

THE SORROWS OF GIRLHOOD.

BY LILY WATSON.

PART III.



WHEN I began to confer with my girl readers—for the sake of nearness to whom I have discarded the editorial We—on the special troubles in which they may need comfort and help, I strongly disclaimed any intention of being sentimental myself, or of encouraging sentimentality in them. This danger is real, and so much to be dreaded, that in each case it seems necessary to rigidly lay down the limits within which sympathy may be granted, and confidence encouraged.

The present theme above all others needs judicious limitation, and for this reason—that in women, overstrung nerves, morbid tendencies, frequently assume the form of a complaint of loneliness and neglect. "I am so lonely; no one cares for me!" cries an invalid of a certain type, lying in a room bright with the flowers sent by sympathising friends, while the knocker is almost worn out with the constant assaults upon it in "kind inquiry." Try to prove to such an invalid that she is mistaken, and you will only be thought unsympathetic. The governess in home or school, worn out and overtasked at the end of a term, feels bitterly that certain wholly innocent actions on the part of her employers, fellow-workers, or pupils are meant as a deliberate slight. One can, in many women, detect the approach of a nervous break-down by the complaint of neglect or loneliness.

This is not a symptom to be ridiculed. It entails a great deal of suffering upon its victim; but it is not, by the recipient of such confidences, to be met by assent and pity. Rather it should be recognised as a symptom of ill-health and treated by the remedies of less work, less strain, cheerful society, and all that can brace and invigorate and help. It is a mistake in these cases ever to encourage the delusion.

The consciousness of plainness, or a painful shyness—troubles I have already discussed with my readers—are other causes that will lead to this morbid view of life; and pride in its various forms is a fruitful source of fancied loneliness and neglect. The proud and poor relation or acquaintance sees an affront where nothing of the sort is intended. Which of us cannot recall such instances? It is often most difficult to "get on" with delightful people who are a little poorer than you are because they are apt to imagine themselves neglected on account of their social insignificance, when there is not the faintest ground for the supposition.

This sort of thing is nothing but pride, and pride after the "Uriah Heep" style, which

apes humility; it has its root in a diseased self-consciousness. Therefore let us beware of it with might and main.

There is also a proud reserve which fences in its owner from all approach and makes her lonely in real earnest through her own fault, while she blames other people.

Ill-health and overwork, plainness, shyness, pride: these are some of the causes that will foster the morbid conviction of loneliness or neglect, and each cause should be met in its appropriate way.

So much for the pseudo-forms of this trouble. But what of the realities? for realities they are in many a case.

All of us are lonely to a certain extent. "Thus far shalt thou come and no farther," might be inscribed above the sanctuary of every heart for all human intruders.

"Why should we faint and fear to live alone,

Since all alone (so Heaven has willed) we die,

Not even the fondest heart aneth our own
Knows half the reasons why we smile
or sigh."

So Keble says: and as life goes on this truth is increasingly known.

And yet it will always be true that in friendship and loving converse lies the chief joy of life. In proportion as one is endowed with a sensitive, sympathetic nature does one need the response from other natures, and its lack is a misfortune so great that it is simply indescribable.

The most eminent of novelists have chosen this theme. In a past generation the *Sorrows of Werter* took hold upon the young with overmastering force. One may, with reason, call the book exaggerated and morbid and blame its influence, but Goethe knew the human heart. Charlotte Brontë, in each of her novels, has a heroine deeply, tragically conscious of this loneliness. *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe* are no mere sentimental girls lamenting loudly over fancied griefs, but women who knew and quietly faced this terror, working with all their might the while. One of the most charming passages in *Shirley* is that where Caroline Helstone finds her mother in Mrs. Pryor after her lonely suffering. Some of Christina Rossetti's sweetest poetry is on this theme; for instance, the verses on "L. E. L." "whose heart was breaking for a little love."

"Downstairs I laugh, I sport, and jest with all,

But in my solitary room above

I turn my face in silence to the wall;

My heart is breaking for a little love.

Though winter frosts are done,

And birds pair every one,

And leaves peep out, for springtide has begun.

Perhaps some saints in glory guess the truth,

Perhaps some angels read it as they move,

And cry one to another, full of ruth,

Her heart is breaking for a little love.

Though other things have birth,

And leap and sing for mirth,

When springtime wakes, and clothes and feeds the earth."

The great poet Dante knew and recorded how hard it is to pace up and down the stairs of alien homes!

In spite of Keble's question, human hearts do "faint and fear to live alone." And this

is specially terrible when one is young. There is a loneliness of age that is sad and tragic enough, but the loneliness of youth has something so strange and unnatural about it that it is perhaps harder to bear. The young life sends out its tendrils in all directions, seeking to find some friendly support to answer the clinging embrace, and for due development these are necessary.

There are three chief causes which produce this genuine loneliness. First, there is the loneliness attaching to the position of a "dependent" (?) in other houses; then there is the loneliness of being surrounded by unsympathetic people, no matter who they are; lastly there is the actual isolation which sometimes cannot be helped.

The young governess in a family has long been the chief recognised type of lonely girlhood. Charlotte Brontë had had experience of that which she wrote about. In the pursued ignorant household, honoured for a time by her services, she was made in every way to feel that she was utterly outside the family life. "Love the governess, my dear!" exclaimed the mother in consternation when a little boy showed Miss Brontë some affection, and the fire smouldered at her proud heart until it found its vent in the novel that took England by storm. Among people of any refinement and education such treatment would be impossible. To allow a stranger living in the heart of a family to feel solitary or neglected if it can possibly be helped, is a crime that might deserve the censure of the lady in *Punch*; "It's worse than wicked, it's vulgar!" So in Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*, Jane Graham writes to her mother-in-law on her visit to "The Hurst" concerning the beautiful Mrs. Vaughan.

"She led

The way to where the children ate
Their dinner, and there Williams sate.
She's only nursery governess,
Yet they consider her no less
Than Lord or Lady Carr or me.
Just think, how happy she must be!"

In spite of the utmost courtesy and kindness of well-bred people, however, it must always be a difficult thing for one girl or woman, living in a household in a special capacity, without colleagues, to avoid a feeling of desolation. She who still wants affectionate guidance, has to guide others; she has to stand on an imaginary pedestal which is always a solitary position, and when her work is done for the day, for the very sake of quiet she prefers to remain alone. The girl from a large family who has gone out into the world, even although she may have secured a "desirable situation" and has no slights to boast of, must often know what it is to bear this sorrow.

To her I would say, Do all you can to put away the thought of it. If the people with whom you live are kind and anxious to make you "one of the family," do not repel them, even though solitude would sometimes be pleasanter than their society; try not to brood or grow morbid; never allow yourself to impute slights, and, above all, find companionship in books, which will carry you away from yourself. One must in these matters "make the best of things." I am always sorry for the "bright young governess" so often advertised in the daily papers; and yet she may have it within her own power to make her life as "bright" as her reputed character.

The second sort of loneliness is that which comes solely from being with people of