

THE STEPMOTHER.*

BY R. E. M.

CHAPTER XII.

HAPPY indeed was poor Amy, when towards the close of the following day she entered the hospitable mansion of Neville Park. With motherly tenderness the gentle hostess welcomed her, and though she saw Amy was both suffering and unhappy, she forbore questioning her. Mrs. Neville saw but little company, and nothing could have been more in accordance with the wishes of her youthful guest, who found more satisfaction in the pleasant drives and walks she daily took, in the cheerful conversation and music that enlivened their evenings, than in meetings in which she knew she would hourly hear of those she wished to forget. The invigorating air of the country soon tended to restore in some degree her strength, and Mrs. Neville remarked with pleasure, that her step was lighter, her manner less dejected than on her arrival. One evening, having just returned from a short excursion in the Park, she found a letter on her table, which had come during her absence. She immediately recognized the delicate handwriting of her stepmother, and with a sickening feeling of reluctance she opened it. After giving her the *on dit*s of the day, she continued:

"But how do you contrive to vegetate in that horrid Neville Park? It always reminds me of a country parsonage, and Mrs. Neville herself, with her low, sweet voice, and stiff, angular manners, enacts to perfection the part of the poor curate's wife. And the time too that you select to bury yourself alive!—when the gay season is just commencing. I must certainly say you are the most singular girl I ever knew. At every place I make my appearance I am surrounded by a host of enquirers, eagerly demanding what has become of Miss Morton? When does she intend returning? Indeed I had no idea your little quiet ladyship's absence would have created such a sensation. Sir George is *au désespoir*, but he consoles himself by remembering that Mrs. Neville, her sleepy husband, and the old butler, are the only rivals he has to fear at Neville Park. Indeed I am sometimes tempted to think his uneasiness is over-acted, and that he really is glad of a seclusion which separates you from all

dangerous competitors. Captain Delmour, who daily visits here, often asks for you. I must say that whatever opinion I may once have entertained of him, I now think him one of the most gentlemanly and agreeable persons I know. Miss Aylmer desires me to ask if she may share your solitude, as she is now wearing the willow for her witty and intellectual admirer, Lord Hilton; who at length weary of dancing attendance on so capricious a being, even though she is a beauty and an heiress, has turned his devotion to the fair and gifted Miss Danton, who you know, has just attained her thirty-sixth year. But *n'importe*, she wears rouge, false curls, and has a very youthful, interesting manner. But I hear Delmour in the hall, and I declare, Sir George too. What an unaccountable antipathy those two possess for each other! Ever yours,

"LOUISA MORTON."

Nothing did Amy notice or remember of this silly letter, so characteristic of the writer, but the sentence which told that Delmour was now the constant visitor, and most probably the suitor, of a woman whom he had once affected to despise so much, and with whose many defects he was so perfectly acquainted. "Oh! how unmeasurably different," she bitterly murmured, "was the Delmour of my fancy from this changeable, frivolous being. However, I am grateful to know all. Contempt will soon teach me to regard him with the indifference he merits. But I shall remain in the seclusion Mrs. Morton deprecates so much, till I have schooled my feelings to bear every trial with calmness."

With a heavy heart, she set about inditing a reply, in which she mentioned that as she found her health and spirits so rapidly improving, she intended extending her stay at the country parsonage to a longer period than she had at first contemplated. Having concluded her disagreeable task, she returned to the drawing-room, and though she strove to smoothe her brow, Mrs. Neville soon perceived that something must have annoyed her. With her usual delicacy, she forbore making any remark, and Amy soon succeeded in recovering the comparative tranquillity which her stepmother's letter had disturbed. Several weeks had now elapsed, without any