

Literature, &c.

From Chambers' Edinburgh Journal
STEPMOTHERS.

THE world seems to have agreed to consider stepmothers, particularly and generally, in connexion with all that is harsh and cruel. The word has indeed become proverbial, to mark the association in which the one party is the victim of the other. Chivalrous as the attempt may appear, we are disposed to put in a word against this sweeping condemnation of a class which must comprehend many estimable persons. It appears to us that there is no small absurdity in presuming a necessary character in every person who enters into a particular relation in life. A young lady may be in the bloom of womanhood, possessed of every grace which can adorn her sex and age; she may have lived for years the most loving and beloved member of a domestic circle, cementing the ties of kindred with a thousand proofs of tenderness and affection; but no sooner has she consented to become the wife of one who has children by a former spouse, than the eye of suspicion is cast upon her, and these sweet attributes seem to fall from her, like the trappings of a masquerader. She may be gentle, kind, generous, and agreeable, to all the rest of the world; but it is supposed to be utterly impossible that she can entertain one spark of regard or affection for these usually helpless and unoffending beings who, from their position appeal naturally most strongly to her sympathies, and whom it is both her duty and her interest to cherish.

It is quite true that when the hallowed tie of mother and child is severed by the cold hand of death, no bond of affection can be quite so strong and pure; but surely for this reason it is folly to reject that which must in the nearest degree replace it. A little reflection on the position of a man—the more especially supposing him an active man of business—bereaved of his partner while yet on the sunny side of middle age—will assuredly prove that the wisest plan he can adopt is almost always that of giving his children a stepmother. Let us grant that her care is less watchful, her affection less deep, her deportment less fond than those of her who cannot be restored; but, instead of looking back with vain complainings, let us rather compare her behaviour with that of the hired guardian, who from the fallibility of human nature, must necessarily be far more deficient in those impulses and actions, the failure of which are so constantly regretted. Governesses, teachers and nurses, are all human beings, and they must indeed be unfortunate mortals if they have no home ties and affections, far warmer and dearer than any they can form for the children committed to their care, however, conscientiously, they may fulfil the duties they had undertaken. Let us suppose the children are confided to some female relations; if she be single and inexperienced a mere theorist, she is very seldom a fit guardian or guide; if she be married the chances are very great that she has interests more clashing than those of the stepmother. From our own observation, we do firmly believe, that in the dissensions and disunions that sometimes occur after second marriages, the aggressors are almost always the first children or their relatives. Indeed, we could cite many facts in corroboration of this assertion, but refrain from doing so, lest the feelings of individuals should be wounded, but we will select one because those whose feelings it was due to spare, are alike beyond the reach of prying curiosity, sympathy, or commiseration, and because the relation of it may illustrate more forcibly the point we have in view, than a string of disjointed observations could do.

Mr Charles Barham was about eight and thirty, and had been a widower for three or four years, when he thought proper to fall in love with Mary Villiers, the orphan and almost portionless daughter of an officer in the navy. He met her first at the house of her married sister, with whom she resided; and her graceful person, her winning manners, and intelligent conversation, very soon completed her conquest.

Perhaps he did not regard her the less because he perceived how affectionately attached to her were her little nephews and nieces: and he certainly very much respected those feelings which had induced her to linger in a home, necessarily not the most independent in the world, until six and twenty, simply, as from good authority he soon found

out, because though she had received two or three advantageous offers, she did not intend to marry without she was in love. It seemed a heart worth the winning; and when at last he discovered that it was all his own that he found that his emotions was quite as deep and true, as when, a dozen years before, he had offered his humbler fortunes, and as he had fancied, a fresher heart, a younger and more beautiful bride. Though his former married life had not been quite all sunshine, neither had it been very stormy. Mrs. Barham had been a spoiled child, and her temper was consequently not perfect; still, they were what is called a happy couple, and her husband loved her most sincerely to the day of her death, with a love, perhaps, only a love surpassed by that he bore the two children she left him. At the period of his second marriage, his son was ten years old, and the little Ellen eight.

