

IN SPITE OF ALL.

By IDA LEMON, Author of "The Charming Cora," "A Winter Garment," etc.



CHAPTER XV.

THE picture which Margaret had given to Michael had the effect of breaking down the composure which absence and self-government had gained for him. His devotion to Beattie had never wavered from the moment

he had first seen her; indeed, it had grown steadily, and if his fancy somewhat idealised her, still, his nature was not one that would readily give up anything that had once grown into it. Even if Beattie should prove less worthy than he thought her that would make no difference; he loved her for herself, and if she should be somewhat different from what he conceived her to be, his ideal and not his love would alter. It seemed to him—although he could not contemplate such a prospect with equanimity—that even if Beattie should belong to another before his term of waiting should be over, he would never turn his thoughts to any other woman. And somehow he could not help trusting that she would belong to him some day, and in this hope he lived through the months of separation.

But when Margaret gave him the sketch which he told himself was sufficient to draw a man's heart from him, even if he had not seen the original, absence seemed intolerable. The picture was certainly very sweet. Margaret had taken it in a happy moment, and there was about it such an air of freshness and youth and charm, such light in the smiling eyes, such tenderness in the mouth, and such a suggestion of dimples in the rounded cheek, that Mike found it irresistible. He spent a great deal of time looking at it, and became restless and rather unhappy. Then came the talks with Margaret, and though he was not going to tell her the secret which he had not been allowed to tell to Beattie, yet he could not but see that she guessed it, and he suspected that she despised him for not going straight to the object of his affection in the way which Margaret—who had no belief in the prerogatives of parents or guardians—considered the only sensible method of proceeding. The mention of Beattie's projected visit to Crabsley further excited him with the memory of last year's happiness, and when finally Miss Raven informed him somewhat maliciously that from her experience of Mrs. Swannington she was quite sure she would fill the house with gentlemen visitors, he was rendered desperate.

He would go to Crabsley and ask leave again to speak to Beattie. If it were withheld, he should announce his intention of speaking to her without

leave. She had had a year in which to see other people, and she was certainly capable now of forming her own judgment. Although they could not be married till she was of age, without the consent of her guardians, yet there was no hurry about being married, and besides, if Beattie found she could care for him, what reason was there for withholding their consent? His position was different from what it had been when he first spoke, and he could not see why—though of course in his estimation no one was good enough for Beattie—Mrs. Swannington should despise for her the position which his mother occupied, and which would eventually be hers. Indeed, it was quite likely, if he married, that his father and mother would wish him to make Woodfield his home. It is true there was not much money, but the value of land might improve, and besides, he could soon be independent of it. He was anxious to practise as an eye-specialist, and more than one of those whose opinion was as valuable as prophecy, foretold for him a brilliant career. He had more worldly knowledge than he had possessed a year ago, and it was with less humility that he prepared to approach the once formidable Aunt Ella.

As it chanced he came down to Crabsley on the same day, though by an earlier train, than Cecil Musgrove. The walk from the station in the exhilarating air, the sight of the sea, the brilliant sunshine and holiday aspect of the clean little place, and above all the consciousness that he was near his lady-love, all combined to make him particularly cheerful. And the world, which he had so often heard was a vale of tears, seemed made for hope and happiness and delight. He lunched at the hotel and then strolled out on to the sea-front. From what he remembered of the habits of Mrs. Swannington, he hardly expected to see her yet, but perhaps he might catch sight of Beattie, and if she were alone it would be all the better. Many a fashionably-dressed young lady who approached from a distance made his heart beat violently, and then, as she drew nearer, sink in the miserable manner of which only lovers know the full wretchedness. But no Beattie came, and then he made up his mind that, as it was late enough in the afternoon for tea, and she might be at home, he would call. He was walking in the direction in which their house lay, when suddenly he was confronted by the sight of a small person in grey under a crimson sunshade, whose walk and appearance were unmistakably those of Aunt Ella. But who was her companion? With the ready jealousy of one who was prepared to see in every man near Beattie a possible rival, Mike noticed that he was remarkably handsome. Aunt Ella was talking and laughing with great animation, but she never failed to notice any one she

passed, especially if he were a gentleman, and suddenly she pulled up short with an exclamation of surprise, and, the discerning would have said, of dismay. But she was a woman of quick perception, and she saw at once that she must rise to the occasion. She was neither so sure of Cecil nor of Beattie as to wish Mr. Anstruther to appear upon the scene until her plans had come to a more decided issue. She greeted Michael, therefore, with a show of warmth, and, without introducing the two men, turned to her companion, and contriving to convey to him the impression that if she could not have his society to herself, it was wasting it to dilute it by that of any other, suggested in a voice audible to poor Michael—who would far rather she should have given him the necessary directions—that if he went on the cliffs he would probably find Beattie. The gentleman raised his hat and departed with alacrity, and Michael, taking his place at her side, tried to perform the difficult task of adapting his pace to Mrs. Swannington's.

"So you, like ourselves, have returned to Crabsley, Mr. Anstruther. But you are looking very well! Ah, and so much older! Come, now, we must have a talk together. I am just taking my constitutional; will you accompany me?"

"I should be very glad to," said Michael. "I was, in fact, on my way to call upon you."

"Ah," said Aunt Ella, "you have discovered my whereabouts then. I have that charming little house with the thatched roof. You remember; the one we admired so much last year, and which was occupied by those sticks of girls and their so ugly mamma."

Michael inquired after Beattie with ill-disguised eagerness.

"Already!" thought Mrs. Swannington. "Dear, dear! I had hoped one of my compatriots would have succeeded in helping him to get over that fancy." Aloud she said, "Oh, she is quite well; she usually is. My niece enjoys such enviable health; but then she never worries. She will be pleased to see you again, I am sure."

"I hope so," said Mike.

"Do you?" thought Mrs. Swannington. "But I am not going to let you spoil my plans. I don't think myself you are to compare to Musgrove, but there is something attractive about you, and girls are such fools. I should like to prevent your seeing her if I could."

Mike broke the momentary silence.

"Mrs. Swannington, I am going to ask a favour of you. You forbade my speaking to Miss Margeton last year. Since then my brother's death has placed me in a better position. I want you to tell me I have waited long enough."

Aunt Ella's heart beat fast. Michael was all very well, but what could he offer in exchange for Cecil's present secure position and prospective thousands?