

ashamed and sorry, retired precipitately to the refuge afforded by the sofa-cushions and hid her face.

"Well," said Mike, after a considerable pause, "between you I may well feel a brute. My visit doesn't seem to add particularly to the cheerfulness of the rectory. Having reduced you both to tears, I had better take my departure. Good-bye, Norah."

Mike moved towards the door, but at the sound of his departing footsteps Norah raised her face.

"Don't go, Mike," said a quivering voice, "I—I am sorry I have been—such a silly. You—you'll never respect me again."

Michael had been inclined to mount the high horse himself, but the mere sign of Norah's relenting was enough. He came back. And as he looked at her woe-begone little face and the eyes which were regarding him so affectionately, he remembered that he had once thought she cared for his unworthy self. If so, it must indeed have seemed hard for her to find him apparently forgetting her in her friend. He felt a rush of tenderness towards her as he seated himself on the sofa by her side.

"Norah," he said, "I can't bear to think I have done the least thing to make you unhappy. You have always been so good to me. As to respecting you, you know perfectly well that I believe you to be the best girl I have ever known. I can't show my trust in you better than by asking you to let me tell you something. A man doesn't generally talk about these things unless it maybe to his mother, and you will understand why I have kept this secret from you before."

"Mike," said Norah imploringly, "I don't want you to show your trust. I don't deserve to be taken into your confidence."

"Nonsense. Don't for pity's sake go reproaching yourself because you showed a little natural spirit. You had a right to be angry with me if I neglected you. Only you'll forgive me, dear, won't you, when I tell you that I have not seen Beattie for a long, long time, and that I love her better than anyone else in the world—better even than I love my mother."

"You—love—Beattie?" Norah's face had grown deathly white, and it seemed that something had tightened round her heart. Her voice was low and startled, and as she raised her eyes to his, as if to read the ratification of his words, they had the look of a creature who has been mortally wounded. Poor Norah, she needed all her woman's pride to hide from Mike what that confession meant to her. There was no question now of petty jealousy. An instinct of self-defence, an instinct which even the most artless woman feels before the man she loves when she knows he loves another, made her strive to hide from him, not very successfully indeed, that to her those words had meant the sudden death of every hope.

"Yes, dear," said Mike very gently, "I have loved her since we first met, that night at Mrs. Gilman's. You remember."

"Yes," Norah answered dreamily, "I remember. And," with an effort, "Beattie—you—have been telling her? Why—did she go away? Was it—because I came in? I will call her back."

And, with a longing to escape, she half rose. But Mike drew her back.

"No, dear, you don't understand. Beattie doesn't care for me. That was why my telling her about it only—made her unhappy."

"She doesn't care? Beattie does not love you?" For an instant something almost like joy came over Norah; but it quickly died away. She forgot herself in him as she realised that his suffering was like her own. Norah could never bear to see anyone unhappy, and least of all anyone she cared for. "Oh," she said, "I am so very, very sorry. But, dear, you must have patience. Perhaps you surprised her. Perhaps presently she will learn to love you. She must."

Mike shook his head. It was not for him to tell Norah Beattie's secrets.

"I am not such an irresistible person, you see, Norah. And it is not everybody who has your faculty for idealising their friends. However," giving himself a shake, and rising from the sofa, "it is about time I made up my mind to doing without her. It is wonderful though, how easily hope springs up when you think it is done with. Now, Norah, why don't you give me one of your lectures? Tell me, in the good old salutary style I well remember, that there are other things in the world than marrying, better gifts than love, all sorts of people to live for and plenty to be done. Why, you used to be such a good hand at improving the occasion. Won't you do so now?"

But Norah only shook her head. She was in no humour to "improve the occasion." Mike, however, began to whistle "Begone, dull care," rather drearily. He was anxious to cheer up poor Norah, with whose sorrow he must not sympathise, since it was kinder to suppose it non-existent. Then, as she smiled, he said—

"I'll preach you a sermon presently, Miss Norah, on the advantages to be derived on having our wishes denied us. And look here, if ever you care for someone who isn't able to love you in quite the same way, you must remember that single women do most of the world's work; I am not so sure about the bachelors. Indeed, from my experience, I am rather inclined to reverse Lord Beaconsfield's famous saying that all women should marry and no men. Ah, now I see you are prepared to argue. That's right. Now farewell sentiment."

And taking out his handkerchief Mike wiped Norah's eyes in spite of her laughing protestations, and throwing open the French window, drew her into the garden. There presently Beattie joined them, and though all their hearts were secretly heavy, and Norah's sadder than it had ever been, yet they were all outwardly cheerful, and Mr. Gilman when he came home little guessed why his welcome was so cordial. He was

delighted when Mike suggested a walk with him over his glebe.

There was a little awkwardness when the girls were left alone. Norah was divided between her anxiety to do her duties as hostess and her longing to be alone. Beattie did not know how much, if anything, ought to be explained. But presently Norah broke the silence which had been maintained while they walked twice round the lawn.

"Mike has told me about it," she said gently. And Beattie little knew the struggle it cost her to utter those simple words. Beattie turned to her an April face.

"I am glad," she said. "You will comfort him better than anyone. I—I couldn't help it. I never tried to make him love me."

Norah said no more. But she kissed her.

"Norah," said Beattie suddenly, "you look very tired."

"I am—a little," Norah answered. "Shall we go indoors? I—I will—lie down till tea-time. Don't tell father. He will think I am ill. I will be down by five, dear." And as Beattie entered the drawing-room, Norah crept wearily up the stairs to her own room and locked the door.

A fortnight after Beattie went home she received a letter in the handwriting of Cecil Musgrove. Aunt Ella had immediately perceived from whom it was, and she smiled significantly across the breakfast-table to her husband as the girl, without attempting to read it then, slipped it into her pocket.

"What a relief it will be to me, Arthur," she said, as Beattie left the room, "when this affair is settled. A girl in love is of all things most tiresome."

Beattie's letter was as follows—

"MY DEAR MISS MARGETSON,
"I am writing to you because I think that will be more agreeable to us both than for me to tell you in person that I was in the wrong and you in the right when I made you an offer of marriage and you advised a period of waiting. You did not then care for me enough to cast in your lot with mine, and in the year which has elapsed we have seen so little of each other, owing in part to my unfortunate illness, that it is impossible your feelings can have grown warmer. I will not say mine have grown cooler, but apart from the fascination of your presence, I have realised that while entertaining the sincerest regard and affection for you, I have not that ardour which alone can make marriage desirable. Our ages and dispositions are different, and I do not believe it is in my power to make you happy. You will find a partner more worthy of you and better suited to your charming temperament. I trust that you will always regard me as your friend, and should it ever be in my power to render you any service I should esteem myself most fortunate."

"Believe me, dear Miss Margetson,

"Always sincerely yours,

"CECIL A. MUSGROVE."

(To be continued.)