It was in the country he met Mary Villiers; in the country he married her, and not till he brought her to his home in London his wife, had she seen his children. But she had heard of their beauty and talents from their fond father. And happy in the present, as well as in her anticipations of the future, they were naturally included in all her castle building. For feeling hearts (and the stepmother had a very feeling one) are always grateful for love and tenderness, however rich they may deserve both, and are ever on the watch to repay as it were, the debt that seems due; or, in simpler phrase, it is not only a pleasure to please those who love, when we can do so with ease, but it is a pleasure to make sacrifices for them. Not that there was any sacrifice in the case with regard to Mrs. Barham and her husband's children. Unknown, unseen, she felt that she would and must love them, even from the impulse of her own kindly nature; but her cooler judgment, if she consulted it at all, must have told her, that to wreath all their hearts into one knot of happiness and affection would be the surest means by which to bind her husband's love yet more dearly to her. It was night when they arrived in London; and though the children were in bed, Mrs. Barham could not wait till morning for an introduction. The nurse, an old servant of the family, preceded them, with a single taper, as Mr Barham led his impatient bride to the chamber of his son. The boy was sobbing in his slumber: he had evidently cried himself to sleep. The nurse, seemed grave, and though there was an overstrained civility in her manner, she looked at her master from time to time, and if he had done something of which she felt hardly ashamed. They could get no clear account from her of why the child had been fretting; but when Mrs Barham stooped to kiss his cheek, the child awoke, and, turning his head quickly on the pillow, refused the proffered caress.

'We have frightened him—oh! I am so sorry,' exclaimed Mrs Barham.

'We did not mean to wake you, Charley,' said his father; 'but now that you are awake, kiss your mamma.'

The boy's lip fell; but by a strong effort of the will, he restrained the tears, and suffered her to touch his cheek. He still restrained them, though with more difficulty, when his father embraced him; and Mr Barham, turning to the nurse, exclaimed, almost sharply, 'Warren, what is the matter with the boy? I insist upon knowing.'

Warren sighed, and looked down, and very leisurely snuffed the candle, from which Mrs Barham had just lighted another, and had hastened on to little Ellen's chamber. The stepmother trod softly, shaded the candle with her hand, and would not, even by a touch, awaken the slumberer, who lay, her doll clasped tightly in her arms, in one of those untaught attitudes of childhood which are always graceful. As motionless as the sleeping child did Mrs Barham remain for many minutes: and who can tell the thoughts that passed through her mind? Perhaps she wondered if the mother had been as beautiful as the daughter, and had she been less, or as well, or better loved than herself? Or did she seek to pierce anxiously or hopefully the future? Or was she content to dwell upon the present? Whatever her thoughts were, they could not be evil. Oh! no; for the truthful glance and affectionate gesture with which she beckoned her husband to approach softly were never dictated by a selfish or unkind thought. He however was ruffled, for he had insisted on an answer from the nurse, who, to the question of what ailed the child, had replied, with some reluctance, that Miss Pearson, their

aunt, had been there that day, and 'had talked to Mr Charley about his own mamma, and had made him very unhappy.'

The sorrows of children, however are seldom very long lived, and Master Charley came down to breakfast the next morning without any traces of the last night's tears. Yet it might have been observed that he very studiously avoided addressing Mrs Barham by the endearing name which her husband always used in speaking of her to his children. As for little Ellen, she looked timidly in her face, and not till quite the middle of the day did she gain courage to utter more than monosyllables in the presence of the stepmother, although Mrs Barham strove, by a thousand gentle stratagems, to gain the confidence of the children. It was very evident that Master Charley's heart was steeled against her,—and if, by kindness and indulgence, he seemed for a few hours subdued, the mildest remonstrance (and remonstrances were very often necessary, for he was a spoiled and self-willed boy) brought the flush to his cheek, and the black drop to his heart again. The little girl was far more impressive, and in a very few days the degree of awe, which she seemed at first to feel, wore off, and she came for the proffered kiss a dozen times a day, and prattled to her heart's content. One day, she was sitting on a stool at Mrs Barham's feet, dressing her doll; and receiving some suggestions as to the improvement of its costume with vast delight, when the lady asked, gently, a question which had long hovered on her lips—'Why, Ellen, do you always call me ma'am.' The child colored to her temples, shaded as they were by her soft curling hair, but did not answer.

'Why do not you call me mamma,' continued Mrs Barham, pressing the little hand that rested upon her knee.

The child turned her head away as she murmured—'Because Charley told me not to, and said he would not love me, and aunt would not love me, if I did.'

The heart of the stepmother was too full to reply, her husband found her in tears: and—and—it was impossible positively to refuse his young wife so simple a request, and he did allow that the children should be allowed to address her only by the term their own feelings should dictate. Little Ellen soon began to call her 'mamma,' and called her so for years: Master Charles did the same at intervals, when more than usually good tempered, or just after some indulgence she had been the means of procuring for him.

One other scene of this period, and we will pass on for years. Miss Pearson and other relatives had been introduced to Mrs Barham, and had paid the formal wedding visit. At their first meeting the merits of the bride were of course discussed.

'The idea of calling her pretty,' said one.

'To pretend she is only twenty six!' exclaimed another, 'she'll never see thirty again.'

'No money, I believe,' asserted the first, in the form of an interrogation.

