

did not speak, and I could not see her face, I knew that the hand was my step-mother's, and I lay still for a long time, with my eyes closed, and Harry's words ringing in my ears. I was too weak even to think much, but I remembered that Harry had said he would not call her mother, and I wondered what had made him change his mind.

A few days after this I was carried from my bed to the sofa, and as my step-mother gently arranged my pillow, she whispered, "Ethel, darling, would you like papa to come and sit beside you?" and I answered "Yes, but you can stay too, if you like."

It was not a very gracious acknowledgement of all her tender devotion to me, but my step-mother seemed grateful even for this slight mark of approbation, for she stooped down to kiss me before she went to papa.

Very soon I was pronounced convalescent, and papa carried me down stairs to the breakfast-room. I remember how strange everything seemed. I could have fancied I had been away for a year instead of a month, and I was almost afraid of myself as I caught sight of my face in the mirror on the mantel-piece. I had become very pale and thin, and my hair being cut short gave me such a strange expression; but as I was not feeling ill, it was very pleasant to lie still in that beautiful room, looking through the half-open door of the conservatory, from which a delicious fragrance of roses and geraniums came to greet me. I thought that after all life was very sweet, and I had more to be thankful for than most people. Harry had just come home for the Christmas holidays, and he brought me in my lunch upon a little tray, and sat beside me while I took it. Harry was a kind hearted boy, and although he often teased me, I am sure he was very fond of me.

"I am going to take you out for a drive, Ethel," he said, "the very first day you are able to go. Papa has bought such a beautiful pony-carriage, and Mayflower goes like the wind. I never have to touch her. I have taken mother out twice, and she has promised to go with me this evening. I'll drive round the house, so that you can see us."

"Do you think she is really ill?" I enquired, pondering over an expression which had dropped from my grandmother's lips.

"Who is ill?"

"Grand-mamma said it was bad for her to sit up so much." I said, still avoiding the name.

"Oh, mother. I don't think there is much the matter with her now, though she was quite ill for a few days. It does her good taking her out for drives. Oh, Ethel, you don't know how nice she is. I am sorry I said all I did about her. She was so kind to you when you were ill, only you didn't know it, for you were so often out of your mind,—and she really does care for you, Ethel; she cried more about you than anybody in the house except me, and of course I am your own brother. I think she likes me too. I couldn't help making friends with her, and she didn't ask me to call her mother, but I thought she would like it, and she acts just like a mother. She doesn't look down upon us a bit, but only thinks what is good for us, and asks our opinion—I mean mine for you don't know her as I do."

I was very weak, and as the memory of the past rose up before me, I began to cry, partly because I was sorry for my own conduct, and partly because I did not exactly know how to meet my step-mother without the apology which my conscience suggested, and which my foolish pride rejected.

Harry was frightened at my agitation, for he knew that it was bad for me, and feared that he would be blamed for making me cry, but while he was trying adroitly to change the subject, my step-mother entered the room, and sitting down beside me took my hand in hers. "Would you like to go upstairs, dear," she said, "or shall I darken the room and let you sleep here?" I did not answer, but continued to cry weakly. "Poor child!" she said, "you have exerted yourself too much; you must not talk any more, now. There, lean on me" and as she placed her right hand under me I felt for her left hand, and raising it to my lips kissed it fervently. "You are so kind, mother," I said, and

in that moment the barrier which had separated us vanished. I lay for some minutes with her hand in mine, looking at her wedding ring, which was still so new and bright, and wondering how I could ever have felt angry at seeing her wear it.

A week after this I was able to go for a drive with Harry, and soon my recovery was quite complete, although I did not resume my lessons for some time. One evening, as we sat by the drawing-room fire, waiting for papa to come home, my mother said, "This reminds me of the night that I came here; do you remember, Ethel? It was raining, and you had a fire in this room, and grandmamma was waiting tea for us."

"Yes, I remember," I said; "we did not want you here, but now I am glad you came."

"Oh, Ethel! how unjust you were, my child," she said, coming closer to me, and putting her arm round me. "While you were stealing your heart against me I was longing for the time when I could call you mine. When your papa asked me to be his wife I accepted him because I loved him, and knew that he was a good man, but I also loved you children, and the thought of being a mother to you was for a time the brightest prospect in my life."

"I had once a little sister, Ethel, but she died before she was your age, and sometimes when grieving for her I have thought perhaps God is sending me Ethel in Maude's place. You are not unlike her in appearance, and I cherished the thought that you might resemble her in disposition. My life was a very lonely one, particularly after Maude's death, and I rejoiced in the thought that my husband's children were to share my home; indeed he had nothing to offer that I could appreciate as much. I assure you, dear Ethel, it is a foolish and unjust opinion, almost a superstition, which makes people believe that step-children are intruders. It is natural to love those who are dependent, upon us, the very feeling of responsibility endears them to us, and I am sure that many women love their step-children as dearly as they could love their own. The fault is much oftener with the young people, for a want of confidence and sympathy will in time repel the most loving disposition. It is hard work striving against prejudice, and no one can long continue to do it. If we want to be happy we must believe in the goodness of others without waiting to experience it."

"You believed in my goodness long ago," I said "and you have not experienced it yet." There was a choking sensation in my throat which prevented me from saying more, but inwardly I resolved that I would try to make amends for my past conduct.

It is nearly ten years since that evening, and our two little girls have just been mourning over the discovery that I am only "half their sister." "I am sure you are better than any real sister in the world," Maude says. "And mamma thinks so too," adds little Elsie, "and Harry is just as kind as any real brother," and mamma coming in says, "My children are all alike to me, and if Maude and Elsie grow up to be as great a comfort as Harry and Ethel have been, I shall think myself the happiest mother in all the world."

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