

# THE STEPMOTHER.\*

BY R. E. M.

## CHAPTER IV.

On passing through the sitting room, Amy met Mrs. Morton. There was a strange expression in the countenance of the latter, which she could not define, and her cheeks involuntarily crimsoned, as her step-mother exclaimed, in a peculiar tone :

"Good evening, Miss Morton; I hope you have had a pleasant walk, at least I should think so, from your having protracted it so much later than usual."

Amy replied something about the beauty of the weather, and proceeded to her own room. Having seated herself, she took up a book she had commenced reading; but she found it impossible to fix her attention upon it. Mrs. Morton's strange manner recurred to her, and she formed a thousand conjectures respecting its cause. Suddenly, the thought flashed upon her, that she might have witnessed her interview with her cousin; and she remembered, a fact that had escaped her till then, that the windows of her dressing room commanded a view of the arbour, in which she had been sitting. The unpleasant reflections this remembrance excited, may be imagined, and it was with no agreeable feelings, she prepared to attend the summons to the tea-table. The fear that Mrs. Morton would make some allusion that might rouse her father's curiosity or—still worse, that she would disclose all to him—haunted her. To her inexpressible relief then, on entering the apartment, she saw it was empty. On enquiry, she found her father was absent, and would not be at home till late. Mrs. Morton, not feeling well, took her repast in her own room. In the course of the evening, she had ample leisure to review in her mind, all the events of the day,—the visit of her cousin, his story, and lastly, the unpleasant position she was placed in, with regard to her stepmother. She knew that if the latter did not immediately reveal her secret, she would, sooner or later, do so, in some fit of passion; and she at length determined to throw herself on her father's indulgence, and confess all. Scarcely had she formed this resolution, when

she heard the tramp of a horse's hoof beneath her window; and she knew he had returned. After a few minutes hesitation, she descended to his library, and knocked for admittance. He was in rapid, earnest conversation with some person in the room, and the vehemence of his tones prevented her being heard. She then tried the lock, but it was fastened. Seeing he evidently did not wish to be interrupted, she retraced her steps to her apartment, and throwing on her morning gown, lay down on her couch, resolving to seek him when his unknown visitor should have departed.

She was roused from an uneasy sleep, by the servant's entering to tell her that Mr. Morton desired to speak to her, in his library. Wondering what he could want with her at so late an hour, she rose, and proceeded to his study. He was pacing the room, his arms folded, while his face, unusually pale, wore so severe and stern an expression that she shrank from approaching him. For a moment he regarded her in silence, but at length exclaimed, in a voice of concentrated passion ;

"Can you conjecture, young lady, why I have sent for you?"

"No indeed," replied Amy, trembling from head to foot.

"What blissful ignorance! But perhaps, this is but another specimen of the duplicity you have so long practised towards me."

"Duplicity!" repeated his daughter, springing from the chair, against which she had leant for support.

"Perhaps you may have some gentler, more lady-like term for it, such as delicacy or reserve; but that does not alter its nature. Do you not call it deceit," he continued, changing his sarcastic tone, to one more congenial with his irritated feelings, "do you not call it deceit, to receive the unauthorized visits of a stranger, to pledge yourself to him, without even deigning to apprise me of it?"

Amy was confounded. There was too much truth in her father's last words to admit of an