

malicious words, which have so many counterparts in this uncharitable world, had left a sting in her sensitive nature which would long rankle. Doubtless it would have gratified the gossip-mongers could they have witnessed Evelyn Ayre's humiliation and the bitter tears they had caused her to shed.

It was very pleasant that September morning in the autumnal woods. Something of the spirit of peace pervading these dim solitudes crept over Evelyn, and somehow the silent sympathy of Nature seemed to make her sacrifice less hard. She sat down by-and-by on the low, mossy parapet of a quaint, old bridge spanning a wide, brawling brook, and dreamily watched the clear water dancing over the rough pebbles; its noisy song soothing her with a kind of dreamy restfulness. She was tired out, physically and mentally, and it was a perfect rest to be alone in the depths of the woods, away from every human eye. She sat a long time in that silent, dreamful mood, feeling herself strangely far off from life and all its fulness of joy and care; but at length the sound of approaching steps broke the spell, and she rose to go upon her way. She felt no nervousness nor curiosity even at being disturbed in her solitude, because the way through the wood was a right-of-way from one village to another, and especially in summer weather was always preferred by pedestrians. When the long stride crushing the brushwood came nearer, she suddenly looked round, with heightened colour, and a strange fluttering at her heart, and the next moment the lover against whom she was trying to steel herself was by her side, his honest eyes full of reproach, although they brightened into tenderness as they dwelt upon her changing face.

"Lord Raybourne, it was not kind to follow me," she said, in tones which her great effort made very cold and stern.

"Was it kind of you to try and avoid me, Evelyn? It was of no use. I should have seen you if I had to wait the whole day. Mrs. Ayre sent me to bring you back. Will you turn with me, now?"

"Mamma sent you, Lord Raybourne," Evelyn repeated, in the slow accents of boundless surprise. "She did, and my mother seconded. The whole family is at Stonecroft, Evelyn," he answered, with a curious twinkle in his eye. "Don't disappoint them."

She turned her face away, maiden-like, to hide the light of love which filled her eyes.

"I will only ask you to go back on one condition, Evelyn; that I may take you to my mother as her daughter, who will take Sybil's place. She knows my errand, and is waiting to receive you."

Still Evelyn neither spoke nor turned to meet his gaze. Then a great fear took possession of the honest fellow pleading for her love.

"Evelyn, have I made the greatest of all mistakes? Have I overlooked the chief obstacle, that you don't care for me at all? Tell me so honestly. I can take my refusal like a man, but don't play with me, for I am in earnest, and I want you to be in earnest too."

Then Evelyn turned slowly to him, and the loveliest of smiles illumined her grave face.

"It is a shame to come and upset all my beautiful composure after the struggle I have had to attain it."

It was a sweet admission, and what could the honest soldier do but take her to his breast and pour his heart out in passionate endearment.

So that eventful day witnessed a double betrothal, and surely Rachel Ayre had just reason to be proud and grateful if ever woman had, for her children and her friends. If there was any slight disappointment in the minds of Lord Winterdyne and his wife, they did not suffer it to be seen. Believing, as both did, that love is the most essential element in happy marriage, they felt no desire to stand in the way of their children's happiness, or to set aside their choice.

Soon, very soon, they were to feel unspeakably thankful that they had sent their boy forth to the hazards of war with nothing but high hopes and abiding happiness in his heart.

## CHAPTER XXVI.—TWO COUPLES.

"It was most truly kind of you to leave your guests and come here this morning," Rachel repeated to Lady Winterdyne, when Clement had taken Sybil away down by the lake, where we will not seek to follow them. Lord Winterdyne smiled a somewhat grim smile.

"My dear Mrs. Ayre, we had positively no alternative," he said, drily. "I said to my wife this morning that surely we had been lax in some department of our parental rule when our children could command such prompt obedience from us."

Rachel smiled also, but almost immediately her face grew graver.

"I think no engagement should be allowed in either case; that the matter should at least be left open until the soldiers' return from the Cape."

"No engagement, indeed!" reiterated Lord Winterdyne, good humouredly. "And at this moment two pairs of lovers are swearing eternal fealty, and perhaps fixing the day. We may as well give in peacefully, Mrs. Ayre. Just look at my wife's eyes. I believe this is a pet plan of her's come to fulfilment, and she can't hide her satisfaction."

"In my son's case, especially," continued Rachel. "We cannot pretend to think that he has anything worthy to offer Lord Winterdyne's daughter. I am not without hopes that the day may come when we shall not be ashamed of his name."

"To hear Sir Randal Vane, one would believe that Captain Ayre's son might aspire to the hand of a Princess," laughed Lady Winterdyne. "Dear Mrs. Ayre, let us not lay any restrictions upon the young people. Remember how short a time they have together now, and what uncertainty attends the future. You may believe that Lord Winterdyne and I are entirely satisfied, otherwise we should never have encouraged their intimacy."

It was impossible for Rachel to continue oppressed by any sense of dissatisfaction, and she permitted her real happiness and pride to show themselves.

