

Beattie with her somewhat steely eyes, but they looked kind in spite of their glittering sharpness.

"My dear," she said, "I am sorry to hear it."

"Aren't you rather hard to please, Miss Williams?" asked Beattie smiling through her tears. "You are disappointed that the others are going to be married and disappointed that I am not. Or is it that you have such a low opinion of my capacities that you think if I stand alone I shall only bring contempt upon the cause of woman?"

"No, my dear. I believe if you developed your mind it would well reward the care given to it. But it is a curious thing, and I hope you will not think I am going against my principles when I say that it would give me more satisfaction to hear you were about to enter the married state than that you are desirous of leaving the protection of your home. I do not, as you know, believe the married state the happiest for women. All the most useful and finest women are independent of the support of men. But—there are exceptions. Somehow I scarcely imagine you growing old—alone."

"But if—I shall not ever marry?"

"It is unlikely. Should some sentiment for one individual now deter you from liking others time will doubtless cure that. It is merely imagination which makes one man seem perfect, the others hardly worth speaking to. To me—now" (there was a scarcely perceptible pause; was Miss Williams asking herself if she were speaking the truth?) "it seems foolishness for a woman to ruin her life for the sake of an ideal. And in any case, I think it would be wiser for you to remain with your aunt. I am not wishing to deter you from being of use in the world. But I would not be too independent. A home is not to be lightly thrown away. Your aunt is doubtless attached to you. Life, you may not yet know, wears a different aspect to those who have to earn their own living. The struggle with one's fellow creatures has a hardening effect. And you, my dear, do not seem made for fighting."

To hear Miss Williams talking in a way exactly the opposite of what she had expected, was somewhat disconcerting to poor Beattie, who had confidently looked for help and advice of a different sort, and who yet could not fail to see that it was possible the elder lady knew better than herself what would be a wise course for her to pursue. She sat silent with downcast eyes, feeling that she must be rather a poor sort of creature if the rules which the upholder of woman's rights laid down so firmly were, in her case, to be relaxed and even reversed. Perhaps Miss Williams read her thoughts, for she said presently, as if bringing forward an argument which was more worthy of Beattie's consideration than those which had preceded it, "Don't you think, unless there is a decided vocation, it is a species of dishonesty for women who are well provided for to swell the numbers of those who seek for wages?"

Beattie looked up.

"I don't want to make anyone else's life harder," she said. "But I do not see why I should rely on being provided for myself. I am sure you won't mind my not entering into particulars which concern my own feelings, but there are reasons why it seems unlikely I can ever satisfy my aunt. She has been wonderfully good to me in the past, but she has often lately given me to understand that her home is not necessarily mine. I do not please her, and consequently I do not add to her happiness or my uncle's. I have no right to bring discord into the house."

It was true that Aunt Ella was dissatisfied with her niece. Beattie had not gratified her ambition, and she considered this entirely the girl's fault and did not hesitate to reproach her with it. The end of the affair with Cecil Musgrove made her furious. She saw herself lowered in the eyes of Mrs. Gilman and others to whom she had spoken with great positiveness as to the possible issue of events. She could not forgive either Beattie or Cecil, and the only revenge she could think of for the latter was that the girl whom he had, as she considered, slighted, should make a good match as soon as possible. As it chanced Beattie numbered among her admirers a widower more than twice her age and with two or three children; he was very rich and was a great friend of Mr. Gilman's. Beattie had known him since her childhood and during his first wife's lifetime, and nothing was further from her thoughts than the idea of marriage with him. She certainly could not have been said to give him any encouragement, and when one day her aunt informed her that he had proposed for her she could hardly believe it. At any rate she begged that nothing more might be said about the matter, as it was impossible she could ever accede to his wishes.

"It seems to me," exclaimed Mrs. Swannington when at last it was apparent that threats, persuasions and arguments were alike useless, "that you are bent on thwarting my wishes. You think nobody good enough for you. But I can tell you, you will have by-and-by to change your tune. I have given you every opportunity of finding a good home, and you have rejected them all. Well, only look not that I will have you always in mine."

"You have been very, very good to me, Aunt Ella," said Beattie, "and you cannot be sorrier than I am that I am not able to please you. Things have so turned out that I know however many offers of marriage I have I shall refuse them."

"But what an absurdity!" cried Mrs. Swannington. "You refuse this Musgrove; then when he has treated you like he did, you pretend to love him! Have you no pride? Or is it that he has trampled on it, so it exists no longer? For me, I have no patience with you. None. Why, I would rather even you should take that Anstruther. He was infatuated with you once. I will ask him that he shall call here when he passes through London and say good-bye. It will seem not strange

as he so recently met you. I will soon arrange that all shall be right."

"Oh don't, don't, auntie," cried Beattie. "Have I not been already enough humiliated? Besides, Mr. Anstruther has, I believe, left England. And in any case," she added desperately, "he knows I care for someone else."

"You idiot!" said Aunt Ella. "What induced you to tell him that?"

Beattie's eyes flashed.

"Because," she said, "you had already done so. And before it was a fact. I have not said anything before because I saw no good in alluding to it, but I know that you told Mr. Anstruther an untruth about me and—Mr. Musgrove; me, and a man whom, after all, I am not going to marry. Perhaps I ought not to reproach you. I suppose you thought you were acting for my good, but it would have been kinder to have left me alone to choose in a matter which is of such vital importance. If Mr. Anstruther had been allowed to speak to me, I should have been spared all this. I could have cared for him. I did. And all these mistakes and this wretchedness would have been avoided. But we have had enough of it now. I am nearly of age. It will be better that I should decide for myself in future. I am very sorry that you insist on my marrying. If I might just live quietly with you and Uncle Arthur I would be quite content. I would consider you both in every way, and be like your own daughter; I would try to be a comfort and a help to you. I am sure uncle is not anxious to get rid of me. He has told me so himself. If you will be satisfied to put away any schemes for my future it will be better for us all. I cannot marry to please anybody but myself."

This outburst was not calculated to soothe Mrs. Swannington. To be informed that Beattie knew of her interview with Michael, to be reproached with having been the cause of her niece's troubles, and above all to feel that her husband had been telling Beattie he would like to keep her with them, were each separate stings.

"You are an ungrateful, bad, selfish girl," she said. "I believe now you are capable of anything. Actually blaming me; one who has given you the very clothes you stand in, whose only fault has been a too great desire to see you well established, while you, a silly sentimental chit, have constantly thwarted me. And then getting your uncle who is, if anything, too good-natured to side against me, wheeling him into pretending he cannot do without your society, no doubt, and nonsense of that kind. Well, I have done with you. I take no more interest in you nor your affairs. I tell my husband when he returns that I have no more of his relations thrust upon me to be only an expense and a trouble and a disappointment to me. And the more you keep out of my way the better shall I be pleased. Mr. Cookson will now, I have no doubt, cease to visit here because of you, and certainly my intimacy with Mrs. Gilman is at an end; I