

the library. The house, which had been shut up, was not yet quite in order. But Beattie felt glad to be in this room, which was more especially his own, rather than the big drawing-room, which was formal and unhomelike. The library opened into a small sitting-room, and as she sat there, her heart beating to suffocation and her eyes dilated, the handle of the door was turned. She looked away. Now that the moment had come she felt a longing to avert it. She was afraid. But it was not he who entered. Involuntarily she gave a great sigh, half of relief, half of disappointment, as the figure of Mrs. Coverdale, his sister, appeared.

She greeted the visitors with her usual somewhat chilling politeness. She was indifferent to Mrs. Swannington, but of Beattie she was inwardly jealous. She had thought her brother too attentive to her the night they had dined together; she was always secretly afraid of Cecil marrying. She had a little boy who would, if things remained as they now were, inherit his uncle's and his great-aunt's money. Accordingly she was a very attentive sister. As a rule Cecil, in whom family affection was not particularly strong, did not encourage the advances of his relations, but he was sometimes glad to take advantage of them. And at the present time, when people were constantly calling, it was a comfort to have a sensible woman who knew whom to receive and whom to send away, and who was not too cordial to gossiping individuals of her own sex.

"I could not refrain from coming to inquire after your brother," said Mrs. Swannington, who would be amiable at any cost. "His illness was such a shock to me. When last I saw him he was in quite excellent health. In fact, he was staying at my country house."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Coverdale; "but that was some time ago."

"In the summer, as a matter of fact," Mrs. Coverdale smiled sweetly.

"I remember now. He mentioned that he had been with you for a couple of days. Cecil always has so many invitations. Do you know, I think your niece—she is your niece, is she not?—is rather altered since I met her here? She is thinner. Have you been unwell at all?" she inquired of Beattie.

"Oh, no. I am never anything but well," said Beattie, smiling.

"Ah!" drawled the lady. "How fortunate for you. I suppose it is only, then, that you have got a little older. Girls always look different"—turning again to Mrs. Swannington—"after their first season."

"I suppose she thinks I have gone off," said Beattie to herself. "I hope he won't."

"We are going, I trust, to see Mr. Musgrove," said Aunt Ella, changing the subject.

"I think he is in," replied Mrs. Coverdale. "I will inquire."

"Oh, I am sure he is in," said Mrs. Swannington promptly. "The servant told me so."

"He shall be informed that you are here," said the languid lady, and extended a hand towards the bell.

"Have you told your master that Mrs. Swannington and Miss——"

"Margetson."

"Miss Margetson are here, Simpson?"

"Not yet, madam."

"Do so, then."

She did not feel it incumbent upon her to explain that when the servant had announced to her her brother's visitors she had given no instruction that he was to be told. He left this matter to her management, as he was not always eager to see callers.

Again poor Beattie flushed and paled as the door opened, and she was further embarrassed by a consciousness that Mrs. Coverdale's fine grey eyes were coolly scrutinising her. Naturally emotional, it required all her self-control to behave with that absence of display of feeling which good breeding imposes. He, however, had no such difficulty. He had shown more at many a casual meeting with her than now, when she whom, almost the last time he saw her, he had asked to be his wife, laid her hand in his and looked up at him with her heart in her eyes. He was quite unchanged, except that he was a little thinner and paler. To Beattie, who had gone through so much on his account, it was almost a surprise that in him there was no difference; to hear the same calm, half-quizzical tones, to see the same look in his eyes, the same smile, and to notice that his comments on things were of the same order as they had been before his illness. Why not? But she was inexperienced, and she had fancied that the nearness to another life, the realities of pain and bodily weakness, the necessity of relying on the tenderness and care of others, would have made him—for the present, at any rate—more indifferent to the trivial things of this world, more transparently genuine in his manners, and more ready to dwell on the lovable side of human nature. She did not analyse her feelings, only she was conscious of a subtle disappointment; and, strangely, the fact that he was just what he had seemed to her formerly, made things easier for herself. Her love for him, though no less real, did not any longer overpower her. She was again mistress of herself. It was an intense happiness to be near him, and for the present she was content to sit quietly by while he and her aunt talked, only now and then exchanging remarks, which were equally uninteresting to both, with Mrs. Coverdale.

"When we are alone it will be different," she thought. "He will not be quite like this when the others are not by. He purposely does not say much to me."

Mrs. Swannington could not refrain from conversing on his recent illness and congratulating him on the heroism which she believed to be partly the cause of it. He, however, disclaimed anything of the sort.

"That, my dear Mrs. Swannington," he said, "is a mere fiction. I assure you I never saved anybody's life, nor desired to. I am not certain that if I had done so I should have been rendering

a great kindness. You know it is a debated question whether existence is a boon. I remember a wise friend of mine remarking that man was a creature burdened with life and threatened with immortality. I often wonder, as the majority of mankind are sufficiently wretched, so much fuss is made of the saving of human life."

"Cecil," said his sister, "you will shock Mrs. Swannington. How can you talk so?"

"Mrs. Swannington, like myself, is a philosopher," he said, laughing. "And, moreover, she is tolerant of opinions not in accordance with a narrow creed, are you not?"

Aunt Ella shrugged her shoulders, and turned the palms of her hands outwards.

"I," she said, "am nothing if not tolerant. But I think, myself, it is enjoyable to live if only one's digestion be in order. I have no patience with people who are always making themselves unhappy because the world is not square and the moon does not shine by daylight. Still, Mr. Musgrove, you are a bad man (is he not, Mrs. Coverdale?) to be so ungrateful when your life has been spared. Ah, we were all most anxious, I can assure you."

"Well, it is very kind of you, Mrs. Swannington. At any rate, I am grateful for your giving me any thought at all. It certainly was a narrow escape. My relations, who are more pious than I, had me publicly prayed for, and my aunt, who is a most estimable old lady, attributes my recovery entirely to this fact."

Beattie flushed up to the roots of her hair. How could he speak in that light and jesting manner? She thought of the many times she had fallen on her knees in the solitude of her own room, begging that he might live and not die: how often in church, when prayers were offered for those in sickness, she had said his name in her heart: how she had told Norah that someone she cared for was very ill, and asked her to pray for his recovery.

"And why not?" she said involuntarily, surprised at the earnestness of her own voice.

"Ah," said Mrs. Coverdale, with a laugh which was not destitute of mockery, "Miss Margetson is shocked at you."

"Then I must beg her pardon," said Cecil, smiling. "Miss Margetson knows that I would on no account hurt her feelings."

As she met his eyes, her own, which had been flashing, suddenly grew dim with tears, why she scarcely knew.

"Beattie, you must know," said Mrs. Swannington, turning to Mr. Musgrove, "has become very edifying of late. When next you come you will doubtless see her engaged in knitting comforters or some such thing. I tell her, we shall yet see her in the Salvation Army. But come now, we must be going, my dear."

"And I have not had a word with you," said he, again looking at Beattie. "Do stay to tea, Mrs. Swannington. It will be here directly."