

between Beattie and Aunt Ella. Perhaps Mrs. Swannington made a shrewd guess at the estimation in which Michael held her. She saw at any rate that he was *distrait* and nervous, and that she was not interesting him in the remotest degree. She wondered with secret amusement how long his good manners would be proof against his impulses. She had not long to wait.

"Mrs. Swannington," said Mike, rather thickly, and looking away from her, for her gay, hard, rather bead-like eyes were not encouraging to sentiment or seriousness, "I have come here today with a purpose."

"And that purpose, Mr. Anstruther, was not to see me," said she laughing. "And you dare confess this in my own drawing-room?"

"I did want to see you," replied Mike, refusing to respond to her mood. "I wanted to obtain your consent to my proposing to Miss Margetson."

Aunt Ella was silent. She still smiled, but the smile was not encouraging.

"If I had stayed at Crabsley I might have been tempted to speak to her herself," went on Mike, gaining courage, for he still did not look at Aunt Ella, "but I know I ought to ask you and Mr. Swannington first. I am afraid you will think me very presumptuous, and will feel Miss Margetson might have done better, but I love her so much and I will work so hard for her, and before many years I may be in a very good position."

He paused, but as Mrs. Swannington was still silent he ventured to glance at her. His face flushed crimson when he saw that hers wore a look of amusement. Then she stretched out her hand and patted his arm, letting the white palm rest for a moment on his rough sleeve, where she surveyed it approvingly.

"Silly boy," was all she said.

"But, Mrs. Swannington," said Michael angrily, "I am in earnest."

"Of course you are, just now. Yes, my dear Mr. Michael, you are too much in earnest to be able to realise the facts. The consent you ask for is impossible. My husband is Beattie's guardian. He has her good at heart, and he is a sensible man. He will tell you to go away and continue your studies. In ten years' time you may think of marriage. But Beattie by then will probably have been mistress of a house for eight or nine years. For me, I would not permit of her engaging herself to anyone who could not provide for her handsomely."

"But," stammered poor Michael, "there are other things to think of besides money."

"Nothing of importance, my friend," said Aunt Ella calmly. "Money improves a happy marriage and it makes an unhappy one tolerable. Fancy two people utterly unsuited who cannot buy distractions, indulge their tastes, and amuse themselves independently. But how horrible!"

"Are you going to leave love out of the question, Mrs. Swannington?"

"In this case I am," was the reply.

"At all times it is a mere detail. What does one see? People who love to distraction and run away together, presently bored to death and perhaps in

the law courts; and others who have had an arranged marriage and afterwards adore each other."

Michael had to restrain an impulse to throw something at this cruel little lady, thus trampling on all he considered most beautiful and sacred. He thought of how his mother had listened to his confidences, and of her tender sympathy. She had understood him; but how could he make this apparently heartless woman realise that his love was a holy thing and that no worldly considerations could alter it?

"You will see," Mrs. Swannington was saying, "that this fancy will pass away. Some day you will laugh at it with your wife. *Tiens*, do I not know? Have I not my husband's confidence? I do assure you we have often laughed together over some of his love affairs. When he was twenty he adored his sister's governess, who was thirty-five, and had protruding teeth. When she refused him he threatened to take poison."

Mike stood up. He felt it impossible that Mrs. Swannington should be the arbitress of his fate. It was desecration to speak of the matter to her.

"Have I then offended you, my dear Mr. Anstruther?" said Aunt Ella. "Surely you are not going, and without tea? Ah, there is my husband. He shall speak with you. Listen, Arthur, here is our friend, Mr. Anstruther. He is wanting to marry Beattie. But I tell him it is impossible. And he is very angry with me. See, now I leave you together a little while that you may talk it over."

And with much rustling of silken skirts and a backward look at her husband that he well understood Mrs. Swannington left the room.

Mr. Swannington treated Mike at once more seriously and more considerably than his wife had done. Men do not trifle with each other in these matters, and Mr. Swannington was too sensible to behave in such a manner to the young man as should lead him in the impetuosity of youth and love to probably set his authority aside and go direct to his ward. It is true that he no more than his wife conceived of love as Michael conceived of it, but he was inclined to regard the young man's prospects more favourably than that lady. Unlike her, he was not anxious for Beattie to be soon married. Her presence in his home added to the pleasure of his existence, and he anticipated much gratification from the society of his beautiful niece now that she was grown up. At Crabsley he had enjoyed the walks and drives he had taken with her, her abundant vitality gave a zest to all she did, and communicated itself to others. It is just possible that Mrs. Swannington was clever enough to see the possibility that he might prefer Beattie's companionship to her own, and she was jealous of everyone whom her husband cared for. Perhaps one of her reasons for wishing Beattie to be married young was that she herself could not bear not to be always first with him, and first by a long way. Mr. Swannington would have been fairly satisfied that Beattie

should be engaged to someone whose duties would keep him from haunting the house and who could not take her away for some years. He could see, better perhaps than his wife, that Michael was socially their superior, and he had a respect for birth which, if it did not equal, was only second to his respect for money. He knew a gentleman when he saw one, and if Michael had possessed no other advantages in Mr. Swannington's sight he at any rate possessed this. But, as a matter-of-fact Mr. Swannington did not consider the question very deeply. Depth was not one of his attributes. Like his wife, he lived on the surface and cared for nothing beyond the shallow. His affair was to please Mrs. Swannington, and if she wished Michael to be dismissed he would do so as kindly and with as little fuss as possible. But inasmuch as decided measures were not greatly in his line, and he had a happy faith in the postponement of disagreeables leading to their disappearance, he merely advised Michael to wait.

"I cannot sanction your proposing to my niece, you see, Anstruther. She hasn't seen anything of the world yet, and I don't believe in a girl making a decision before she has had any choice. A young fellow like you can surely afford to wait a bit."

"But you see sir," said Mike, "I don't want to prevent her choosing. I only want her to know I love her."

"But that would bias her, my dear fellow. Young as she is, and sensitive to any affection, that would be almost enough to bind her to you."

"And why not?" said Mike bravely. "If she loves me she will not suffer by being bound. If she does not love me she will lose nothing by knowing that someone cares for her. I don't see myself why a girl should learn a lot of worldly wisdom before she gives away her heart. If we are to believe the books we read, a generation or two ago the first love was the best love, and few women had another."

"Well, that's all very romantic, but we have to be more sensible now. Men as well as women married much younger. Perhaps living was less expensive or people had fewer needs. At any rate we don't belong to that generation, and I'm afraid, Anstruther, you'll find Beattie, who has been used to luxury, would make a sorry poor man's wife. Perhaps there's another thing I ought to tell you, she will have hardly any money of her own. Her parents left her almost dependent on us. It is probable, as we have no children, she will inherit what we leave; but if she marries against her aunt's wishes it is more than likely she at any rate may alter the disposition of her property. She has a nephew in France, a sister's child who is more nearly related to her than Beattie. So you see in urging your suit you may be damaging the girl's prospects. No, no, take my advice. Come back in a couple of years, and then if Beattie is free you can propose to her. In the meantime when you are in England, you are welcome to visit her like any other friend, and see her occasionally provided,