

AIRLIE'S MISSION.*

BY ANNIE S. SWAN,

Author of "Aldersyde," "Maitland of Laurieston," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

"I REALLY wish those boys would come down to breakfast when it is on the table. I am sick of their irregular hours. If your father had been alive, they would not dare to be so careless. They are getting quite beyond me altogether."

It was a fretful, peevish, complaining voice, which quite prepared one to see a discontented, worried expression of face. And yet it was a sweet, kind face, if rather undecided, the face of a woman without much strength of character, totally unfitted to face the battle of life alone. Perhaps feeble health had much to do with Mrs. Keith's fretful disposition. She had long been partially invalided and there were lines of pain and weariness on her brow, and about her drooping mouth, which told their own tale. Sordid care had never touched her, it is true, but there were other troubles which had aged her before her time. She had been deprived of the love and care of a devoted and noble husband, just when her children most needed the firmness of his guiding hand. To one of her nature the desolation of widowhood was a peculiarly bitter experience, for she was totally unfitted to breast alone the tide of life.

It was a pleasant, cheerful, luxurious place, the morning room at Errol Lodge. A cheerful fire burned in the pretty grate, and a bright, ruddy glow danced on the well-appointed breakfast table, and vied with the wintry sunbeams slanting

through the crimson curtains, and playing on the golden head of a young lady at the window, busy already with a dainty piece of embroidery. Janet Keith was like a picture, in that bright setting; her fair, pale, refined face, crowned by the shining plaits of her golden hair, she looked as if nothing could ever ruffle or disturb her composure. Her dress was dainty and becoming, too, a warm crimson morning gown, fitting to perfection; the linen at throat and wrists was as spotless as the snow lying on the lawn; everything about her was tasteful and harmonious: it was something of a rest to look at her after seeing the worn, fretful, unsettled look on her mother's faded face. Mrs. Keith was sitting very near to the fire, stooping over it with her thin hands outspread to the cheerful heat, her ample white wrap gathered close about her bent shoulders, as if she suffered from the chilliness of the morning air.

"Why don't you speak, Janet?" she asked, querulously, when no response came to her.

"What shall I say, mamma?" inquired Janet, in her calm, cool, sweet voice. "You know my opinions regarding Errol and Jack. They have been too long left to the freedom of their own sweet wills, and are incorrigible now."

"That is cold enough comfort. Really, I wonder why my sons should be so undutiful. Just look at George Maitland; what a comfort he is to his mother. He considers her in everything."

* By kind permission of the copyright holders, Messrs. Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, Edinburgh and London, we are permitted to reprint this latest story by Annie Swan, with all the original illustrations by Lilian Russell. The Methodist Publishing House, Toronto, is the sole agent for Annie Swan's books in this country.