

## CHAPTER XXIV.



months and even years went by, and Beattie did not return. She was well satisfied with her new life, and had no desire to go back to the old one, which, although it had been easier, had been empty in comparison. She was on good terms with her aunt and uncle, and

called on them from time to time till she had the offer of work away from London and accepted it. But if she were content Mrs. Swannington was not. She missed Beattie more than she cared to confess, and her husband, though he dared not own it, found his home a different place. At last one day Aunt Ella said, "I wouldn't on any account have Beattie back, but I rather feel the want of someone who can be a companion to me. I shall advertise." Mr. Swannington said, "I am sure you must be lonely when I am away, my dear. I certainly should have some one." And accordingly an advertisement was inserted in the *Morning Post*, which brought answers from fifty single women, all, if their letters were to be believed, eminently desirable in every way. "You see, Arthur," said Mrs. Swannington, "there is no difficulty. It is easier to find a companion than a coo, and certainly cheaper."

The finding might have been easy, but what to do with them when found was another matter. Mrs. Swannington, tried one after another of them in rapid succession, and regaled her husband with anecdotes of the stupidity of this one, the insolence of that, the eccentricities of a third, and the utter uselessness of her successor. Before two weeks she was bored to death with every one of them; then she snubbed them or found fault, and the result was tears or retorts, according to the temperament of the individual.

"You only change their faces," said she; "they are all fools alike. I think companions are even more tiresome than servants. At any rate, you don't have the latter about you all the day long. I shall give them up." And she gave them up accordingly.

Her friends meanwhile wondered at the selfishness of the niece, who thus

left her to the society of hirelings, but Aunt Ella, with a little twinge of conscience, would reply to their condolences that young people were usually selfish. Then one summer she had a return of her old complaint. The doctor forbade much exertion, and poor Mrs. Swannington found herself confined to the house and the sofa for a considerable portion of each day. It was an unwonted thing for her to give way to depression, so that when her husband came home and found her in tears he was rather alarmed, and exerted himself to cheer her.

"The house is so wretchedly dull," said Mrs. Swannington. "Marie has a voice like a pencil scratching on a slate; if she laughs it sets my nerves on edge. The nurse is worse; her prim and proper ways make me inclined to hurl at her my physic bottle. The doctor is the only creature who has amused me the entire day. And he stayed but ten minutes. Last time I was ill I had at any rate—Beattie."

Uncle Arthur fidgeted with his watch-chain. Moral courage was not his strong point, and he feared his wife's tongue, so there was something valiant in his suggestion.

"It must be close on time for her holidays. Ask her to come here."

"She wrote she was invited to Woodfield," said Aunt Ella.

"Nonsense!" Mr. Swannington knew by the inflection of her voice that he had not made a mistake. "She'll come if she's wanted. Beattie goes in for the self-sacrifice business. Look here, suppose I send her a line."

Aunt Ella made no objection, and that evening Mr. Swannington wrote and posted his letter before she had a chance of reading it. He told Beattie exactly the state of affairs, and begged her to come back. "I wish you'd stop altogether when you do come," he wrote. "Your aunt will never ask it, but I know she has moped ever since you left us. Don't, if you love me, tell her I mentioned this. But you might just think it over, B. Things are different from what they used to be. I don't think she'll be in a hurry to get rid of you now she sees what it is like."

Beattie gave up her holiday in the country, but she had no intention of giving up her work, and so she told her uncle as soon as she saw him. Perhaps he and Aunt Ella had some talks on the subject, for one day Mrs. Swannington remarked—

"Your uncle seems brighter since you have been here, Beattie. When I am poorly I cannot amuse him, and you are always cheerful. It is a pity you cannot come back. Of course," she added, seeing her niece flush crimson and almost involuntarily shake her head, "it is only for his sake. If you had your evenings you could spend your days as you choose. But you are of age; I do not wish that I should influence you."

"It is not a matter I could decide in a minute, Aunt Ella," said Beattie; but she smiled. She understood her aunt.

The next day her uncle took her aside and said—

"I say, Beattie, it's a pity you don't

pocket your pride. Your aunt is awfully set on your coming here to live again. Of course I'd like it too; but I'm of no consequence; I'm out all the day, only it's dull for her. I should like you to understand that if you wanted to do good and all that we wouldn't stand in your way. And of course money needn't be an object. We—we wouldn't let you be a loser. Still, I wouldn't wish to hinder you in any way, and you're old enough now to judge for yourself."

And then Beattie laughed outright. She understood her uncle too. But the decision could not be lightly made.

However, she made it before many days. She met at an afternoon at-home a lady who worked among crippled children in the South of London, and whose name was already familiar to her. This lady, not knowing anything about Beattie, but only telling her of the work which was the interest of a life the world called blighted, was speaking of her desire to find some one younger than herself, who, without payment of any kind, would devote a portion of her time to helping her. She described the requirements and was as surprised as delighted when the sympathetic young listener turned an eager face towards her and said—

"Shall I do? It is the very thing I have been wanting!"

"And you," replied the lady, "are the very person I have been looking for."

"Auntie," said Beattie, when she got home, "I would like to stay with you if I may spend half my time in a slum. I will drench myself with disinfectants and change my dress before I come to you, and be as careful as a doctor, but I must go. There are children wanting me."

Aunt Ella sighed; but it was partly a sigh of relief. Even the dread of catching something was not so bad as the dread of losing Beattie.

"It is incomprehensible to me," she said, "how anybody can wish to go among children, and especially children who are badly kept; but since you have the desire I know it is no good my trying to dissuade you. But it is a good thing you should have a comfortable home to come to afterwards."

And Aunt Ella had no reason to regret the hours Beattie spent away from her. The sunshine she brought into the "comfortable home" poured into her own heart when she sat in desolate rooms by little crippled children, ministering to them, helping them, teaching them, giving and gaining love. She was happy now, indeed—happier than she had ever been in her life, with a happiness that endured, for she was one of the fortunate ones who have found their vocation and follow it.

Her love for Cecil Musgrove had passed away. It had been an artificial growth, and when she had natural vents for all her powers it dispersed, she knew not how. She was only happily conscious that the thought of him was not associated with bitterness, or grief, or longing any longer. She had no wish to meet him again, but if she did she could greet him simply as a friend. She was