

The Step Mother

Leaves from a Lawyer's Portfolio

When I first knew the family of the Wentworths, it was composed of a husband in the prime of life, a beautiful being his bride, and a sweet little babe whom they had doted on, not only for its beauty, but as the heir of his father's large estates. The family was noble, or rather its ancestors had been so in England, and the estates, now in its possession, had come down from father to son for several generations, increasing in value with the prosperity of the country, until they now afforded almost the revenue of a prince. With the pride of birth, something of its injustice had attached to the family, for, to maintain the importance of the name, it had been the custom ever since the abolition of prime-geniture, to keep the estate entailed on the oldest son, providing, however, respectable portions for the other children. The Wentworth lands had thus descended from the present proprietor's father, and were intended to go down in the same manner to his eldest son. I knew little of Mr. Wentworth himself, for he was a proud, reserved man—but his meek wife had early won on my heart, and from the hour when I first called on, as a professional adviser, to give my opinion respecting some property which she held to her sole and separate use, under her marriage settlements, up to the latest moment of her life, my feelings for this singularly amiable woman, were like those of a parent to a daughter.

Wentworth Hall, where the family resided, was a large, antique, imposing structure, situated in the centre of an extensive park, and approached by a long avenue, terminating at one end in the hall door, and at the other, at the distance of almost a mile, in a massy gateway, guarded by a porter's lodge. The house, when I first knew it, was as lordly a mansion as one would wish to see. I passed it the other day, and it was in ruins. No human being has slept within its walls since the development of the dreadful tragedy I am about to relate. God knows I shudder at the task!

I never saw a sweeter child than the young heir of Wentworth; I think now I see his little hands, his silken hair, or his soft blue eyes, so like those of his mother. All loved him. How could they help it? for in everything he resembled her who insensibly won every heart, and deserved to win them too. But in nothing was this similarity so striking as in the disposition of the mother and child. I do not believe either would knowingly hurt a fly. Certainly, no traces of the proud irascible temper of the father could be discovered in the son.

Well has it been said that the good die young. They are exhaled, as it were, like dew, back to their native sky, just at the very time when we begin fully to appreciate their worth. The young heir was scarcely three years old when his mother died. There was grief, and, I believe, heart-felt grief, up at the old hall for a while, —and then came the intelligence that Mr. Wentworth had determined to travel, and that, meanwhile, the young heir was to be left at home with a nurse, and suitable attendants.

Two years passed away. At length rumors reached the servants that their master would soon return, accompanied with a new bride. Before long these reports were confirmed, and then, after a few days' delay, the newly wedded pair dashed up to the hall door behind a chariot and four, decorated with bride favors.

The new comer was certainly a magnificent woman, but oh! what a contrast to the sweet angel who had formerly filled her place. The first wife was rather *petite*, with soft blue eyes, and an expression of countenance almost seraphic; her successor was a tall, splendid looking woman, with dark flashing orbs, and a face whose haughty beauty was the very impersonation of a Juno. I know not why, but with all her majesty, I never liked the second Mrs. Wentworth.

In due time a son was the fruit of this marriage. The babe, like his mother, was beautiful, and it seemed to me—it may have been only fancy—that, in the rejoicings at its birth, the eldest son, and undoubted heir, was totally forgotten.

It soon became evident that the new wife was paramount in her influence over her husband; but, in one thing she was foiled; she could not alienate his affections from his eldest son. She dared not openly speak against the young heir, but it was evident that she hated him, because he would exclude her own child from the estate; and though the fortune of a younger son of the Wentworth's would have been in independence to any one else, yet this grasping woman coveted all for her own darling. On this point however, she knew that her husband would prove inflexible, and that his family pride would be too strong even for his wife's persuasions. She did not therefore, make the attempt. But in every possible way, especially when her husband was absent, she contrived to make the life of her step-son, irksome and intolerable. A thousand petty vexations, such as are easier felt than described, and which no one knows so well how to inflict as a second wife, soured the early life of the young heir, and despite his amiable disposition, made him the most unhappy of beings. The sum of his misery was filled up, when, his father having been chosen a member of Congress, left the family at Wentworth Hall, while he proceeded to Washington. From that hour, whether at his estate or at the capital of the nation. Mr. Wentworth was so occupied by ambition that he found no time to unravel the domestic transactions of his household; so that, deprived of the check heretofore existing on her conduct in the presence of her husband, the new wife commenced a more open and oppressive series of petty persecution on the young heir, which effectually broke the spirits of one so delicately constituted. I never saw a greater change in any one than took place in Herbert Wentworth, between his fifth and eleventh years. From being used to constant exercise in the open air, he was restricted to the school-room, the library, and the garden. In a short time his health gave way, and he became pale, weakly, and melancholy. And this was the once gay and happy boy, with a heart as light as the carol of a bird! Oh! could his sainted mother have foreseen on her death-bed the destiny that was to overtake her child, how bitter would have been her parting hour.

