



THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

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CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"I will, Rachel; it is your right. There may be some who will think Geoffrey has not aimed so high as he might, but only those who do not know you. I do assure you there is no prejudice or hostile feeling which you will not be able to overcome, none which can cause Geoffrey the slightest vexation, except on your account. Do you believe me, Rachel?"

"Yes. You are always true," she answered, simply. "I will try to do my duty, Mr. Ayre, and learn what I do not know, in order that Geoffrey may never be ashamed."

"Ashamed, my dear child! He has no need. As you are, you are so charming that I expect half the subalterns in the regiment will lose their heads over you. These lads always fall in love with the captain's wife, when she is lovable, and it does them a world of good. Yes, you will be a captain's wife, Rachel. His promotion came last night. But here comes Geoffrey. I have had my say, and now I must see your father. Good-bye, just now, in case I do not come in again, and remember that Geoffrey will not be fonder of his wife than I shall be of my new sister."

He kissed her again as he went away, leaving the sunshine behind. He had a long talk with Christopher Abbot out in the orchard, but the Lady Emily's name was not once mentioned.

Two days later Lady Portmayne's answer came, when they were at breakfast at Studleigh. Happily, Geoffrey was

absent in London on business connected with their voyage.

"Mamma says I had better come over to Portmayne with baby, and remain till the end of the month, William," Lady Emily said, looking up calmly from her perusal of the letter.

"The marriage is to take place on the 24th," the Squire answered. "Will you go before then?"

"Mamma means that; this is Thursday. I shall go on Monday the 20th," she replied, placidly.

The Squire's colour rose, and he kept his eyes on his plate, saying nothing.

"The Vanes are going to Portmayne or a day or two, they will arrive to-day," Lady Emily read on calmly. "They sail in the *Salamis* on the twenty-sixth. That is Geoffrey's ship. It is unfortunate, but perhaps on the other hand well that they should be prepared for what they may expect in India."

"What do you mean, Emily?" asked the Squire, with darkening brow.

"Just what I say. Lady Vane is a very proud woman. I cannot conceive how you do not see as I do in this."

"Although Lady Vane is your mother's cousin, Emily, I must say I have never seen anything of this terrible pride of which you speak," said the Squire. "And if I know Sir Randal at all, he is one of the frankest and most unconventional of men. I shall not be greatly surprised if they disappoint you in their treatment of Geoffrey's wife."

"We shall see," said Lady Emily, with an enigmatical smile.

"You intend, then, to accept the invitation to Portmayne?" he said, inquiringly.

"Of course I do. What is the use of asking advice if one does not accept it? Mamma is very decided about it. She says unhesitatingly that there is no other course open for me."

"Ah, then, it would be madness for you to disobey," said the Squire, with mild sarcasm, which his wife did not deign to notice.

"I suppose you intend to be present?" she asked, after a slight pause.

"It is a superfluous question," he answered, curtly. "I thank God I am not bound by the Portmayne creed."

Lady Emily's colour rose once more.

"I would not lose my temper were I you," she said, with a slight curl of the lip. "Captain Ayre has reason to flatter himself that he is of considerable importance. I have seldom seen your composure so ruffled."

"You have never tried me more sorely, Emily, and I protest I do not deserve it at your hands," said the Squire, passionately. "Your kindred have always received from me the most delicate consideration, even when it was more than an effort for me to give it."

"I am sick of this mutual recrimination," retorted Lady Emily, losing her habitual self-control. "I could wish that Captain Ayre had been shipped from the Crimea to India direct, instead of coming to make this painful dispeace at Studleigh."

CHAPTER V.—"TILL DEATH DO US PART."

Sir Randal Vane had long held an important post in the East India Company, and had been resident at Delhi for many years. He was not himself of aristocratic birth, being only the son of a poor vicar in an outlying Yorkshire parish; but his great ability and shrewd foresight had enabled him to render such signal service to the English Government in India that he had been knighted as a reward. He had married somewhat late in life the sister of a colonel commanding a small English regiment at Meerut, a member of the illustrious family to which the Countess of Portmayne also belonged. The match had been accepted as the inevitable; and during the brief visits paid by the Vanes to England they were always well received and made graciously welcome even at Portmayne. Sir Randal was reported to be fabulously wealthy, and as they were childless, it was within possibility that some of his rupees might ultimately find their way into the somewhat empty coffers of the Portmaynes. Sir Randal, while of necessity civil to his wife's fine kindred, was superlatively bored by their attentions, which he appreciated at their true value. The Countess herself was a great trial to the plain, honest English gentleman, who hated pretensions and humbug; and it was only his genuine love for his wife that enabled him to endure the martyrdom of a visit to the Castle. Lady Vane was indeed a charming woman. As sweet Lucy Baker she had been adored by the European colony at Meerut, and had received many offers of marriage. But she remained heart-whole until she astonished all who knew her by accepting plain, bluff, honest-hearted Randal Vane.

Portmayne Castle was a magnificent residence, which certainly threw Studleigh far into the shade. It stood on a wooded height, amidst far-spreading ancestral trees, itself a monument to the greatness and importance of the Portmaynes. It made a perfect picture, with its weather-beaten and castellated towers standing out against the sky, with the picturesque ruins of a yet older castle in the background, adding a kind of pensive grace to the scene. There was reason enough for a quiet pride in those who had so long called the beautiful spot a home, whose family history is inseparable from it, whose family records told of many deeds of chivalry and valour. But with this pride, excusable in itself, there was no grace. The name of Portmayne was regarded with awe and a certain respect, born of long usage to its haughty sway, but there was no love between castle and cottage—none of that perfect service given and received from the heart, such as blessed the relations between the manor house and the people of Studleigh.

In Lady Portmayne's boudoir, which commanded a magnificent view of one of the finest bits of English scenery, she was sitting with Sir Randal's wife on the afternoon of the day on which Lady Emily was expected at the Castle. Lady Portmayne had been writing some notes of invitation for a small dinner, and her guest was busy with a piece of Indian embroidery for a dress she was to give to little William Ayre.