and her heart enlarges to a new and heavenly

power of loving.

When Lillie was sufficiently recovered to be fond of any thing, she found in her lovely baby only a new toy,--a source of pride and pleasure, and a charming occasion for the display of new devices of millinery. But she found Newport indispensable that summer to the re-establishment of her strength. "And really," she said, "the baby would be so much better off quietly at home with mamma and Kathleen. The fact is," she said, "she quite disregards me. She cries after Kathleen if I take her; so that it's quite provoking."

And so Lillie, free and unencumbered, had her gay season at Newport with the Follingsbees, and the Simpkinses, and the Tompkinses, and all the rest of the nice people, who have nothing to do but enjoy themselves; and everybody flattered her by being incredulous that one so young and charming could possibly be a mother.