'Only about twelve hundred pounds,' replied somebody very well informed on the subject, 'but Charles has made it up five thousand, and settled the whole upon her continued the lady, in a *crescendo* tone of voice.'

'More than ever he did for my poor sister, observed Miss Pearson, with a sigh: 'though she had money.' (Most true, Miss Pearson, but Charles Barham, twelve years ago, did not possess five thousand pounds in the world.)

'The poor children!'

'Frightened to death of her.'

'I could not have believed he would have married again,' chimed in Miss Pearson, in a tone of just indignation at the iniquity of mankind.

'Charley's a fine boy; he can recollect his mother, and has a spirit of his own?' continued the asserter of interrogatives.

'Yes, but they talk of sending him to school,' said the 'well informed' lady.

'I told you so,' exclaimed the aunt, proud of her wonderful gift of prophecy.

'Her doing, of course.'

And they all sighed, and shook their heads, and joined in a sort of chorus, to the effect that second marriages were 'dreadful.'

Alas, for the poor stepmother! Can there be any question that her office was a most thankless one,—without the authority of a mother, yet with all the responsibility of a mother—not with her husband alone to please, but a whole

family to conciliate, and that family predisposed to condemn all her actions. But as the dropping of water will wear away a stone, so Mrs Barham's correct judgment and invariable sweetness of disposition, did a little smooth down the asperities with which she had been met, when, at the end of two years, the prospect of herself becoming a mother was looked upon as a new and most aggravated offence. Her infant died, and instead of sympathy or compassion for the mother's anguish at the loss of her first born, there were women who looked—almost acknowledged—their rejoicings. Yes, women who called themselves feminine and tender hearted, and would have turned away, probably, rather than have seen an insect crushed.

Another year sped on, and again Mrs Barham was a mother; but this time she was more blessed—her infant lived. It proved, however, a delicate boy; and the additional care and tenderness which the circumstance naturally drew from its parents, were looked on almost as injuries to the older and healthier children. It seemed even conjectured that poor Mrs Barham must have used some undue influence over her husband—some sort of domestic witchcraft, to make him so strangely anxious about the well being of a sickly, troublesome infant. Meanwhile Charles and Ellen were growing up—the former a shrewd clever boy, and the latter, a very beautiful girl. By the time, however, that Charley was about seventeen, Mr Barham, whose connexions were with the mercantile world, had met with several severe losses, and, without his finances being reduced to such a state that it was absolutely necessary for him to curtail his expenses and general mode of living, it would have assuredly been prudent for him to have done so. On the other hand he had his temptations. His beloved children were just entering life, and he appreciated, perhaps too highly, the advantages of a certain station and worldly appearances to them. He consulted his wife, from whom he had no secrets; and though her own feelings leaned toward the safer policy of retrenchment, a certain delicacy of mind made her very tenacious of throwing any weight into the scale which should be balanced against the elder children. Almost against her better judgment, she yielded therefore to her husband's plans, and seconded him in many an act of self-denial, of which 'the world' little dreamed. No other human being had an idea of the real state of the case, consequently dear friends and relatives found a great deal to censure in some instances of economy which their prying curiosity discovered. It was all wretched meanness—hoarding for the sake of herself and her little puny brat. Why, indeed, was not Charley to have his own horse, as he had been promised years ago? And so as well as Ellen played, it was shameful they did not give her a new Broadwood, instead of the old thing she had had these seven years. But, with all their commiseration for the poor ill used children,—whom they contrived, both by open remarks and more dangerous insinuations, to make thoroughly discontented; neither grandmother, aunt, nor cousins ever thought of making these costly presents themselves.

Of course the subtle potion worked, and most of all upon the peace of mind and health of the stepmother. She had sufficient cause for real anxiety in the state of her husband's pecuniary affairs, and the delicate constitution of her child, but the outbreak of temper and petty annoyances—annoyances verging closely on insults, though scarcely palpable enough to be resented as such—rendered her life a very unenviable one. From Mr Barham she usually concealed these annoyances as much as possible; for sad experience had proved to her that his interference, though always exerted in her behalf, made matters in a long run rather worse than better. Still, as she had completely deserved, so had she always retained, his entire confidence and affection; and this consciousness did at times give a light to her eye, and a smile to her face, which else she must long since have ceased to wear. But alas! these occasional gleams of happiness were noticed and remembered to be brought forward afterwards as proofs of her unfeeling disposition.

Charley was being educated for the bar, to which profession his talents seemed especially to lead. He was a handsome young man, clever and agreeable in society, generally liked and courted, and just the sort of person of whom most parents would be very proud, and the stepmother would scarcely have been human, if she had looked on him