

with you. In this crush it is impossible. And you are always so high above me. In the conservatory it is cool; take me there, and I will have an ice with you quietly—water, not cream; cream I never touch."

Mrs. Swannington wished to have as long an interview as possible. But Michael had no objection to the cool conservatory and news perhaps of Beattie. For once her aunt was not averse to talking of her with him. She dragged her immediately into the conversation.

"My niece will be sorry not to have come to-night. She was always such a friend of yours. But she is at present in the country. Indeed it is a visit to your home she pays. She is for a few days with Norah Gilman."

"Indeed," said Mike, as surprised and interested as even Aunt Ella could have desired. But contrary to her expectation, he asked no further questions. His dignity forbade his interrogating Mrs. Swannington, though as she showed no unwillingness to talk, it was probable he would lose no information of importance. And, in any case, if Beattie was at Woodfield—

"You will perhaps remember," said Mrs. Swannington, opening her fan and using it slowly, "that last time we met we had a little conversation which, I am afraid, made you unhappy. Had I seen you again before you left England I should have contradicted what I told you." Aunt Ella heaved a heavy sigh. "He behaved badly. But there, it has been for the best. He is now married to another; and they are well suited. There is not between them an ounce of heart."

Mike smiled. In spite of himself he could not take Mrs. Swannington quite seriously.

"You seemed to think more highly of him once," he said, however.

Mrs. Swannington for a wonder blushed. But she was equal to the occasion. She knew that in appealing to Mike's generosity was her best chance.

"I was deceived," she said. "Perhaps I deceived you. But indeed, I believed all would turn out differently. I will ask that you shall forgive me. Now for a reward I will say what is no deceit. Beattie has had many offers, none have pleased her. I often think that before she went into society she saw someone she cared for, and perhaps, but for—for—myself, in fact, she would have cared for him all the time. Indeed, I will go further—" But Mike stopped her.

"Don't let us talk of Miss Margetson any more," he said quietly. And Aunt Ella little guessed what pleasure it gave him to call her by the name which was no longer.

"Tell me about your husband. Is he here? I should like to see him."

The ice was finished. There was no excuse for stopping any longer. But at

the door of the conservatory Mrs. Swannington looked up at him and said, with more genuine feeling than she had ever shown to him—

"I thank you that you bear no malice. You shall not find me any more against you, though I desire no longer that my niece should marry."

Michael had not been expected at Woodfield till much later in the year. But he had heard of a London practice through a friend, who was obliged, owing to ill-health, to give it up, and he had come over to see what he thought about buying it. He had not abandoned the idea of being presently an eye-specialist, but his wish was to make himself master of his profession in all its branches; the thirst for acquiring knowledge was still upon him, and the place where his friend lived near the docks was in a poor crowded neighbourhood where, for a man who did not mind hard work, there was a great deal of experience to be gained, and some of it unique of its kind. Mike thought a few years passed here would be gain rather than loss, and would give him opportunities he might miss in the West End. The day after Mrs. Gilman's reception, he went to visit the scene of what would possibly be his future home, but he deferred a definite decision until he had paid his visit to Woodfield and seen his father, who would buy the practice if he wished it. He had written both to his father and his sister-in-law announcing his arrival. As it happened, however, Geoffrey and his wife were at the seaside, and Sir John sent his note down to the Rectory with one in his quivering handwriting, asking Norah to spend the afternoon at the Hall, for he knew that the home-coming would be painful in many ways to Mike, and perhaps the poor old man was himself rather nervous about it.

But it passed off better than they had expected. The child, who had been left at home with her nurse, was playing on the terrace when he arrived, and as she was a little person who was always friendly towards gentlemen, she allowed Mike to carry her in on his shoulder, and helped him through the trying first minutes which all had secretly dreaded.

He thought Sir John seemed very feeble and aged, but he was able to say quite sincerely:

"Why, Norah, you don't look a day older than when I went away."

"Norah has the secret of perpetual youth," said Sir John, patting the hand which lay on his chair. And perhaps there was truth in the words so lightly spoken.

When she was going, prepared to leave the father and son together, both insisted that Mike should see her home, as he always did in the old days. Only the walk back was more silent than it used to be, though there was so much to be said. When they drew near the Rectory Norah looked up at him with the

gentle solicitous gaze he so well remembered when there was something she had to tell him and yet feared to hurt him.

"Well?" he asked, smiling.

"Beattie Margetson is staying with me," said Norah.

"I know it, dear; I have seen her aunt."

Norah gave a sigh of relief.

"I am glad you are friends still," Mike said.

"We shall always be friends," said Norah. "No one could help loving Beattie. She is just the same. You might more truly say of her what you said of me. She looks as young as ever. I think she is prettier even than she used to be."

"It would be kinder to tell me she had grown plain and sour," said Mike, smiling.

"It wouldn't make any difference to you if she were?"

Mike shook his head.

"Not the very least, Norah."

Something in his firm tones made Norah pause at the entrance to the rectory drive and say, looking at him with eyes which smiled, though her lips quivered—

"I will tell you something, Mike, that may encourage you. Your mother said to me once that she dreamt that Beattie was your wife. She believed it would come true. And she hoped it, and—and so do I, for I am sure she would make you happy."

But it was not till a week later—a week of constant companionship, that Mike ventured once more to put his happiness to the test. He and Beattie were man and woman now, and yet they still felt as they had done when they were only boy and girl, absolute ease in one another's society, absolute confidence in one another's sincerity. Both had gone through an experience which had deepened them, both had learned something of that other life which alone can make this explicable, to both had come a desire to live in accordance with what it had taught them. It seemed to Mike that if this had been only the beginning of their acquaintance it would still have been inevitable that he should love Beattie and want her to be with him always.

One evening, as they stood together in Norah's garden, watching a sunset, glorious in crimson and gold, he told her so.

"I have asked for you three times, and I have waited many years for you now. Each time I have seen you I have fallen in love with you afresh. Am I still to go on living without you, dear?"

Beattie turned to him, the light of the sunset on her face and hair, and laid her hands in his. And the words she said were like the words of Ruth the Moabitess, than which there has been no sweeter expression of love and constancy.

