

IN SPITE OF ALL.

IDA LEMON, Author of "The Charming Cora," "A Winter Garment," etc.

CHAPTER XXI.



THE year was nearly over. During the season Beattie and Cecil had met less frequently than the one preceding it, but when they did see each other, he was unvaryingly attentive to her, and he seldom seemed to care to talk much to other people if she were present. If his manner on these occasions were more that of a friend than a lover, if his interest in her and her affairs were rather elder-brotherly in its tone, Beattie attributed this only to the embargo which she had laid upon him. It was enough that he always came to her. In the summer Norah again asked her to go and stay with her, and this time Mrs. Swannington had no objection to her accepting the invitation. Norah had incidentally mentioned that Michael Anstruther was away from home, and was shortly going on a long journey. Besides, Mrs. Swannington believed there was nothing to be feared from him any more. Of Beattie's feelings she was now quite sure. Indeed, it was Beattie herself who hesitated to accept, lest she should miss seeing Cecil at all, but it was only for a fortnight, and she had a wish to see Norah. It was more than a year since they had met.

"To think I have really got you here at last," said Norah, when they sat, on the evening of Beattie's arrival, in the little drawing-room which, like Norah herself, was neat and dainty and a trifle old-fashioned. "I began to think you would never come. And I have wanted Lady Anstruther to see you for two years."

Beattie laughed.

"Lady Anstruther no doubt has had patience to bear the period of waiting. When am I going there?"

"To-morrow, certainly. We will have tea there. I wanted you to myself to-day; and I thought you would be tired after your journey."

"It takes a great deal to tire me," said Beattie. "I am as fresh as when I started. Fresher—this air is so delicious. Did you say Mr. Michael was away? I should have liked to see him."

"He has been in Germany since the autumn. He was going back to Paris, but when Geoffrey came home—Wasn't that wonderful? It has made such a difference to them all; the doctor said he was a mere wreck of what he had been, and he had to go through a course of treatment at some watering-place. Mike went with him and afterwards stayed on alone to study the method of the doctors there. He made friends with a young professor of science who is going to make an expedition to some part of South America, and he wanted Mike to go with them as doctor. Mike is delighted, of course. They will certainly be away a year if not longer; and

he loves any sort of adventure, you know, and always was mad about exploration. Besides, he'd learn so much. It is not quite certain when they start, but it will be soon. They are making all their arrangements out there, and then he will come home and say good-bye," and Norah sighed heavily.

"Doesn't he mind giving up the property at all?"

"Mind; he is as glad as possible; not only for the reason, but because he doesn't care to have the management of an estate. You see, there isn't much money with it, and that means everything has to be so carefully investigated. Mike wants to give all his attention to his profession."

"And what has become of Mr. Geoffrey now?"

"Oh, he has joined his regiment again. He is in London at present. He is not so handsome as he used to be before he was wounded, but he is thought a lot of by everybody for all he has gone through. I can't tell you what it was like when he came home. The bells rang and all the people were laughing and crying and shouting as he drove into Woodfield, and yet he looked so altered and so ill, we all felt he might after all have come home only to die. We had great rejoicings afterwards, and somehow the cloud which has been over the Hall since Evelyn's death seems to have lifted. Even though the boys are both away it is a happy place. It is partly the change in Sir John, I suppose. He is such a kind old man now."

The next afternoon, as arranged, the two girls walked down to the Hall. Although the time had gone by when Beattie would have felt an interest in her friends, even beyond that which Norah expected, still she was pleased to know Michael's relations. Of late he had been very little in her thoughts, and she had almost forgotten what Margaret had told her in her letter, but Woodfield and the constant mention of his name and his associations had reminded her that had circumstances been a little different her first acquaintance with his home and his parents might have been a matter of the deepest concern to her.

Lady Anstruther had thoughts not wholly dissimilar as she sat waiting for the girls on the terrace. She had reason to be rather sorry that Beattie's visit had taken place just when it did; and she was perhaps a little bit prejudiced against her as the innocent cause of Michael's life having been saddened. She and Sir John had been talking about it, for no longer did she find it necessary to keep from her husband the thoughts about their children's future, which were in her own mind. He did not fly out in impatient anger, as of old, when things were not quite according to his wishes, and although he did not always agree with her as to what would be for Michael's and Geoffrey's happi-

ness, neither did he fret himself about issues which lay, at any rate in part, beyond his own control.

"It seems so aggravating," said Lady Anstruther, "that Norah herself should be the means of throwing them together. I can't postpone Mike's return, because that would mean not seeing him at all. It is such a pity. Instead of carrying away the thought of Norah, he will be sure to have his old feeling if he sees this Beattie. And I did really hope that with all his new interests he had given up thinking of her."

"I don't think seeing or not seeing will make much difference to a fellow like Mike," said Sir John. "You remember even as a little chap it was no use our hiding away anything about which he had a fixed idea of future possession. However, I have greater hope in his notions of honour. You tell me this little girl is betrothed to some other man."

"Yes, but without coveting your neighbour's wife you may care for her too much for your own peace of mind. Ah! here they are."

Lady Anstruther rose to meet Norah and Beattie who were coming towards her through the sunshine. Her first sight of the latter routed any lurking distrust of her. She and her son always liked the same people, and both were quick in forming their opinions. Beattie in her white gown with all the charm that youth and health and hopefulness could add to physical beauty, would have been sufficiently engaging to the least discerning person; but Lady Anstruther had insight, and she found her lovable by reason of the pure mind and warm heart which she quickly perceived her to possess. She looked into the clear eyes, and was quite satisfied that Michael had not thrown away his heart on a mere delusion. But she was all the more sorry for him.

"Sir John cannot get out of his chair to speak to you," she said. "I expect Norah has told you he is paralysed."

She led Beattie up to him and introduced her, smiling at the girl's pretty deferential manner, which none the less had a warmth in it as if seeing Sir John really gave her pleasure. He who had come to appreciate all that was bright and cheerful and kind would certainly be pleased with this young and buoyant creature.

Norah looking on and content to take for the time a second place, was glad that Beattie had made so favourable an impression, for she could soon see when Lady Anstruther liked anyone, and she was pleased at this ratification of her own judgment. The conversation at once became general, and as neither Lady Anstruther nor Beattie were ever at a loss as to what to say it was animated enough. There was no need to search for topics, and it was not till Norah spoke of leaving that Lady Anstruther mentioned her son.