

THE SORROWS OF GIRLHOOD.

BY LILY WATSON.

PART II.

THE second subject on which our Editor has invited me to confer in friendly fashion with my girl-readers is a very familiar one. Among the troubles that beset girlhood, none is more distressing than shyness, or than self-consciousness in its form of nervousness. Like the trouble of physical plainness, this is not a matter on which sympathy is readily asked or tendered, and yet it is very real, embittering the life of many a girl who blames her own stupidity for suffering so keenly at "a mere nothing."

The girl who is shy is painfully aware that she is, so to speak, at warfare with the commonly-received principles of her existence. Young people ought to like to go out whenever they are asked, to see plenty of society and to shine in it, to be always ready for a little fun or frolic, to desire new scenes, and frequent change of associations. Such, at least, is the dictum of most elderly people regarding the young with whom they have to do.

The shy girl feels that she is a living contradiction to these accepted maxims. She loves nothing better than to stay at home leading a tranquil life from day to day in her familiar occupations and interests. All she asks is to be let alone. This is just what her well-meaning relatives decline to allow. Her mother kindly hunts up suitable friends to come and visit her. She does not want them, dreads their arrival, is unhappy while they are with her, and rejoices when they depart. There is probably one exception to this rule, but rarely more than one, in the shape of a confidential friend, who herself (for extremes meet) in all likelihood cannot understand her friend's peculiarity, and thinks it is "such a pity." None the less, it remains a trouble for the victim of shyness to see fresh people, to enter fresh houses; and if perchance she should be plunged into fresh associations altogether, she suffers cruelly in a dumb fashion.

It is needless to say that, with this peculiarity, she does not show the best that is in her to casual acquaintances, and that it takes long, very long, to know her thoroughly; so that, outside her own family, she has few friends.

I have always felt great sympathy with the *hound* misery and distress of a dog or a young child at being suddenly placed in unfamiliar surroundings among new faces. People say it is "terror of the unknown;" but it is not that in whole or even in great part. It is the severing of the unseen links that bind the little creature to its environment; which severance causes for the time, and until fresh links form, exquisite, uncomprehended suffering. In its further development this becomes the very real malady known as home-sickness—German, *Heimweh*. With some people this tendency to suffer, almost universal in the very young, lasts on through life. And for the comfort of the shy it may be said that a passionate clinging to the familiar and the trusted is by no means generally the accompaniment of a mean or shallow nature.

Personally I have always felt inclined to dislike a child who, like the unpleasant infant in the story, "loves everybody" without distinction; and when I hear that So-and-so is "a nice girl but so shy!" I always feel prepossessed in that girl's favour. Shyness is far better than the dreadful manner so prevalent among some modern girls—a sort of go-as-you-please, rough-and-ready style. High Schools have done much for the education of girls; may one who is keenly alive to their good

work in this respect, venture to suggest that there is a certain "High School manner" not altogether to be admired? The characteristics of this manner, at the antipodes of shyness, are a sort of easy conviction that its owner has the key to all knowledge and is a supreme object of consideration; that gracefulness, gentleness, refinement, are things of no account, that loud talking, disrespect to parents, and general "flinging round" in a free and easy way, are desirable womanly characteristics. Of course I am not suggesting that this manner is peculiar to or universal in High Schools; but its acquirement is a danger to be carefully avoided by girls who congregate together in an independent fashion in large numbers daily. Among girls of the type just described, any little lady would appear "shy," and one would endorse in her case the remark of an unknown author: "What is often termed shyness is nothing more than refined sense and indifference to common observations."

One is struck, in reading the newly-published biography of Tennyson, to notice how shy he was on his entrance into Cambridge life. "I know not how it is," he writes, "but I feel isolated here in the midst of society." He wrote an essay for a debating society of which he was a member, and "was too shy to deliver it."

"But surely," some reader may exclaim, "you are not going to write an article in praise of shyness?" And visions that arise to the mind of the shy girl in society—as red as a beetroot, as mute as a fish—unable to impart or to receive any remark with intelligent ease, are certainly not prepossessing.

