

spoke thus of the girl, by whose dying mother she had watched long before her own bereavement had made her doubly tender over the child. She was not an ambitious woman in any worldly sense, and sometimes she hoped that this young and charming little friend of hers would be a daughter indeed. Norah was unspotted from the world and of gentle blood. Her mother had been of better birth than the Anstruthers themselves. Of money as a factor in happiness Lady Anstruther thought wonderfully little considering the day she lived in; though she knew Sir John would not wish his son's bride to come to him dowerless. But what above all endeared the rector's daughter to Michael's mother was that she knew that from the time when they had played together as children, there had been no one like Michael in Norah's eyes and never would be. Norah was a mere girl still, but Lady Anstruther could see that that which had grown with her would remain with her; the development to womanhood would be a gradual thing. She would gain new affections, but the old ones would remain and deepen with the passing years.

"I met her at Mrs. Gilman's," said Mike quietly.

Lady Anstruther could not at present feel any assurance that to Michael Norah was more than the friend of his boyhood, but then to her Mike was a boy still, and she did not suppose his thoughts had turned with love to any woman.

"She told me she had made a friend," went on the gentle voice of the invalid, "and she held out hopes that one day she would stay with her. Poor child, I am afraid she is often dull at the rectory."

Michael's heart leapt. It was strange and seemed to him ominous of good that on the very evening of his return he should hear of Beattie and from the lips of his mother.

The lady's-maid knocked and stole into the room.

"I do not think her ladyship had better talk any more to-night," she said. "It is time she had her draught."

Michael bade her good-night. His mother laid her hand on his head with a murmured "God bless you" that brought the tears to his eyes. There was that in her manner which told him she had scarcely hoped to see him again, and that made the meeting a solemn as well as a joyful one.

Lady Anstruther had heart-disease, and her husband and children knew that in all probability the attacks would one day end fatally. But people who live with one in any way afflicted get so used to it that they are liable to forget danger in its familiarity, and those about her, especially Sir John, were apt to take advantage of her sympathetic and unselfish disposition and let her wear herself out in their service. Sir John had a morbid twist in his character which sometimes caused him to suffer from prolonged fits of depression. At these times he was fractious and irritable, exacting in the attentions he

required, and liable to passionate outbursts which although they spent themselves in words were most exhausting to her on whom they were usually inflicted. The monotony of country-life too, deprived as she was of the intercourse with her children which she so enjoyed, and of her neighbours through Sir John's unsociability wearied Lady Anstruther occasionally; for she was naturally a woman who loved society and varied occupation and the exercise of the many brilliant gifts with which she was endowed. Of late years Sir John had refused to accompany her to London for the season, and as she feared to leave him alone for more than a few days, an absence which would have been scarcely worth the fatigue it entailed, she remained at Woodfield the whole year. The village was the gainer; she visited the poor in their homes, interested herself in their daughters, ministered to the sick, and aided the needy. She knew all the joys and sorrows of these humble homes, and her own bereavement in which she had had the genuine sympathy of the village had brought her nearer to other mourners. So it was that by her own patience and meekness and charity, she was able to set an example that was ennobling and elevating, and though she spoke little of religion she made it a reality, and her influence was all on the side of good.

But for her Mr. Gilman's position would have been hard indeed. The Squire would have nothing to do with him in his capacity of clergyman, and had never entered the church since Evelyn's funeral; the death of his wife had deprived him of his only companion, and he, like Lady Anstruther, was debarred from indulging any of his natural tastes, partly by the loneliness of the neighbourhood, and the difficulty of congenial society for one who had neither leisure nor wealth, and partly by defective hearing, which, increasing as he grew older, made him shy and retiring. He was a scholar and a gentleman, in his youth he had been much sought after, but a certain lack of power, a diffidence that was almost faulty had kept him below the position to which he might have attained. His wife's delicacy had made him glad to accept a living in the bracing county in which Sir John Anstruther's estate was situated, and after her death his ambition, such as it was, seemed to have faded. He wished for nothing but to do his work quietly till he should be laid by her side. Still, he was desirous of doing his duty by his children, and it was here that he found Lady Anstruther's advice and help of such great importance, especially where Norah was concerned. His friendship and admiration for her extended to her children, and Michael he loved scarcely less than his own two boys.

To Michael the rectory had been a second home. The boys were a good deal younger than he, but they were merry little fellows, and he liked to share their games, and Norah, even in the days when she wore pinafores and short frocks was always a kind little hostess, ready with piles of buttered toast

on wintry afternoons, when they had been skating or snowballing, and with unlimited strawberry jam when they had tea out in the garden. If Michael hurt himself during the scrimmages, and from his infancy he was always "in the wars," as they called it, Norah was prepared with arnica, and bandages, and gold-beater's skin from the medicine chest of which she was so proud. The boys called her a "regular fusser," and a "frightful fidget;" but though they fretted under her ministrations, Mike was never ungrateful for the kind touch of her childish fingers, and the soothing tones of her clear young voice. He never noticed that Norah grew up. She had always been grown up to him, a person to be treated with respect and consideration even when she was playing rounders with marks of chocolate about her mouth. Her manner to him had never changed, and he took her interest in himself as a matter of course.

But he had never talked to her with the intimacy with which he had laid bare so many of his thoughts to Beattie after less than a week's acquaintance. People are often shyer with old friends than with new. It frequently happens that one reveals to the stranger of yesterday what one's brother will never know, and what a life-long intercourse has not drawn from one's heart. But still Michael was very fond of Norah. He had been too attached to Evelyn to think of putting Norah in her place, but she was like a younger sister, and if he had been in trouble and anxious to spare his mother, he would have gone unhesitatingly, and with the assurance of her sympathy to the little mistress of the Rectory. He was sorry she was not at home now. The morning after his arrival he would have liked to spend the hour in the rectory parlour, till he was admitted to his mother's room. Norah was a person who was always busy and yet made you feel she had plenty of time at your disposal. At least, she made Michael feel like that. He never scrupled to invade her mornings. But to-day she would not be there. The boys too, he heard, were staying with some school-fellows till the next week. Still, he thought, he would stroll down and see the rector. His own father had sat up till late talking to him the night before and had sent a message that he was to make his morning plans without regard to him. Sir John was not an early riser. Sometimes he would keep breakfast about till it was nearly lunch time, refusing to take it in his own room where he was parading up and down in his dressing-gown, brooding on various subjects, and persuading himself he was the most miserable creature in existence (as he probably was at that time). The doctor, a young man with more candour than caution, told him his liver was at fault, and that if he took his breakfast at a sensible hour he would be considerably better in both mind and body, but as Sir John did not obey him, and continued to need his ministrations, Dr. Waller lost nothing except Sir John's approbation by having told him the truth.

Mr. Gilman was in his study when