Meanwhile the younger son—the darling of the mother—was indulged in everything. His slightest wish anticipated. He was taught every manly accomplishment of the day, and at 12, was already nearly as large as his delicate brother. He was a skillful horseman, and the best sportsman on the estates. But he was willful, passionate and imperious.

So matters went on, until the young heir was nearly eighteen years of age, when his father took him to Washington with him during the session of Congress. For the first time emancipated from the thralldom of his step-mother, Herbert began to be aware of the importance of his situation, and of his home. He returned to Wentworth Hall an altered being. When his father, about this time, received an appointment to an embassy to one of the South American States, he solicited to

accompany his parent, but his request could not be granted, and the young heir was left at home with Mrs. Wentworth and her son.

The change in the character of Herbert soon became evident to his step-mother. But in nothing was it more perceptible than in the resistance the young heir made to the restraints attempted to be imposed on him, but from which his brother was exempt. Privileges which Herbert felt were his, equally with his brother, or to which he, if either, had the better right, were no longer [surrendered] without expostulation, or in some cases without a struggle. One of the great causes of difference arose from the determination expressed by the young heir, to shoot on the state—a privilege no rational being would have dreamed he was not entitled to—but which his pampered brother, habituated to seeing himself indulged, and Herbert restrained, in everything, took on himself one day, in a fit of passion, to dispute. Had Mrs. Wentworth been present, even she would have seen the folly of her son and would have checked him; but, unaccustomed to be opposed, the willful boy, when he saw his brother with a resolution as unusual as it was irritating, determined to insist on the right, flew into a rage, and, in a moment of phrenzy, presented his gun at Herbert. A scuffle ensued, in which the piece went off, whether accidentally or not was never known, and the young heir fell to the ground weltering in his blood. His life, for some time, was despaired of during which time the brother maintained a sullen silence—but at length Herbert was declared out of danger, and in a few weeks more, was completely restored. During this time the mother did not hesitate to give that version of the story which would, by throwing all the blame on Herbert exculpate her darling, so that, when the young heir left his sick chamber, he found that except among a few who knew his disposition better, he was received as an arrogant, and quarrelsome young man.

This incident, however, had exercised a powerful influence on Mrs. Wentworth. The very fact Herbert, whom she and her son had so long ruled with a rod of iron, should attempt to break loose from the thralldom, inflamed her almost to madness. From envying, she began to hate the young heir, and that too with a deadliness of which one would have thought her incapable. And every day, as Herbert broke some new mesh of the net in which she had involved him, she seemed to hate him more passionately, than before. Indeed, to a woman of her disposition, nothing could be more galling than to see one, over whom she had used to tyrannize at her pleasure, asserting his rights, even, in some cases, in direct contradiction to her commands, as, for instance, when Herbert refused as heir to the estate, to allow some wood to be cut down which she had ordered to be felled and sold. I solemnly believe that the haughty stepmother never forgave this act—that the remembrance of it haunted her night and day—and that it filled up the cup of hatred, which before was nigh full, and led to the dreadful catastrophe which ensued.

I have said the young heir recovered from his wound, but he remained in an exceedingly delicate state of health, so that the least exposure of his person was sure to bring on a cold, attended with pains in his side, at the seat of his wound. However, by clothing carefully according to the weather, he succeeded in the course of some six months, in firmly as he thought re-establishing his health, though, it is my firm conviction, that, from the hour of his wound, his constitution was effectually undermined. Certain it is, that when Herbert, thinking himself perfectly restored, ventured one day, on a little more exposure than usual, he was seized with a violent cold, which

soon resulted in a fever of the most desperate character. So fatal were the ravages of the disease that his life was soon despaired of, and for several days we hourly expected to hear of his death.