I have felt that there was something to be said in sympathy for the shy—as when the sportsman says "birds are very shy," one always feels that the birds are in the right of it! But none the less, the proper course in the shy girl's case lies midway between two extremes. The reader who suffers from this trouble and finds that it interferes with her social enjoyment and that she is blamed for it, may take courage. She need not be ashamed of the tendency—unless, indeed, it results from pride—but it lies largely within her own power to modify it.

Some shy people, who wish to cure themselves, attempt to do so by rushing to the opposite extreme. You are aghast and a little scandalised at a noisy manner, and a *mal-à-propos* remark delivered suddenly, like a bolt shot out of a cannon, with a reddening visage; and you are told afterwards, "Oh, that is only shyness," which seems at first quite absurd. It is true nevertheless that shyness in revolt against itself produces strange antics.

I advise, then, the girl who is conscious of being distressingly shy not to adopt any such violent measures, but to make up her mind not to give way to the wish to seduce herself. There is a strong temptation, which can scarcely be understood by differently-constituted natures, to slip out of the social engagement or the afternoon call; to avail oneself of the ready excuse—weather, imaginary indisposition, what not—for not putting in an appearance; to shrink snail-like into one's shell on every occasion. And the inclination to do this sort of thing grows with its indulgence.

The word "shy" is connected with the German word *scheuchen*, to scare, whence comes the expression "shoo," so familiar in the poultry yard. The association is rather significant!

Let the shy girl remember that in gratifying

her love of solitude she is selfishly escaping from a duty—that of making herself agreeable and useful as far as she can to other people. After a little while of quiet persistence in doing what she does not exactly like, she will insensibly come to like it. And if she forces herself to talk, naturally, quietly and simply on any topic of which she knows anything, people will gradually cease to discover that she is shy at all! She who yields to her shyness is lost, for it will in time become a hard tyrant, whose bonds she literally cannot sever. In avoiding the society of others, much is lost that is absolutely priceless. We can only become our best selves in relation to other people, and it will always be true that as "iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." The shy person who has successfully fought with shyness is usually a very pleasant companion—pleasanter by far than the expansive person who chatters fluently away to the first comer.

My subject also includes "nervousness and self-consciousness." These are not exactly identical with shyness. The shy girl may not always be nervous, but the nervous girl is generally shy and very self-conscious. Nervousness! what a wide field is covered by that word! Originally "nervous" meant strong and vigorous, but now its significance has been warped to modern uses. In its application to girls it indicates much suffering. A great deal may be done by physical care for a tremulous, nervous creature to whom her daily work, any social display, any effort, means distress. This is perhaps rather a truism, and one need not emphasise the fact that a "nervous" girl should not overwork, but should have plenty of leisure, fresh air, and good food.

Modern girls escape many small social trials that fell to the lot of their predecessors. "On aime à faire ce qu'on fait bien," says the French proverb; and if that be true, it may also be true that "on n'aime pas à faire ce qu'on fait mal." Certainly the dreadful knowledge that every evening spent from home meant a compulsory exhibition of doubtful attainments upon a much-enduring musical instrument used to be a real torment to many a nervous girl of the past generation.

Fortunately things have changed since then. Girls are no longer forced to sing or play unless they have musical taste and capacity. The standard is far higher, and performers are rarer. At the same time the terror which often besets the young artist is a source of actual misery, interfering both with her own success and the enjoyment of others. And in proportion to the musical taste and skill of her audience is the tremor of her fear.

This is a great mistake. Goethe's lines should be learnt by heart by all young artists—

"Vor den Wissenden sich stellen
Sicher ist's in allen Fällen."

It is always safe to throw one's self upon the mercy of "Those who know."

But this is a trivial and a partial view of nervousness, it may be said. What of that tormenting weakness that pervades all life; that checks the expression of the inner thought on the very lips; that thrusts back the natural play of affection and makes one say and do the wrong thing at the wrong moment, appearing cold and unsympathetic when one is the most deeply moved, indifferent when one is torn by anxiety, ungrateful when