



THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

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CHAPTER XIII—A LAST INTERVIEW AT STUDLEIGH.

Rachel slept soundly that night in the wide, old-fashioned room she had occupied in her girlish days. The nursery adjoined, and there little Clement slept in his cot close by his nurse's bed. The arrangements had been considered and provided for by the old man himself, as solicitous as a woman for his dear daughter's comfort. It was a joy of no ordinary kind, though slightly tinged with sadness, to Christopher Abbot thus to welcome Rachel home. He could not sleep, and once in the grey dawn he crept along the corridor to the door of the room which held his treasure. He listened there, expecting to hear the sound of sobbing, but when there was no sound he looked through the half-open door and saw Rachel asleep, with the child's dark head on her breast. Her face looked young and lovely in its peaceful repose, and Christopher Abbot crept back to his own bed, relieved and thankful, and slept till the sun awoke him. It was his custom to see that the men were set about their work before he took his own breakfast, and when he came sauntering up the garden path a few minutes before eight a shrill laugh greeted him, and a white figure, with golden locks flying in the morning wind, came running to meet him, eagerly shouting, "Gran'pa."

That sweet, eager voice sent a strange thrill to the old man's heart, and when presently, remembering his manners, the little fellow stood still in the path before him, and made the grave military salute, grandpa's delight knew no bounds.

"Where are the cows and the hens and the little chicks?" he asked, slipping his hand with the

utmost confidence into the old man's. "Take me to them."

"Not yet, General, we must go and see mamma, and have our breakfast first," said the old man, and from that day little Clement was "General" and nothing more to his grandfather.

In the dining-room Rachel was making the tea—a slim figure in a white gown with bands of black ribbon, a lovely and graceful woman, whose very presence beautified and brightened the house.

"Good-morning, father. The rogue has found you, I see. Yes, thank you; I rested well. I have had no such sleep, I think, since I went away from Pine Edge. I miss the mosquitoes," she said, with her pleasant smile. "Ask Clement about the mosquitoes, and he'll give you a graphic account of their depredations."

"Oh, ma, there's a carriage," cried Clement, who was standing in the sunshine by the wide-open window. "It's a white horse. Oh, ma, will it be dada?"

"It's from Studleigh, Rachel; it will be a message from the Squire. I'll see," said the farmer, and stepped hurriedly over the low window ledge.

"Morning, sir," said the man on the box, touching his hat. "The Squire's compliments, and if Mrs. Ayre is not too tired, would she come over to Studleigh, and bring the little boy."

"She'll do that, Simmons, if you can wait a few minutes. How is the Squire this morning?"

"Had a bad night, Rosanna said, and her ladyship's been up since four o'clock," said the man, with a graver look. "Excuse me, sir, but is that the Captain's son?"

"Yes; isn't he a fine little fellow?" asked the farmer, delightedly.

"He's a splendid little chap—like his mother, Mr. Abbot, if you'll excuse me sayin' it; but he's got the Captain's hair. I hope Mrs. Ayre is well."

"Quite well. She will be ready in a few minutes, Simmons; just wait. Come, General, and get ready to escort your mother."

It was natural that Rachel should feel a little nervous and excited over her approaching visit. She only drank a cup of tea, shaking her head when urged by her father to eat something more substantial. She did not wait to change her dress, but, throwing a dark cloak about her, put on her widow's bonnet and stepped out to the carriage. She had a kind word of greeting for Simmons, who had served as stable boy at Pine Edge before he entered the Squire's service, and had many kindly memories of his old employers.

So in the sweet and sunny morning, Rachel was driven along the green lanes to the great gates of Studleigh. She talked to her boy as they drove, to keep down her agitation, telling him to be very quiet and gentle with his poor uncle, who was so sick and weary, and whom dada had loved so dearly. She tried, but could find nothing to say to him about his aunt; nor did she mention the little cousin, not feeling sure whether Lady Emily would permit any such relationship.

The child's eyes opened wide in wonderment when the carriage stopped at the wide doorway of the grand old house, and Rachel could see that he was awed into silence. The great house was very still, and a strange feeling of loneliness came upon her as she stood a moment within the hall, hesitatingly waiting for someone to tell her what to do. She half-expected that Lady Emily herself, softened by sorrow, might come to bid her welcome, but presently, it being the servants' breakfast hour, Rosanna, her ladyship's maid, who had seen the carriage arrive, came running down stairs.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ayre," she said, pleasantly, yet with a touch of familiarity which Rachel was perhaps too quick to resent; then she took little Clement in her arms, but he, resenting the liberty also, struggled down, and holding fast by his mother's skirts, looked defiantly at the maid's pretty face.

"Be good enough to tell Mr. Ayre I have come," Rachel said quickly, but her colour rose a little, for she felt her position keenly; and she knew that she owed it entirely to Lady Emily.

"Just come up-stairs, please," Rosanna answered, a trifle more deferentially. "The Squire is expecting you."

Rachel stepped back to the table, laid down her cloak, and taking her boy by the hand followed the girl up-stairs. In his dressing-room the Squire received his brother's wife alone, and Rachel took Lady Emily's absence as an indication that she still declined to receive her as a member of her family. The sick man was lying on his couch, very thin and worn and wasted, but with a deep peace on his fine face, a look which Rachel had seen before on the faces of those who had given up the things of time. His smile was very sweet as he extended both his hands, saying, tenderly, "It is good of you to come, my poor sister."

The voice was so like Geoffrey's that it broke Rachel's composure down. With a quick sob she advanced and knelt down by William Ayre's side, the child looking on in a great wonderment, his big grey eyes wide to the rims.

It was a few moments before Rachel recovered herself, then she drew back with a quivering smile.

"Forgive me, it was Geoffrey's voice. I could not help it. I am not very strong yet, I fear. Come, Clement, and salute your uncle, papa's dear brother he taught you to pray for every night."

William Ayre's eyes filled as the child, obedient to his mother, came forward with his large, bright eyes fixed full on his uncle's face.

"So this is Geoff's boy, a beautiful child, who will be a comfort and a joy to his mother. Rachel, I have thanked God many times that Geoffrey had the wife he loved with him in India. You do not regret it either, I think, in spite of your many sorrows."

"I regret it! I would not give my memories, William, for other women's best possessions,"