

Mrs. Swannington any longer had the same aversion to their union. She began to wish she had let things alone at the beginning, since she had occasional doubts as to whether Mr. Musgrove would ever now become Beattie's husband. But what she did fear was what disclosures might take place as to her own part in the affair. Beattie knew neither of Mike's first proposal nor his subsequent renewal of it. Also if Mike discovered that Mrs. Swannington had lied to him it would not be exactly pleasant for herself. But what she chiefly feared was that, even if there were yet any likelihood of Musgrove again proposing to Beattie she would again refuse him should Mike have gained any hold over her; whereas by keeping them apart and by making her own home unpleasant for Beattie the latter would most likely be glad enough to accept Cecil. And then all would yet be as she desired. Her only uneasiness was lest, as he showed himself not too well pleased with the state of affairs, Cecil Musgrove should stay away till he had lost interest in Beattie; or worse still, lest he should hear what she had done, and for that reason keep his distance.

But Beattie could not be expected to know all the workings of her aunt's mind, and accordingly she did not take her refusal very meekly.

"I am very disappointed," she said to Mrs. Gilman.

"And so I am sure will Norah be. But still, you must, of course, do as your aunt wishes. There may be other opportunities."

"I can't see what reason she can have for keeping me away though."

Mrs. Gilman was a woman who made a point of attributing kind motives.

"I expect, dear, it isn't that she wants to keep you away from Norah, but near herself. Besides," she added, smiling, still well-intentioned, though not particularly wise, "I don't think Norah is the only person who is fond of you. I rather believe, for I have been taken partly into confidence, there is some one nearer home who cares in a different way from Norah, and Mrs. Swannington may think it well not to send you away on visits just now."

Mrs. Gilman meant that she had been taken into Mrs. Swannington's confidence during the summer, but Beattie understood her to mean Cecil's. She found herself blushing crimson.

"Mrs. Gilman," she said impulsively, "do you think people can always tell before marriage whether they are likely to be well suited to one another?"

"Dear me, no," said Mrs. Gilman, airily, "or how is it they make so many mistakes? But as for you, Beattie, you are so easy to get on with that anyone could live happily with you. And I don't think you are hard to please, either."

Beattie was silent.

"We must not mention names," said Mrs. Gilman, "but I heard someone who is a very good judge of character say that you had the most charming disposition he had ever met. Only, if anything, you were too guileless."

"I should like to know what that means?" said Beattie. "It doesn't sound altogether flattering."

"It was meant to be," said Mrs. Gilman. "Ah, Beattie, you would be very vain if you had heard all he said about you to my husband one evening during the tableaux. Robert told me that for a man who generally had disparaging things to say it was quite remarkable. But for my part I think Mr. Musgrove's way of running things down is only a mannerism. I believe he has more appreciation of life and the world in general than people give him credit for."

"I thought no names were to be used," said Beattie, laughing.

But when she went home to find her aunt rather vexed at her having stayed out her thoughts turned almost instinctively to Cecil.

"I suppose I have been a little idiot," she said to herself. "They all make out he is very fond of me, and I have repulsed him without due consideration. He is not a boy to be snubbed and laughed at, and I don't wonder he was hurt at my treating his proposal so lightly. I expect I am too stupid to have understood him rightly, and because he has not appeared to take things seriously I hardly believed he was serious in that. And yet, it seems absurd. Why else should he have proposed? Aunt Ella is right; I am a nobody. I have only a pretty face and a good figure. And he has so much to offer. Many women would give anything to be loved by him. . . ." Then she fell to musing. "What reparation can I make? The only thing is to make myself fitter to be his wife. He lent me books; he wanted me to read and think. I will try to go on doing so, only much more seriously. He shall find I am not so empty-headed, nor so frivolous, as I have been."

The result of this was that when she wrote to Norah refusing the invitation, and alleging as a reason that her aunt wanted her at home, she consulted her as to what books she would advise her to read with a desire to self-improvement. And Norah, having asked her father, there arrived in due course a long list, with the offer of the loan of some of the volumes named. Beattie eagerly accepted, and with the feeling that she was doing something which would please Cecil when he came to know of it, threw herself with ardour into the pursuit of learning. Mrs. Swannington was still confined to her room for a considerable part of the day, and when Beattie sat with her she turned the time to good account. Her natural distaste to reading was conquered by her enthusiasm to do what was right towards the man she now regarded as her future husband, and as Beattie never did things by halves she really studied in earnest. The books which the Gilmans, father and daughter, had selected, were not altogether those which Mr. Musgrove would have chosen, and their effect on the impressionable Beattie was other than he might have admired. Still, this was an epoch in Beattie's life. She began to realise that there was an ideal

far removed from the actual existence, to see that the great minds of the world thought very differently about many things from what was held up by the accepted standard. She had a spirit easily kindled to enthusiasm, and the narrow round of social duties, the amusements and pursuits which she had believed the sum of reasonable existence began to shrivel and appear rather contemptible. In the Swannington household success and money were regarded as the essentials of life; she was beginning to perceive that failure in a noble cause and voluntary poverty for the sake of a greater good might be worth far more. And gradually, almost unconsciously to herself, she found the necessity of forming independent judgments, a necessity that comes to most young people sooner or later, and which, like all other development, brings sorrow as well as joy with it. Every step away from the old things is a step towards that loneliness which in its degree marks the progress of the individual through life. However well-intentioned, she was not really fitting herself to regard things from Mr. Musgrove's standpoint.

All this took time, but it is doubtful if Mrs. Swannington had sent him more than one invitation to the house, for there had been no supposition that the visiting or the degree of intimacy was to be any different from what it had been hitherto. The first two of these invitations he had refused, but quite courteously, alleging engagements which were *bona-fide*, one of them a public meeting which Mrs. Swannington saw by the newspaper he had attended. He had called one Saturday afternoon, but it chanced that Mrs. Swannington and Beattie were out driving. It is true he had not as before invited them to any sort of entertainment at his own house, but that was natural enough. Under the circumstances it would not have been quite agreeable for Beattie to receive hospitality from him. He had not ceased to be fond of her, but he was acting in a way which he considered most dignified and most likely to bring Beattie to a different state of mind. But yet unconsciously to himself he was growing more indifferent to her, and less desirous of renewing his offer of marriage.

Christmas had passed, and Beattie had received from him, together with her aunt and uncle, one of those somewhat formal remembrances of the season which of late have taken the place of the pictorial Christmas card. In return she had chosen, with much care, and sent to him the prettiest and daintiest she could find. She wanted him to see that she acknowledged this recognition of herself. He wrote and thanked her, and his letter was so friendly that Mrs. Swannington, who insisted on seeing it, was sufficiently encouraged to again send him an invitation, this time to a small At Home she was having shortly after the new year. To her surprise he neither answered it nor appeared, and a few days went by without her knowing the reason. She had a return of her old uneasiness, but one day Mrs. Gilman called and then they heard the cause of his silence.