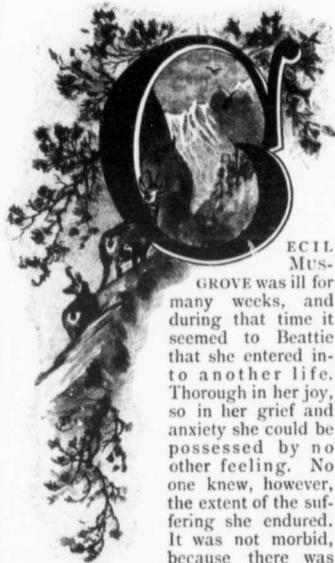


IN SPIKE OF ALL.

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

CHAPTER XX.



ECIL MUSGROVE was ill for many weeks, and during that time it seemed to Beattie that she entered into another life. Thorough in her joy, so in her grief and anxiety she could be possessed by no other feeling. No one knew, however, the extent of the suffering she endured. It was not morbid, because there was nothing morbid in

Beattie's nature, but perhaps she indulged in needless accusations as to her own former pride and heartlessness. She felt she had misjudged her would-be lover, and the possibility of his dying just when she was growing to care for him, and of her never being able to explain herself to him, saddened her as with a cloud which would rest over all her life. All her former pleasures and interests, the many gaieties in which, as the season progressed, she was asked to take her part, wore a very different aspect from what they had done last year. All the time, even though she might banish it from the foreground of her thoughts, the consciousness of an impending sorrow and a present dread was with her. Sometimes Mr. Musgrove was reported better, then there was a relapse. It was not till spring had come that he was said to be out of danger. He was not yet to return home, but to go to the seaside with his mother and a nurse. The likelihood of a meeting was therefore still postponed for some weeks, if not longer.

During this time Beattie and Norah had corresponded with some frequency, and had really become intimate. In all her distress there was no one to whom Beattie could turn at home for genuine sympathy, and in her deepening inner life, the awakening of her soul to its own nature, she was not likely to find any response in the beings of either her uncle or her aunt. It was to her girlfriend that Beattie poured out all her thoughts, and in Norah she found someone who was not likely to laugh at her

aspirations, nor take a superior attitude in face of the little exaggerations and errors of judgment which youth, inexperience, and intensity of feeling bring with them at any crisis. To Norah, who had grown quietly in spirit and in mind, even as in her bodily development, everything was much simpler than to the perplexed and enthusiastic young creature who wanted to do and be great things at a moment's notice. Beattie never broke her word, and when she vowed to dedicate her life to higher purposes than it had yet known, should that other life be spared, she no sooner heard such was the case than she was anxious then and there to devote herself to good works, and to do all in her power to show her gratitude. The reaction after the long strain made her happiness the more intense, and everyone who came in intimate contact with her noticed it. Yet neither Mr. nor Mrs. Swannington had any notion of all that had passed within the being of the girl whom they had seen daily.

"Beattie seems rather quieter than she used to be," her uncle had said once; "but I suppose she is fretting about that poor fellow Musgrove."

And Aunt Ella had answered, not so heartlessly as it sounded—

"She'll learn sense if he dies."

When she was again the life of the house they saw nothing deeper than her natural joy at his recovery. Her efforts at patience with her aunt, who although well again, was no longer quite so amiable as of old, passed unnoticed; neither did they observe that her former good-nature and affectionate consideration for those with whom she came in contact had deepened into an earnest desire to deny herself for the sake of others.

One day she asked leave to go and see the parlourmaid, who was ill in the hospital. Aunt Ella shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Beattie, how can you wish to see a servant when it is not necessary? For me, I detest them all. But Barton was better than this silly Eliza. Tell her from me if she gets better soon I will take her back."

"It is a glorious day," said Mr. Swannington. "Whatever do you want to go to visit sick people for? Go to the Park."

"I would rather see Barton," said Beattie.

Aunt Ella laughed.

"Beattie is becoming a model young woman. I think it must be the fierce-looking curate who preached so tiresomely on selfishness last Sunday that is responsible for it. I notice she is making red flannel garments for the poor—she who hates her needle."

Beattie reddened. She did dislike needlework, unless it were on a thing that could be finished almost as soon as begun; but there was a consumptive girl of whom she had heard, and she was trying to make her some warm clothing.

Aunt Ella had chanced to enter her sanctum, and found the garment side by side, it must be confessed, with a book and a bottle of barley sugar.

However, they let her have her own way when it did not clash with theirs, and she found, as is usually the case with people who are really in earnest, that there was plenty of good to be quietly done without breaking away from the restrictions which were placed upon her by those in authority.

At last a day arrived when, calling on Mrs. Gilman, they were told that on the previous evening her husband had inquired for Mr. Musgrove, who had returned home and resumed his ordinary life. "He was asking after you," she added, and Beattie, at whom she more especially looked, found herself blushing with a joy she had scarcely the art to conceal.

"To-morrow," said Mrs. Swannington, when they had left, "is Saturday. You and I will call at his house. It is but suitable we make inquiries."

"To-morrow! After all this long time! To-morrow!"

All that night she scarcely slept for thinking of the possible meeting of the next day. How would he look? What would he say? Would his illness have altered him? Would he be glad to see her? He had asked about her; she had been in his thoughts. How long, long ago it seemed since that afternoon at Crabsley, when she had asked him not to speak to her of love! If he had felt for her as she did now for him, how cold and light and even cruel her manner must have appeared. But he would soon see now that all was different.

Usually she was not sufficiently careful in her dress to satisfy Mrs. Swannington, who frequently had to send her back to retie a veil or choose another pair of gloves, but to-day she was fastidious to a degree. Her spring walking costume, for all it looked so simple, had cost nearly as much as Norah Gilman was able to spend on clothes for a year; but then, as Aunt Ella said, style is everything, and one must pay for it. Her hat was most becoming, and all the little et ceteras of her toilette, so trivial yet so important, were in perfect taste. She was so long before the glass that, for once, she kept her aunt waiting instead of fidgeting downstairs while Mrs. Swannington adorned herself. The latter, when she appeared, said nothing, but nodded approval. Beattie was not thinking of effect, but only desired that her lover should take pleasure in the sight of her.

During the drive Mrs. Swannington, who was also a little excited, made from time to time disconnected remarks and ejaculations. Beattie was too agitated to say much; she was pale and trembling with nervousness. To her, this meeting with one who had been near death had something sacred in its character.

They were informed that Mr. Musgrove was at home, and were shown into