

even hint to him her consciousness of that growing evil, which was already beginning to make fearful inroads upon her domestic peace.

CHAPTER II.

It was about three years after the time of which we have written, that Eleanor Bond was attacked with a serious and alarming illness. She was the mother of three hopeful children, the youngest of which was but a few weeks old, when the distracted father implored the assistance of Mrs. West, to come and take the superintendance of the sick-room of his wife.

Mrs. West, who was a retiring and unobtrusive woman, naturally hesitated, particularly as the mother and sisters of the suffering patient were so near.

"But you know," said Frederick, "that Mrs. Stanley is no nurse. Her bustling habits create a perfect tumult wherever she comes; and as for the girls, they are too young and thoughtless to be of the slightest service in any case of emergency."

Mrs. West still hesitated.

"I see you have some other reason," said Frederick, "Let me entreat you not to allow any feeling of false delicacy to interfere with the natural goodness of your heart."

"I trust," said Mrs. West, "it is not false delicacy that keeps me back, but to speak plainly, I have no reason to believe that any attentions from me would be acceptable to Mrs. Bond: you know she has never—"

"Oh! don't think of that," interrupted Frederick, "don't think of it now. She is perfectly unconscious at this moment of all that passes around her; yet the flutter of so many inexperienced nurses, greatly increases the delirium under which she labours.—Never can I forget your untiring solicitude for me, when I was ill under your roof, and entirely dependent on your care. As you value my temporal and eternal happiness, let me prevail upon you to come and take charge of my wife for a day, for a single hour each day, or at least, for as long a time as you can be spared from your own family."

Mrs. West immediately despatched a note to her husband. She then visited the different departments of her household, and in the course of half an hour was standing silently by the restless couch of Eleanor Bond, having requested every one else either to leave the apartment, or to maintain the strictest order and quiet.

Nor had it been a difficult task to obtain this release from injudicious attentions. One had urgent calls of duty at home, another had duties equally urgent abroad, and all were easily prevailed upon to leave the sick-room, under the conviction that their absence would be more than supplied by Mrs. West.

Silent and peaceful was the chamber of suffering now, except for the fitful wanderings of the restless invalid; who, lost to the consciousness of reality on almost every other point, was possessed with the belief that some gentle spirit from a better world, had come down to minister to her necessities.

Fully aware of the prejudice existing against her in the mind of Eleanor Bond, Mrs. West had carefully avoided obtruding herself upon her notice. With a noiseless step, she had glided around her bed, and even when she raised her head, or adjusted her pillows, she had often concealed her own face behind the curtains, lest her countenance, meek and fair and placid as it was, should displease or offend. With inexpressible satisfaction, however, she soon discovered that in her new character, she was not recognised as the repulsive being from whom Eleanor had so often turned away, to seek for friendship that was not worthy to be weighed in the balance with what hers might have been; and while the unconscious patient fondly bestowed upon her the appellation of a good angel, refusing everything that was not offered by her hand, it might have awakened a smile on a countenance less grave than hers, to think of the disparity there was between her angelic nature, and the menial offices it now became her pleasure to perform.

Mrs. West was not one of those ladies who leave every thing to servants. In the present instance she had tried them first, and finding they did not move the chairs and fire-irons so quietly as she wished, she arranged the whole apartment herself, swept up the hearth with her own hands, and attended to every call, so as scarcely to allow a servant to enter the room.

With what happiness did Frederick Bond observe the effect of this mode of treatment in tranquillizing the mind of the patient; and when he first witnessed the child's fondness which she was beginning to entertain for her unknown visitant, his eyes involuntarily filled with tears, while he paid the true homage to virtue

which its own nature demands, by inwardly regretting that his wife had not chosen this excellent woman for her only friend.

As a youth, Frederick had spent many years under the roof of Mrs. West. In health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, he had proved her value as a mother and a friend; yet although he had often urged upon his wife the "desirableness of cultivating her acquaintance," he had, with strange contradiction, encouraged her to adopt such habits as he knew must be destructive of all intimacy with a woman of her character.

Frederick Bond was much altered since he stood before the altar with his blushing bride, himself the happiest of men. He was much altered, for his temper had become irritable, and his kindness fitful and inconstant. His appearance, too, had undergone a change for the worse, which it would have been difficult to define. He was still handsome, but his countenance had lost its harmony, and its truth. There was a want of consistency and correspondence in his features. The eye did not answer to the forehead, and the expression of the mouth was uncertain, and false to both. There had lately been whisperings abroad amongst his patients, that he was not always quite himself. Some laughed at his oddities, and made them public under the character of profound secrets; while a few more scrupulous, declared it was trifling with human life, to place it in his hands.

Some scattered hints of this description had reached the ear of his wife, and still she forbore to speak. She had listened to them with that terrible shrinking of the soul with which we crouch under some impending and inevitable calamity; but still she concealed her apprehensions within her own bosom; and as the traveller who is far from shelter, looks back upon the thunder-storm that comes rolling after him, and persuades himself it will not, cannot be so cruel as to burst upon his head, so she looked around from the fancied eminence on which she believed herself to stand, and hoped, and trusted, that the floods of dark waters would never overtake her.

Mrs. West had so thoroughly established herself in the sick chamber, that a week elapsed without her having made more than occasional visits to her own house, where all things were so well arranged, and conducted with such regularity, that the main spring of order might even be withdrawn for a time, and the machinery would continue to move on in its habitual manner.

At the expiration of a week, the naturally good constitution of the patient began to rally. She exhibited signs of returning reason, and often fixed her eye upon Mrs. West in an earnest and inquiring manner, as if to discover by what abuse of her faculties she had converted her into an angel.

"You cannot imagine, Frederick," said she, one day, when her husband was alone with her, "what unaccountable fancies I have had in this illness. Do you know, I actually believed there was some beautiful spirit sent down to earth, to attend upon me; and behold! it is nothing but Mrs. West."

"You have probably done more justice to Mrs. West in your illness, than you ever did before," replied her husband very gravely. "She has indeed been a ministering angel to you; and if returning life be a blessing at all, it is certainly a blessing, which under Heaven, you owe to her exertions."

"And is it not a blessing, Frederick, to behold you again—to have you near me—to hear you speak—and to know that you love me still?"

"It might be a blessing," said Frederick in a mournful tone. "I wish it was a blessing to you; but I sometimes think —" And he murmured between his teeth, that "it will prove in the end to have been nothing but a curse."

Eleanor at that moment remembered her resolution, or she would have thrown her arms around his neck, and implored him to put away the only bane of her felicity, and render the happiness of her life complete.

Eleanor Bond had awakened from delirium with a child-like consciousness, confined merely to present things. Her first conviction had been, that she was not in her accustomed chamber. Then the coverlid of the bed attracted her attention; but chiefly her patient and untiring nurse, whom she followed with her eyes wherever she went. At last she recollected that she was a mother. What a world of happiness was unfolded to her with that blessed thought! Life was worth regaining when it came back so richly laden. A mother! a wife! her heart was too full. Alas! what thrill of anguish is that which shoots through every nerve! A cloud has settled upon her sunny prospect, a shadow has fallen upon her bower of peace.

It was like the awakening of the criminal on the day of execution. Sleep—his last earthly sleep—has refreshed his weary