

THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

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"Probably. I hope Clem is not seriously wounded. Aunt Rachel does not deserve that she should have any more sorrow."

"I hope, I am sure, that his wound may be slight," said Lady Emily, sincerely. "I think, Will, I have lived too much to myself. Why do you shiver like that? Do you feel a chill? Let me have the window closed."

"It was nothing," he answered, quickly. "Mother, you will go over to Stonecroft another day with me when Aunt Rachel comes back."

"We shall see. If it will make you any happier, Will, I shall try in future to make more friendly relations between Studleigh and Stonecroft."

CHAPTER XXXI.—A SOLDIER'S TALE.

Again it was the leafy month of June. Again the roses hung in dewy clusters on the boughs; again summer beauty and summer gladness filled the land. A sad and painful tragedy had marked the closing days of the war, and the nation was yet mourning the untimely death of the gallant Prince Imperial. He was but one among many brave young lives sacrificed among the wild plains of Zululand; but the circumstances of his death, and the peculiar desolation attached to his mother's bereavement, made it marked out for special notice. The war was practically over. Almost every day saw the arrival of vessels with returning troops, and many anxious hearts were relieved of their load of anxiety and care. On the evening of the last day in June, a party of ladies were gathered on the terrace at Winterdyne, and they were evidently in a state of expectation. Lady Winterdyne, in her mourning gown, looked sweet and fragile; the shock of her son's death had told upon her sorely. Rachel sat by her side, scarcely daring to allow her own happiness to show itself, lest it should grieve the bereaved mother, to whom the home-coming they were awaiting must have a peculiar sting. Our old friend, Lady Vane, white-haired, and somewhat feeble, though still energetic and cheerful, sat a little apart, watching the two girls walking arm-in-arm to and fro on the lawn below. Conversation had flagged a little as the time of the arrival drew near—a visible agitation seemed to take possession of each.

Presently the sound of wheels broke the silence. Then Sybil broke from Evelyn's gentle, sisterly clasp and ran into the house. Evelyn looked after her with a slight, sad smile, and then ascending the terrace steps crossed to Lady Winterdyne's chair and there stood still, with her hand on her shoulder. There was something pathetic and significant in that light, tender touch; these two, perhaps, more than all felt the desolation of Clement's solitary home-coming. Rachel had demurred a little about making the occasion a family gathering at Winterdyne, knowing full well that the mother's heart must ache because of the one who "was not," but she had been gently overruled.

When the carriage swept round the curve of the avenue Rachel sprang to her feet, trembling in every limb. Yes, there was her boy, sun-browned and vigorous-looking, standing up in the carriage waving his cap with his strong right hand, though the other shattered arm was still in a sling. And in another moment she was clasped to his heart, and heard his deep voice, tremulous with emotion, uttering her name in accents of tenderest love.

"My poor Evy," Clem said, as he turned then to kiss his sister, but Evelyn smiled bravely into his face, not wishing to dim the joy of his home-coming by her tears.

Then Clement, with an exquisite grace, knelt on one knee before his comrade's mother and bent to kiss her hand.

"Dear Lady Winterdyne, if it had been possible I would have given my life for Harry, but the

chance was not given me. I have feared this meeting more than I can tell, and when Lord Winterdyne met me I was more than surprised, it is so good of you all."

"We must not be selfish," she said, with a sad, sweet smile, and bending down she kissed his brow twice.

"My son's kiss as well as your own, Clem," she said, tremulously. "You must try and fill his place. And now we two mothers will spare you to Sybil."

She pointed to the drawing-room, and he sprang up with a red flush on his face, and disappeared.

"He looks splendid, Mrs. Ayre; do you not think so?" she asked.

"Yes; but I am disappointed to see his arm still bandaged."



"Oh, that was a flesh wound. I can give you the particulars," said Lord Winterdyne. "Ah, there is Evelyn away, poor girl, poor girl, it is very hard for her."

The mother's heart overflowed for her child as she saw her steal away towards the thick shrubbery which sloped down to the river bank. Ay, Evelyn had early taken up her cross, and that with a fortitude and unselfishness which amazed them all. There were even some who observing her calm bearing, said it had only been ambition which moved her to accept the heir of Winterdyne; but those who knew her best could only look upon her grave, beautiful face and tender mouth, and pray that God would give the needed balm. It was known only to Rachel Ayre how she suffered.

"Another wound," she said, with quick apprehension. "We never heard of it. When did it happen?"

"At Ulundi, the final battle. He was quite recovered, and declined to go home, though leave was granted. I suppose he wanted to be in it at

the death," said Lord Winterdyne, grimly. "And of course, fighting in the very forefront, as usual, he got a cut from an assegai which set the old wound open. I tell you we have reason to be proud of our hero, madam. I am, at least. It is not every soldier who leaps from lieutenant to captain in so short a time."

"Is he Captain?" Rachel asked, with a quick flush of motherly pleasure and pride.

"Yes, and won the Victoria Cross as well. Rorke's Drift did that. It was splendidly done. I only wish it had been there my boy fell. He was simply murdered at Isandhlwana, simply murdered. But I must not shadow your joy, dear Mrs. Ayre. I must remember what your kinswoman at Studleigh reminded me of that day the news came. I have two children left, and another son to take poor Harry's place. If your son had not come home, you would have been more desolate even than me."

"Did Lady Emily say that?" Rachel asked, in eager interest.