



BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

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More than once an Abbot and an Ayre had sat side by side at Eton, and been undergraduates together at Oxford, for centuries of thrift and well-doing had accumulated good money in the Pine Edge coffers, and there had never been a spend-thrift or a ne'er-do-weel among them. There was no heir now to fill Christopher Abbot's shoes—he dwelt alone in the old house, a widowed man with one child, a daughter, who was the sunshine of his life. There had never been a large family in Pine Edge. Christopher himself was an only son, as his father had been before him. There had been no daughter born to the house for a century before Rachel.

"Not even for my sake, Emily?" repeated the Squire, anxiously, and his tone smote her to the heart.

"You make it hard for me, William, but I cannot do it," she said slowly. "I have others to consider. You know what my people think on such questions. I confess, though I am not a nervous woman, I do not like to contemplate my mother's reception of this news. She would be indignant even at so slight a hesitation on my part. She would be quick to tell me that my duty was absolutely clear."

"I understand, dear, that when a woman marries she might in a sense be expected to concur a little in her husband's views, at least to give them some slight consideration," said William Ayre. "Perhaps it is not to be expected that I should entertain sentiments so lofty as the Countess of Portmayne," he added, with mild sarcasm, "yet I cannot but think my own views are more in keeping with the broad spirit of charity the Bible itself teaches. If Geoffrey truly loves this woman and she loves him, I think it is my duty, and yours too, for my sake, to send them on their way with words of love and hope."

She slightly shook her head and made a movement towards the door.

"Is there no hope then, Emily? If the marriage takes place at all, it must be immediately. Will you not at least countenance it with your presence?" he asked, eager for some concession.

"I cannot tell. I am anxious to do my duty. I shall write to my mother to-night," she answered, somewhat hurriedly, for she felt the appealing glance of his eye, and it distressed her to appear so obdurate. She gave him no chance of further pleading just then, for with a murmured excuse that the child would require her in the nursery she left the room.

William Ayre sighed as he heard the silken skirt sweep through the doorway. He was both hurt and disappointed, and the idea that she should deem it needful to consult Lady Portmayne before deciding a matter which was of moment to them alone, caused him a sense of irritation, which his wife's august kindred had too often awakened already. They were distinctly condescending in their behaviour to the Squire of Studleigh, and he had an intuitive feeling that they regarded their second daughter in the light of a social failure because she had married him. Even to his gentle nature such a thought was galling, and he found it more conducive to his peace of mind not to come too much in contact with them. Certain amount of intercourse was inevitable, for Lady Emily was devoted to her own people, and thought they could do no wrong. Her mother was her pattern and though it was an immaculate pattern so far, it had few touches of kindliness or gentleness of heart to beautify it.

It was the prayer of William Ayre's life that his wife would be saved from such a soulless age.

## CHAPTER III.—THE SOLDIER'S WOOING.

Pine Edge was rightly named. The house stood upon the abrupt face of a wooded slope, and overlooked the whole valley of the Ayre and the fine old park of Studleigh. It did not look like a farm house, especially as the out-buildings and the barnyards were quite behind, and not visible, except from the North windows. It had originally been a low, flat-roofed house, built in cottage style, but roomy and commodious within. From time to time it had been added to—a room here, and a larger window there—indeed, it had assumed the dimensions of a small mansion. These improvements

had, as a rule, been made by the Abbots themselves, at their own expense, but sanctioned by the Squire. They had been in the place so long that they looked upon it as their own. The result was as picturesque and desirable a residence as any man could wish. It was built very near to the edge of this woody hillock, but there was room before the house for a belt of green sward, which was close and rich as finest velvet. The house was overrun with creepers, and the sunniest gable had a fine old rose tree clambering upon it, which was seldom without blooms. The dining-room was large for a farm house, because, when Christopher's father married, he had built a new drawing-room, and thrown the old one into the dining-room. It had two long windows—one opening upon the little lawn, and the other looking right into the pine woods. The furnishings were old and heavy and sombre; the carved sideboards had stood in Pine Edge for generations. The pictures were old, too—family portraits, with one or two modern landscapes, all good and valuable as works of art. A great silver bowl stood in the centre of the table, filled with roses, and two quaint china jars on the mantelpiece held some graceful sprays of the dogberry and wild grasses. It was a sombre room; the crimson velvet hangings at the window were not relieved by the customary lace beside them; they hung in straight rich folds from the heavy gilt cornice, and were not fastened in any way. Yet there was a subdued and pleasant charm about that room, which every one felt. The drawing-room was very pretty, filled with light and bright, beautiful things; but the sombre window which looked out upon the pine wood was Rachel Abbot's favourite seat in the house.

She was sitting there in the pleasant gloaming that evening, with her work lying on her knee, and her hands folded above it. Of what was she thinking as her eyes looked into the dark shadows of the pines? We may look at her in her reverie undisturbed. She was leaning back in her chair, and her cheek touched the rich velvet of the hangings. The warm tint against her cheek seemed to give it a tinge of colour not usual to it. Rachel had not a fair complexion. She was dark skinned, like her father; but it was a clear, healthy hue, and it was in keeping with the masses of her dark hair, and the fringes of her eye-lashes. The eyes themselves were wonderful, of that strange, uncertain, lovely hue which, for lack of a better name, we call hazel. They were very deep and liquid, not mirroring every passing thought like lighter orbs; you had to look into their depths to find Rachel Abbot's soul. Her mouth was very strong and resolute, yet indescribably sweet; the whole expression one of power and thought, yet suggestive of the tenderest attributes of womanhood. She wore a grey gown of some soft, fine material, without a touch of any colour to relieve it, but there was no suggestion of anything lacking. Everything Rachel Abbot wore became her, and seemed to be part of herself.

Such was the woman Geoffrey Ayre had chosen, and as she sat there she looked fit enough to reign in Studleigh, ay, even in Lady Emily's place. It was because Lady Emily had recognized her superiority—had been compelled in her own mind to acknowledge her a queen among women, that all these years she had silently been jealous of her, although the mere hint that she could be jealous of any woman, least of all a farmer's daughter, would have sent the flush of pride to the patrician's haughty cheek. In her own mind, too, so quick of intuition are some women, Rachel Abbot was conscious of her ladyship's disapproval and dislike. For long it had not troubled her—but now—

"Lieutenant Ayre, Miss Rachel."

The housemaid's voice roused her, and she sprang up just as Geoffrey was shown in.

"Good evening, Mr. Ayre," she said, quickly, and even with a trace of nervousness. "Bring the candles, Lucy, and tell father Mr. Ayre has come."

"It is you I want to see, Miss Abbot," said Geoffrey, pointedly, and Rachel was glad that the friendly gloom hid her flushed face. "I don't think candles are at all necessary," he added, with a swift bright smile. "Are you well to-night?"

"Yes, I am always well," Rachel answered. "If