

IN A MOTHER'S STEAD.

By A. M. BELLERBY.

CHAPTER III.

MATTERS did not right themselves so quickly as Mrs. Drew had anticipated. Stephanie's finger was quite healed, and Katharine so timed her movements that she did not come into collision with the doctor, and refused one or two special invitations to the house. Mrs. Drew was kept indoors with a severe cold, and Katharine was becoming rather anxious on behalf of Edwin. The child, not too strong at the best of times, was failing in health and appetite, but insisted on doing his beloved lessons; becoming fretful and irritable if she tried to diminish them. She dreaded the idea of Dr. Drew being sent for to prescribe, but touched by the child's appearance, at last said one day to his mother—

"Mrs. Mathew, have you noticed Edwin lately? I do not fancy he looks or seems at all well."

"I haven't observed it," replied that lady carelessly; "I want you to go to—"

"Indeed, I wish you would look at him well," went on the girl earnestly, "I think he ought to have an experienced physician, well-used to children, to see what is the matter. I am sure Mr. Mathew will notice a difference when he returns."

At that moment the door was burst open, and Edwin entered with the great St. Bernard, Max, in all the excitement of a tug-of-war; his small self at one end of a walking-stick and the big dog at the other; Katharine had not seen him so aroused for a long time. Mrs. Mathew called him to her, and looking at his flushed face and brightened eye, said—

"Really, I think you are fidgeting unnecessarily, Miss Skrine; I never saw him look better. She wants to get Dr. Drew again into the house," added the lady mentally, "for all her elaborate suggestion of 'an experienced physician.'"

But Katharine's anxiety did not pass as the days went on, and Edwin began often to complain of being "tired." Again she spoke to Mrs. Mathew, and again that lady scouted the idea.

"I believe she thinks I want to get Dr. Drew into the house," thought the girl indignantly; "how I wish Mr. Mathew would come home again!"

But Mr. Mathew was delayed much longer than he had expected, and Katharine, day by day, and week by week, watched the child she had learned to love so fondly, growing more and more weak and languid. She would have written to Mr. Mathew, but shrank from implying his wife's carelessness thereby. At last she made up her mind to a very difficult course of action. Choosing a time when she felt pretty sure the doctor would be out, she called on Mrs. Drew, who, thinking she had behaved somewhat strangely, received her a little coldly, but the girl, much in earnest, began—

"Mrs. Drew, I owe you an apology for my seeming rudeness towards you, but indeed it was not intentional. I have come to you now because I am in trouble about Edwin," and therewith she told all her anxiety to the old lady, who, shrewdly putting two and two together, guessed what Katharine omitted.

"I tell you what it is, dear. Mrs. Mathew need not know that you have said a word. My brother, who is also a doctor, is staying with me; I will bring him to-morrow to pay one of my rare visits to her, and ask that he may see the children. Leave it to us. If there is any ground for anxiety we will manage matters," and Katharine with lightened heart hastened back.

The old lady kept her word, and all was done as she said, but Mrs. Mathew's penetration was not deceived. After her visitors had departed she sent for the governess.

"Miss Skrine, may I ask if you have called lately on Mrs. Drew?"

"Once only, since you suggested that my visits were too frequent."

"And when was that?"

"Yesterday."

"I thought as much. And you had the impudence to talk about your fancies as to Edwin, as if I, his mother, paid no attention to his health. I tell you what it is, Miss Skrine, you want to get Dr. Drew into the house again, but I tell you as plainly he shall not come. At the end of a month you will be good enough to leave us."

"Since you choose to be so unwarrantably insulting, Mrs. Mathew, I should have determined to leave if you had not expressed your wish for me to do so."

Hot with indignant anger, Katharine went upstairs into the twilight to sit down quietly in the nursery and think; but two little arms were twined round her neck, and Edwin's now ever-plaintive voice said—

"I am tired, Kattie; let me sit on your knee while you talk to me."

Then came the thought that she must leave these children who had so tender a place in her heart, and Edwin exclaimed—

"You are crying, Kattie; a tear fell on me. What is the matter? I can't bear you to be unhappy."

"I am a little tired too, dear; and feeling stupid, that is all."

