

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NEW LILLIE.

We have but one scene more before our story closes. It is night now in Lillie's sick-room; and her mother is anxiously arranging the drapery, to keep the fire-light from her eyes, stepping noiselessly about the room. She lies there behind the curtains, on her pillow,--the wreck and remnant only of what was once so beautiful. During all these years, when the interests and pleasures of life have been slowly dropping, leaf by leaf, and passing away like fading flowers, Lillie has learned to do much thinking. It sometimes seems to take a stab, a thrust, a wound, to open in some hearts the capacity of deep feeling and deep thought. There are things taught by suffering that can be taught in no other way. By suffering sometimes is wrought out in a person the power of loving, and of appreciating love. During the first year, Lillie had often seemed to herself in a sort of wild, chaotic state. The coming in of a strange new spiritual life was something so inexplicable to her that it agitated and distressed her; and sometimes, when she appeared more petulant and fretful than usual, it was only the stir and vibration on her weak nerves of new feelings, which she wanted the power to express. These emotions at first were painful to her. She felt weak, miserable, and good for nothing. It seemed to her that her whole life had been a wretched cheat, and that she had ill repaid the devotion of her husband. At first these

thoughts only made her bitter and angry; and she contended against them. But, as she sank from day to day, and grew weaker and weaker, she grew more gentle; and a better spirit seemed to enter into her.

On this evening that we speak of, she had made up her mind that she would try and tell her husband some of the things that were passing in her mind.

"Tell John I want to see him," she said to her mother. "I wish he would come and sit with me."

This was a summons for which John invariably left every thing. He laid down his book as the word was brought to him, and soon was treading noiselessly at her bedside.

"Well, Lillie dear," he said, "how are you?"

She put out her little wasted hand; "John dear," she said, "sit down; I have something that I want to say to you. I have been thinking, John, that this can't last much longer."

"What can't last, Lillie?" said John, trying to speak cheerfully.

"I mean, John, that I am going to leave you soon, for good and all; and I should not think you would be sorry either."

"Oh, come, come, my girl, it won't do to talk so!" said John, patting her hand. "You must not be blue."

"And so, John," said Lillie, going on without noticing this interruption, "I wanted just to tell you, before I got any weaker, that I know and feel just how patient and noble and good you have always been to me."

"O Lillie darling!" said John, "why shouldn't I be? Poor little girl, how much you have suffered!"

"Well, now, John, I know perfectly well that I have never been the wife that I ought to be to you. You know it too; so don't try to say anything about it. I was never the woman to have made you happy; and it was not fair in me to marry you. I have lived a dreadfully worldly, selfish life. And now, John, I am come to the end. You dear good man, your trials with me are almost over; but I want you to know that you really have succeeded. John, I do love you now with all my heart, though I did not love you when I married you. And, John, I do feel that God will take pity on me, poor and good for nothing as I am, just because I see how patient and kind you have always been to me when I have been so very provoking. You see it has made me think how good God must be,--because, dear, we know that he is better than the best of us."

"O Lillie, Lillie!" said John, leaning over her, and taking her in his

arms, "do live, I want you to live. Don't leave me now, now that you really love me!"

"Oh, no, John! it is best as it is,--I think I should not have strength to be very good, if I were to get well; and you would still have your little cross to carry. No, dear, it is all right. And, John, you will have the best of me in our Lillie. She looks like me: but, John, she has your good heart; and she will be more to you than I could be. She is just as sweet and unselfish as I was selfish. I don't think I am quite so bad now; and I think, if I lived, I should try to be a great deal better."

"O Lillie! I cannot bear to part with you! I never have ceased to love you; and I never have loved any other woman."

"I know that, John. Oh! how much truer and better you are than I have been! But I like to think that you love me,--I like to think that you will be sorry when I am gone, bad as I am, or was; for I insist on it that I am a little better than I was. You remember that story of Undine you read me one day? It seems as if most of my life I have been like Undine before her soul came into her. But this last year I have felt the coming in of a soul. It has troubled me; it has come with a strange kind of pain. I have never suffered so much. But it has done me good--it has made me feel that I have an immortal soul, and that you and I, John, shall meet in some better place hereafter.--And there you will be rewarded for all your goodness to me."

As John sat there, and held the little frail hand, his thoughts went back to the time when the wild impulse of his heart had been to break away from this woman, and never see her face again; and he gave thanks to God, who had led him in a better way.

* * * * *

And so, at last, passed away the little story of Lillie's life. But in the home which she has left now grows another Lillie, fairer and sweeter than she,--the tender confidant, the trusted friend of her father. And often, when he lays his hand on her golden head, he says, "Dear child, how like your mother you look!"

Of all that was painful in that experience, nothing now remains. John thinks of her only as he thought of her in the fair illusion of first love,--the dearest and most sacred of all illusions.

The Lillie who guides his household, and is so motherly to the younger children; who shares every thought of his heart; who enters into every feeling and sympathy,--she is the pure reward of his faithfulness and constancy. She is a sacred and saintly Lillie, springing out of the sod where he laid her mother, forgetting all her faults for ever.