

THE STEPMOTHER.*

BY R. E. M.

CHAPTER VII.

SUCH was Amy's first night of pleasure, and it may be imagined with what feelings of repugnance she looked forward to another. It was not the mockery, the persecutions of Sir George, that had rendered it so insupportable. Oh, no! The bitterest pang was the overwhelming consciousness that Delmour was false. Until that evening she had, unknown to herself, cherished some faint hope of his returning, and repairing the unkindness which had arisen from some momentary fit of impatience, some misunderstanding; but now, the proofs of his inconstancy were too evident. Even when he had last visited her, soothed her with words of affection, another's image filled his heart. What baseness had he shewn! and she shrank from dwelling on it, for it added immeasurably to her sufferings, to discover such unworthiness where she had fondly imagined honor and nobleness alone existed. Two days after this, Sir George called, and Amy, who fortunately was in her room, refused to see him, under pretence of indisposition. A very short time elapsed ere he came again, but she was out driving, and her satisfaction, as may be supposed, was great, at having escaped the penalty of seeing him.

One evening, however, as she was alone in the drawing room, Mrs. Morton being confined to her room by a slight headache, the servant flung open the door, and Sir George entered. Recovered from her first embarrassment, her reception of him was polite, but excessively cold; and he had not been long in her society, ere he found she was not the shy school-girl he had imagined. On the night of the ball, nervous and bewildered, she certainly had not appeared to great advantage; but in her own house it was quite a different thing, and her demeanour was now as graceful as it had then been constrained and embarrassed. Her pertinacity in refusing to see him, shewed also she was not to be annoyed with impunity. He resolved then, at least for the present, to change his tactics, and he was accordingly as respectful and agreeable as she could desire. But having penetration enough to perceive that his society was anything but welcome to her,

notwithstanding her efforts to make it appear otherwise, he soon took leave. But he suddenly arrested his hand on the door, and drew forth a note from Lady Travers, to her stepmother.

"My sister would have been very angry at my negligence, for she charged me strictly to give it myself to Mrs. Morton. 'Tis a pity I cannot see her."

On Amy's promising to deliver it immediately, he thanked her, and left the room. She then rang for the servant to take it up; but the summons was unanswered, and remembering that it might require an immediate reply, she determined to give it herself. Knocking gently at the door of the lady's apartment, she heard her silvery voice exclaim, "Come in!" With some feeling of embarrassment, for it was the first time she had ever been in her stepmother's room, she entered. It was furnished with the most luxurious elegance—rose-colored hangings, delicate paintings, exquisite *statuettes*, everything was in keeping with the taste of the owner, who, reclining on a velvet couch, in an elegant morning undress, seemed certainly the fitting occupant of such a chamber.

"What is it?" she negligently exclaimed, supposing it was the servant, without raising her dark eyes from the silly French novel they were perusing. "Speak, girl," she added with impatience, turning towards the intruder. She started on perceiving Amy, and tutored as she was in dissimulation, she could not repress her first movement of astonishment, on receiving a visit so unexpected. The former, after asking how she felt, and giving Lady Travers' note, prepared to leave the room.

"Will you not be seated, Miss Morton?" she said, with one of her most winning smiles; "'twill really be an act of charity to pass a few moments with an invalid like myself, who has nothing to dissipate her *ennui* but this wearisome novel."

Amy could not, without ungraciousness, refuse; and inwardly wondering at her unwonted affability, she seated herself; Mrs. Morton begging her to excuse her, rapidly glanced over the note, and then threw it from her, exclaiming—

"What do you think of Lady Travers? Is she not a charming person?"