"Then you told the Vanes, Lady Winterdyne?" she said inquiringly.

"Yes, and Lady Ayre also. She goes home to-day."

"Did she express surprise or displeasure, may I ask?"

"Neither. She made no comment whatever. I confess I do not understand your sister-in-law. She is entirely changed. I wonder if there is always a certain disappointment in renewing early friendships. Perhaps the change lies with me."

"She has had a long widowhood, Lady Winterdyne, and her husband was so absolutely devoted to her that she must miss him intolerably," said Rachel, gently.

"Yes, but I know many widows who mourn their husbands as sincerely as it is possible for Lady Emily to do, and yet who think they have a duty to others as long as they are in the world," maintained Lady Winterdyne frankly. "I do not think she knows her duty to her son, who is a splendid fellow, if he were brought out a little more. He is very shy and reserved."

"With strangers, but the good Squire lives again in his boy," answered Rachel, with real emotion. "I wish he were not so like him in physical weakness. It sometimes makes me fear lest a second sorrow, worse than the first, should shadow Lady Ayre's later years."

Lord Winterdyne looked at her curiously. Evidently it had never occurred to her that by Will Ayre's death a great inheritance would come to her own son. Few women would have been able so absolutely to sink all selfish interest, he thought, and she rose higher in his estimation, though he did not speak.

"She has had a great disappointment just now, Mrs. Ayre. There has been some talk between us of a marriage between Sybil and her son."

"Is it possible that Will can care for your daughter?" asked Rachel, in quick anxiety. "I thought he had not met her until now."

"Nor has he, and he cares nothing for her. No sooner did he come to Winterdyne than I saw how

futile it was to plan for our children. It is Harry, not Sybil, who has dealt him his bitter disappointment."

Rachel looked bewildered, but Lady Winterdyne nodded, as she reiterated her assertion.

"Will has more than a cousinly affection for your daughter, Mrs. Ayre; and I think he is not the kind of man to transfer it so lightly. Ah, there are the truants! Is there anything to be gathered from Evelyn's face? Look at her, Harry, and tell me if you have not outgrown your old intuitions."

There was nothing to be gathered from Evelyn's calm, serene face, which had not even a heightened colour to betray her.

But Raybourne's proud elation would not hide, and as they passed by the window he drew her hand within his arm with that delightful air of possession which is the outstanding attribute of a newly-made lover. It was a trying ordeal Evelyn had to face, but she bore herself with an exquisite grace which won all hearts anew. Rachel was disappointed in her, however; she missed something of that elation which the happy crown of her love affair had the right to evoke. She was too calm and serious; tears seemed nearer to her eyes than the sunshine of happy laughter. When Raybourne proposed that Clement should return to Winterdyne in his place no one demurred. The time was so short and so precious, and the separation might be so long and so bitter, that they had need to make the most of the few hours left.

Often during that day Rachel's thoughts reverted somewhat painfully to Lady Winterdyne's speech about Will Ayre. She had felt at first inclined to set it down as imagination, but when she sat down calmly in her solitude to think of it, she feared it was too true. She remembered countless little signs she had passed unheeded at the time, but which all pointed to Will's love for his cousin. Her heart filled anew with compassion for him. Although, certainly, he possessed many of the world's good gifts, much was denied him. He was a singularly lonely man, who appeared to be destined to an existence unblessed by ties of love or family life. And yet Rachel felt that it was better that Evelyn's choice had not fallen on her cousin.

When the party returned to Winterdyne luncheon was waiting for them, and the luggage for Studleigh ready to depart.

"Well, good people, there are exceptional circumstances, or our conduct would not be tolerated," said Lady Winterdyne gaily, as she hurried to her place at the table. "We have settled the fate of our two elder children, and only Norman remains to be disposed of. Long may he continue devoted to his skeletons and fossils. Clement, you must sit on my right hand, and comport yourself with the dignity befitting your new responsibilities."

Her happy humour broke the ice, and restored the best of feeling to the company. As Clement passed by his cousin's chair, Will put back his hand and gripped it like a vice.

"All right, old man," Clem answered, a little unsteadily, and a curious moisture for a moment dimmed his eyes. Fortunately he was sitting directly opposite to Sybil, and could thus look at her unrebuked. It was a very happy, merry meal. Sir Randal and Lady Vane were full of nonsense, and unmercifully teased the young pair. It was not noticed how very silent Lady Ayre was during the meal. Proud woman though she was, she was no hypocrite, and would not utter congratulations which would be as hollow as they were forced.

She did not make the slightest allusion to the state of affairs, even when Lady Winterdyne came to her dressing-room when she was dressing for her journey.

"I shall come and see you when the soldiers have gone. We shall be dull enough, and glad of anything to break the monotony," Lady Winterdyne said. "I was saying to Winterdyne this morning I thought we should spend Christmas in Rome if we could persuade Mrs. Ayre and Evelyn to accompany us."