During this crisis, what the feelings of the haughty step-mother? She could not be expected to wish for the recovery of the being who she had hated with so much intensity, and although she was forced to appear concerned for him, and the best medical attendance was, by her orders procured, yet I have not the least doubt that the one burning wish of her heart, during all that terrible time, was that young heir might not recover. His death indeed, would be the consummation of all her hopes, it would at once place her darling son in possession of the vast estate of his father—a position at which she could not look without a momentary bewilderment. As day after day elapsed, and the young heir grew weaker and weaker, her hopes rose in proportion, and the prize on which at first, she had scarcely ventured to look, she now regarded as almost in the possession of her child. How her heart leaped—we will not attempt to disguise it—at the prospect before her. She would be saved from the shame of being thwarted as she had been—she would no longer have a right to remain at the Hall only as long as her husband lived; and though, under other circumstances, she felt she might have continued in it to her dying day, yet she knew that Herbert, after what had passed, would, on his father's death, cut off all communication with her. Besides, her pride revolted from accepting a favor at the hands of the young heir. Her own child too, brought up as he had been, with habits of such lavish expenditure, how would he ever be able to live on the fortune, handsome though it was reserved for the younger son of the House of Wentworth. He had been used to every indulgence; he had been taught to regard everybody and everything as subservient to his wishes; in short, he had been educated as the heir rather than as the younger son of the family—and now when the vast estates of his father were almost within his grasp, when only the life of a sickly boy was in his way, could his mother be expected to look upon the death of the real heir with anything but complacency? But she dissembled her feelings; the world gave her credit for the most poignant anguish of mind during the vacillations of the disease.

‘And how is the patient tonight, doctor,’ said she, following the physician out of the sick chamber, and affecting to place her handkerchief to her eyes; ‘do you not think he is a little improved?’

‘I do not wish, unnecessarily, to alarm you,’ was the answer; ‘indeed, you must have seen the ravages of the disease; but so far from thinking your son’—oh! how the word grated on her feelings—‘any better, I fear he cannot survive until morning. He is naturally of a strong constitution, and this fever would have brought the stoutest man to the grave. I wonder how young Mr. Wentworth has stood it so long.’

‘Then you cannot give us any hope. —Oh! cannot you let us have some; even the slightest expectation of his recovery? Do, dear Doctor, only say a word like it.’

The physician shook his head sadly, for he had become attached to his patient, and knew nothing of the secret of his companion's heart—and departed. The unnatural woman turned to her chamber, and with a joy we will not attempt to picture, paced up and down the room. At length, she thought her wishes were about to be fulfilled: her boy—her darling boy, would inherit the broads lands she saw from her casement; and she—she paused and muttered—‘ah! there will be

a vast difference betwixt the mere widow of the proprietor of Wentworth Hall, and the mother of that personage.’

In a short time she calmed her transports, and, returning to the bed side of the now insensible [illegible], watched there until late at night, when she retired with apparent reluctance, leaving orders, however, to be called, should any change be perceptible in the patient.

She had fallen into an uneasy sleep, in which thousand wild dreams flitted thro’ her mind, and the clock had just struck the second hour after her retirement, when a maid servant knocked at her chamber-door, and saying that her young master had suddenly awoke sane, and had conversed rationally with the nurse, departed.

‘He is going, then,’ muttered the unnatural woman in a delirium of joy; ‘they always are so just before death;’ and hastily throwing on a loose dress, she hurried to the room of the sufferer.

The curtains were closed when she entered, and the nurse held up her finger whispering—

‘He has just fallen asleep. Praise to God, the crisis is past, and the dear youth will recover! His fever has left him—his skin is no longer hot: he is free from delirium.’

The words of the faithful old creature almost took away Mrs. Wentworth’s breath; she felt herself turning pale, and her brain swam around. Happily the room was imperfectly lighted, so that the nurse could not detect the changes in the countenance of her mistress.

‘*And is there any fear of a relapse?*’ said Mrs. Wentworth, forcing herself to assume feelings outwardly, far different from those raging in her bosom. ‘Is the *dear boy* safe?’

‘The chances are infinitely in his favor; yet there is a possibility of a relapse. I pray God no such evil may overtake Master Herbert.’

Her mistress nodded, and feeling that she could not much longer maintain her composure, she said she would return to her room for a moment to procure her slippers, when she would aid her in watching by the sick bed, as she was *too overjoyed to sleep*.

What pen can paint her feeling when she reached her chamber? Here were all her bright visions dissipated. What would become of herself after her husband’s death? —what, indeed, would that husband say when he returned and heard Herbert’s version of his brother’s and her conduct? What would become of her darling son, subject, perhaps, to his father’s displeasure, and, at most, left with nothing but a younger son’s fortune, with which to support his expensive habits? She paused in the center of her room. A thousand furies seemed agitating her countenance. Pride, fear, hate, all chased each other, by turns, thro’ her bosom. Suddenly her face assumed a look of comparative calmness. She walked to a neighboring closet, took from its wall a small vial, and then, gazing a moment at her face in the glass, she placed her slippers on her feet, and sought the room of the invalid. Motioning to the nurse to keep her seat, this faithful woman crossed to the other side of the bed, and sat down by the little table on which stood the medicine for the sufferer. The cup already contained the dose which was to be given him at the expiration of the

hour. She looked at the watch—but a few minutes remained to the time. She looked round the room—no one was in it but the nurse, who was concealed by the curtains of the bed. She hastily uncorked the vial, and, with a trembling hand, let fall a few drops of the liquid it contained into the cup. The vial was then secreted, and, with a face as ashy as the dead, she heard the next instant the clock strike the hour. The patient awoke at the noise, and, almost on the instant, the nurse came around and took the cup in her hand. My pen trembles so I can scarcely proceed; but I must. Suffice it to say the cup was drained, and the invalid, as if exhausted, sunk back on his pillow. When the next attendant drew aside the curtain, she gazed on the face of the dead!

