

She hated long engagements, and she was determined to have Beattie soon married. Besides, she had taken such pains to secure Cecil Musgrove, and though the presence of a rival might bring him to the point, yet suppose, after all, that rival should have greater power over Beattie? It was possible. What should she do? There was only one thing she could think of, and though she was not a stern adherent to truthfulness, she shrank from a deliberate lie, especially when there was not only the risk of discovery, but of putting herself in a most uncomfortable position. Still, in her opinion the end would justify the means.

"My good friend," she said, laying her delicately-gloved hand lightly on his arm, as if to express sympathy, "you have waited long enough—for it to be just too late."

Michael stopped short and faced her, shaking by his sudden action the hand from its resting-place.

"You don't mean to say—" he began vehemently.

"Hush, hush, my dear friend" (Aunt Ella was wonderfully affectionate now that she was killing his hopes), "not so loud; you will attract attention. Come, now, I see a seat across there; it is not so close to the people. But mind, what I tell you is in the strictest confidence."

"You are not going to say she cares for someone else?" cried Michael.

"When Beattie loves," said Mrs. Swannington, "it is with the whole heart."

Mike felt crushed. He had found Aunt Ella out in prevarications before, but he had been generous enough to forget them, and her manner was so unwontedly sympathetic, so perturbed, that even if he had been in a humour to analyse her motives he would scarcely have credited her with the cold-blooded falsehood she was about to perpetrate.

"Is it," faltered Mike—unable to wait till they had reached the seat which Aunt Ella, in the hope of gaining time, had selected as the secluded spot for confidences—"is it—that gentleman I saw with you?"

Aunt Ella nodded assertion. Mr. Anstruther was making her task a very easy one, and she was momentarily gaining confidence.

"It is," she said. "I am glad you have seen him. Can you wonder that any girl should be attracted by him?—even Beattie, who has been hard to please, I can assure you."

"They are engaged, then?"

"Privately," said Mrs. Swannington. "That is why I want you to consider what I tell you as in confidence. Now here we are. Sit by me." Mrs. Swannington looked hurriedly round. She was not so sure of Beattie's whereabouts as to feel quite at ease. "It was a case of love at first sight, I do believe, though I am generally sceptical of such things. But his devotion is ridiculous. He is at present staying with us. I am very well satisfied. I am sorry for you, my dear Mr. Anstruther; I wish you had been more fickle, but there it is. They are well suited, and both my husband and I congratulate ourselves."

Mike felt cold and sick at heart. The sudden fall from hope to despair had stunned him. Only those who have gone through a like experience, who have learnt that someone or something they had ardently desired is lost to them, can realise how the aspect of all things is changed by a word. To Mike there was no longer any beauty or charm in the place in which he found himself. It was grey and cheerless and empty of delight—he longed to be gone from it, to flee away, he cared not whither. His first disappointment seemed as nothing compared to this; his loss had been less inevitable. And if Beattie had not been his, at any rate he had been spared the anguish of knowing she loved someone else. And she might have loved him. The "might have been!" If Whittier's words do not contain a universal truth, there are many hearts which can echo his words as a fact of their own experience:—

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these: 'It might
have been.'"

But whatever Mike might feel he did not show much to Mrs. Swannington. Indeed, when he was no longer tortured by anxiety, and knew the worst, he was so quiet and self-possessed and looked so much as he had looked before that the little lady, who only believed in emotions when she saw their manifestation, was inclined to think that Mr. Anstruther did not mind so very much after all, and that if absence had not cured, it had very much weakened his boyish passion. She was glad it was so, for though her conscience was not a very troublesome one, yet she would not like to think she had made him unhappy sooner than necessary. Of course he would have had to know he could not marry Beattie, as soon as she was engaged, and so really she did not think she had acted otherwise than was justified by a needful diplomacy.

"May I ask you his name?" said Mike presently.

Aunt Ella hesitated. A handsome stranger who was nameless was one thing, in the event of her having made a false step. Mr. Cecil Musgrove was another. However, there was nothing for it, and she not only informed Michael of his identity, but drew a highly-coloured picture of his personality, his position, and his prospects, which had the effect of so much further depressing her listener with a sense of his comparative unworthiness as to take the heart out of him altogether. He ought, perhaps, to have rejoiced that Beattie had escaped being his wife to attain something so much better; but, though he loved her very sincerely and unselfishly, somehow that aspect of the matter did not present itself before him so vividly as to outweigh other considerations.

But now Mrs. Swannington began to feel a little restless. She must not let that impulsive girl come upon them at any moment, to betray her pleasure in meeting Michael or to say something of or to Cecil which might prove their relations were not what she had represented them. She must part from Mike

as soon as possible, and in her own interest she gave him an exhortation. Again the grey-gloved hand was in requisition. This time it reposed for a moment on his.

"My dear Mr. Michael, I am sincerely sorry for your disappointment, though I never concealed from you—did I?—that I desired for Beattie more than you had to offer. Do not blame me. I am to her instead of a mother, and her well-being I must consider. Still you have indeed my sincere sympathy, though I think you will get over this fancy. No, no, be not impatient with me. I have lived longer than you. You are not the first young man who has met with reverses in love. And Beattie, though amiable and charming, is by no means the only nice girl the world produces. But let me give to you a little advice. It is this—that you do not see her. You came, I am convinced, for that purpose. Now you will but suffer more if you break the separation which has lasted this year. My niece is prettier than ever, the sight of her would make your affection more ardent. But besides, Mr. Musgrove is for ever near her, and what would you not endure at feeling yourself an interloper? Jealous he is not, he is too sure of her love; but as you can well understand, more especially as the engagement is not yet declared, he likes to have her to himself."

"You need not be afraid that I shall force my society on Miss Margeson or her fiancé, Mrs. Swannington," said Mike bitterly. "I am glad she is happy, but I am not yet able to witness her happiness without a pang, and, as you say, it is no use torturing myself for nothing."

"If you stay here you can hardly avoid meeting. This little Crabsley favours not solitude."

"I shall not stay here an hour longer than I can help," said Mike.

Mrs. Swannington breathed more freely.

"You are very wise, my dear boy. It is what I would have said to you. But now I must say good-bye. My husband will be wondering what has become of me."

She would not allow him to accompany her any part of the way. She would not feel comfortable till the evening train had left Crabsley, perhaps not till the next day had passed; but the only thing she could do now was to endeavour to keep her party, her husband included, from encountering the superfluous visitor. By the time she had reached home she had planned an after-dinner drive to some neighbouring ruins which hitherto she had never considered worth the trouble of a moonlight visit. The next day there must be another excursion, and then she would be safe. There was only one imaginable contingency to dread then, and of that she would not admit the possibility. It was that Cecil Musgrove might not propose after all.

Left to himself poor Michael felt sufficiently wretched to fling himself into the sea, but he did nothing so desperate. His dream was over, and though he had known before what it was to awake to disappointment, it had