"Don't you think this is a very tiring world? It would be so nice to take off our poor little bodies and put them to sleep, while we—because our bodies aren't we, are they, Kattie?—went first where we wanted to without them?"

"Edwin, don't talk like that, darling," said she in sudden terror, clasping him closely to her.

"Oh, but I must, Kattie; I've no one but you and Stephanie to talk to, and she does not exactly understand; she is quite happy with her dolls over there now. Do you know, I think it must be so tiring to grow up to be a man and work away in the world like father or Dr. Drew. Do you remember that bit you read to me from Chaucer, and it comes in—'The wyesling of this world asketh a fall?' I can't get the words out of my head; and I don't feel like wyesling, Kattie."

"Oh, if Mr. Mathew would only come back," thought she, "how shall I tell him?"

But a letter from Mrs. Drew to the father was already on its way, urging his return; Anton had ascertained the address at the Birmingham office.

"DEAR MR. MATHEW,"—the letter ran—

"I do not wish to cause you any unnecessary anxiety, but if you could conveniently hasten your return, I think it would be advisable."

"Miss Skrine thinks Edwin has not been well, and he does not look so; but Mrs. Mathew does not seem to see it, and refuses to call in a doctor."

"You will understand that this is a difficult matter for me to write about, but I think you will thank me for it."

"Sincerely yours,

"JOANNA DREW."

In two days Mr. Mathew was at home; leaving his luggage to be sent after him, he took a hansom and was quickly at Moseley.

"Mrs. Mathew at home, Larkins?" to the man, whose imperturbable face showed no surprise at his master's totally unexpected return.

"In the drawing-room, sir; I hope you are well."

"Quite well, thank you," as Mr. Mathew strode to the drawing-room to find his wife settled comfortably in a roll-back, reading the last sensational novel.

He bent over and kissed her; this grave, quiet man, who always tried to think his wife in the right.

She started up.

"You, Philip! good gracious, how you frightened me! What in the world brought you back without sending word?"

"I found I could get away for a day or two, so I just ran home to see how you and the children are. How are you all, Alice?"

"Oh, very well, only that Miss Skrine you think so much of, has been leading me a pretty dance; frightening me with the idea of Edwin being ill—when the child is as well as ever he was in his life—and having the impudence to go and talk to the Drews about it! However, she's going, that's one comfort!"

"How do you mean? Miss Skrine going?"

"Yes, certainly, I was not going to have her meddle, and told her to leave in a month."

"You are an idiot, Alice!" Never had her husband spoken to her in such a tone, and with such words before.

"Oh, indeed, that's a pretty thing to say! I shall be inclined to think you are bewitched by her as well as Dr. Drew!"

Without heeding her, he passed on up to the night-nursery; the door was half-open, Edwin in his bed, and Katharine sitting by, telling one of his favourite stories; she sprang up with a look of delight as he entered.

"Mr. Mathew, how glad I am to see you!"

He shook warmly the hand held out to him, and turned to his little son, who rose up to greet him.

"Oh, father, I think I shall be stying again now you are back; you dear daddy, why didn't you let us know?" the little head snuggled on his shoulder, and Stephanie woke at the raised voices to join in with an uproarious welcome.

"Strong, what do you mean?"

"Only I haven't been feeling well; don't you know I wrote and said I wanted you back, and I was feeling tired?"

Yes, but the father had never supposed what that tiredness meant. He looked at the child, and was startled to see how thin his cheeks had become, and how large, sunken and bright were his eyes.

"Lie down a little while, my boy, and, Stephanie, go to sleep like a good girl, and you shall have such sweets as you never dreamed of in the morning."

Without waiting longer, he himself went straight to the doctor's house, briefly but cordially thanked Mrs. Drew, and brought Anton back with him. After due examination his report was not too satisfactory, and he finished by saying—

"I am young yet, Mr. Mathew, and my experience of children has not been large. I should like you to call in Dr. Fergusson, who has made them his particular study."

When he had left, Mr. Mathew went again to the drawing-room, where his wife was still sulking, and said what he had to say, very quietly, but very much to the point. For five minutes the lady stormed in response; for two and a half she wept, and then she retired to her room and drank *sal volatile*; but it was