



BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

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CHAPTER XXI.—IN BITTERNESS OF SOUL.

Lady Adela Brydges had been a somewhat giddy, frivolous girl in her first season when she married the middle-aged Marquis of Winterdyne. It was a marriage which astonished not a few, and there were many predictions that it would not prove a success—predictions which, however, were never fulfilled, for as the years went on the two, who had married for love, became dearer to each other. Lord Winterdyne was a man of singularly noble character, with high aims above all the prejudices which sometimes mar the character of those in high places. His nature was rather reserved than open. Many called him proud and haughty, but in his family circle and among his intimate friends he was greatly beloved. He was a keen politician, and one eminently fitted to be a leader of men. His judgment was matured and reliable, and his opinions carried weight even among his opponents. He was a man on whom his party absolutely relied, and to whom his compeers looked for guidance and example. His wife was his companion and helpmeet in all things, and with her happy spirit and light-hearted ways lent the necessary brightness to his home. She received Lady Emily Ayre with affectionate cordiality, and the Marquis greeted the son of his old friend with marked pleasure. There were three children at Winterdyne, two sons and one daughter—the blue-eyed, saucy Sybil, on whom Lady Emily's ambition for her boy was centred. The Ayres drove the distance from Studleigh, and arrived shortly before dinner, so that it was not until they went down to the dining-room a few minutes before eight, that they were introduced to the young people. Lord Raybourne and Will were already acquainted. Lady Emily looked at him with but a passing interest, her whole attention being given to Sybil, a bright-faced, happy-hearted girl, with no nonsense or affection about her.

"I am indeed delighted to meet once more one of whom my wife has talked so often," said Lord Winterdyne, in his somewhat dignified way. "Come, Sybil, and greet your mother's old friend."

Sybil looked with open admiration at the queenly figure as she lifted up her face to give the kiss of greeting. Lady Emily's unwonted tears rose at the young girl's graceful action, and she turned somewhat hurriedly to her son.

"I fear you will find that I have somewhat forgotten the usages of polite society, my dear," she

said, with that grace which none could make more winning. "Come, Will, and do duty for your mother!"

"Oh, Mr. Ayre and I have met before at Stonecroft, Lady Ayre," cried Sybil, gaily. "I don't think we feel at all strange to each other."

"I thought of asking Mrs. Geoffrey Ayre to dine with us to-night, Emily," said Lady Winterdyne, entering at the moment. "But again I thought we should have a great deal to say to each other. Where is Norman? He is an incorrigible boy, always late."

"I saw him, mamma, about an hour ago from my dressing-room window, wading into the lake after some sort of water-plant which has come into flower out of season," said Sybil. "I am afraid he will have forgotten all about dinner."

"He often does," said his mother, with an indulgent smile. "My Benjamin is a curious boy, Emily. I don't know from whom he inherits the tastes of a naturalist, but he has a museum in the old picture gallery which would amuse you. He is so utterly happy among his toads and fishes that we are glad to leave him in peace."

At the dinner-table that night Will was amazed at his mother. She looked so beautiful and so gracious, and her conversation was so brilliant and fascinating that all were enchanted with her. She was in her element, and felt surprised to find how pleasant it was to meet once more with congenial and delightful society.

"I begin to think, Adela, that I have made a mistake living in retirement so long," said Lady Emily, when she was alone with her friend in the drawing-room after dinner. The young people were out on the terrace; they saw Sybil's white gown glancing among the trees, and the bright scarlet of Raybourne's coat.

"How do you mean?" asked Lady Winterdyne, as she leaned back in her lounging-chair and sipped her coffee.

"I know to-night how much I have missed. What a delightful life you must have."

"I am very happy. Winterdyne is devoted to me, and my children are as good as gold. The only cloud on my sky at present is that Harry will talk on as if war were the most desirable event in the world. He and Clement Ayre are absolutely agreed upon the subject of their profession."

"Is it not rather a disappointment to you and

Lord Winterdyne that your eldest son should have chosen the army?"

"It was at first, but we soon saw it was no use trying to force his inclinations. Why, Harry has played at soldiers, and drilled Sybil and Norman, since their babyhood. I really don't know, Emily, who is to fill the father's shoes. Norman bids fair to be a naturalist and a scholar, and there is not a politician in the family. Our only hope must be in the son-in-law to be; and about whom we are in a doubtful state of uncertainty."

"Your daughter has had no suitors, then?" asked Lady Emily, with interest.

"Oh, suitors in plenty; but she seems to favour none. I believe she is fancy free. I admire your son very much. His manners are perfect."

"He has been the best of sons to me, Adela," Lady Emily replied, with strange emotion. "It would make the last years of my widowed life boundlessly happy if what you spoke of should take place."

"I should be pleased. Frankly speaking, Sybil is so full of nonsense, just as I was at her age, that it would be well that she should marry a man of firm character and stability. That, I am sure your son possesses, in conjunction with a singularly amiable disposition. Yes, it would be very desirable, but we cannot control the destinies of our children, even if it were desirable that we should."

Lady Emily looked very grave, and slightly shook her head.

"I sometimes think it might be better for some young people if they were compelled to submit to the wise decisions of their elders."

Then suddenly she sat forward and looked her friend full in the face.

"Adela, tell me, are you really intimate with the family at Stonecroft?"

"Yes, the young people are inseparable—Clement and Harry being such friends. Why do you look at me so, Emily? Is there anything objectionable in such an intimacy?"

"Nothing objectionable, of course," Lady Emily answered, significantly. "But I am surprised—very much surprised—that is all."

"Tell me why?"

"Tell me first what you think of Mrs. Geoffrey, Adela?"

"I admire and love her. Winterdyne thinks her perfect. Why do you ask?"

"You know, of course, who she was before she married Captain Ayre?"

"A daughter of one of your tenants, was she not? But a very old family, and she is most refined. Yes, I have heard the story, I think, but both you and I, Emily, know that these old distinctions are