Let me escape from the terrible tragedy. The young heir was buried in lordly estate, and no suspicion ever arose that he died otherwise than by a sudden relapse. But was Mrs. Wentworth happy? She saw her son the acknowledged heir of the estate, and for this she had labored her whole life; but was she happy? I will answer in the words of Scripture, when speaking of the wicked—‘Terrors take a hold of him as waters; the tempest swalloweth them up in the night: For God shall cast upon him and not spare.’

Time passed. Even Mrs. Wentworth began to find in the lapse of years, and in gazing on her son, now near eighteen, some alleviation for her tortured mind. But God, whose inscrutable providence had hitherto seemed to forget the unholy deed we have just narrated, was now preparing for its author a fearful retribution.

It was just five years from the day of Herbert’s death, when the doting mother was standing in the door of her house, surrounded by a party of visitors of her own age, waiting for the approach of a gay cavalcade of young people, coming up the avenue. The sky was gloomy and threatened a storm, and the riders were evidently returning in haste. But the tempest was quicker than even their fleetest steeds, and the group, with young Wentworth at its head, was yet some distance from the door, when the storm burst on the riders. Each put spurs to his horse, and the young heir, as willful as ever, instead of awaiting his companions, dashed forward as fast as his steed (the fleetest of them all) could carry him. He was already several rods in advance of his companions, when the wind, suddenly bursting out into a hurricane, swept across the avenue, taking in its course a huge, but somewhat decayed tree, whose trunk, after swaying forwards a moment, was seen to yield to the gate just as young Wentworth came underneath it.

‘Look out!’ shouted those who saw the danger.

‘Save him—oh, save him!’ shrieked the mother.

It was too late. Down, with a crash like thunder came the gigantic tree, the trunk striking the unhappy youth right on the head, and bearing him to the earth as if he were a mere twig. There was a wild cry, and all that remained of the victim was one quivering hand, extended, as if in supplication, beyond the trunk of the tree.

The spectators stood aghast, transfixed with speechless horror at the fearful sight! A deathlike stillness of a moment, and only for a moment, followed. It was broken by a long, wild, harrowing shriek of anguish, at the remembrance of which, even now, my blood runs cold. They all turned instinctively in one direction—towards the mother of the victim—for that shriek could have

come from no one else. They saw her fall like marble to the earth. They sprung to her aid. Her eyes were wide open, glaring fearfully on vacancy: the foam gathered thick and white on her bloodless lips: her whole frame was quivering in an agony such as (thank God!) mortal man has rarely seen. There she lay, struck by the hand of God, writhing in convulsions. Tell me not there is no retribution! Oh! fearfully was the murdered boy avenged!

They took her up—bore her into her stately chamber, and dispatched messengers on every hand for medical aid. All that the skill of the profession could do to restore her was exerted; but for a long time unsuccessfully. At length, however, Mrs. Wentworth showed signs of recovery. Slowly consciousness appeared to return to her; but just when her attendants were beginning to hope that the danger had passed, she sprung up in the bed, and placing her hands before her eyes, shrieked, ‘save him—save him—oh, God! have mercy—I am the murderer—he is innocent,’ and with other ejaculations equally as terrific, she sunk down on the couch in a paroxysm of madness. *She was a maniac!* It was not many days before nature gave way beneath the struggle; but during the ravings of the phrenzy, she recapitulated the whole of the dreadful tragedy, and in words too, that made her listeners tremble to hear. It has often occurred to me, that if the death-bed revelations of but one year could be made public, they would make us avoid our fellow-men as beings of a darker world.

One word, and this melancholy leaf is ended. Mr. Wentworth never returned from his mission, but fell victim to the climate of South America. His estate having been entailed to the issue of his own body, of course, failing such issue, passed in the regular course of succession; and descending to nearly a score of collateral heirs, who divided the property betwixt them, was soon broken into fragments. —The old Hall was shunned with superstitious fear, and is now in ruins. So pass away the things of this world. D.

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