

laid her wraps and took off her rich attire. She unbound her hair, and, throwing on her dressing-gown, stepped across the corridor to Evelyn's door. For the first time she found it locked against her.

"Are you asleep, Evy; may I not come in?"

"Not to-night, please, dear mamma."

There was something in the tone which went to Rachel's heart.

"You are quite well, my darling?"

"Quite well, dear mamma," came the answer as before.

Rachel did not insist on being admitted, although for the moment, perhaps, she felt it hard. Between her daughter and herself, however, there was much in common, and from her own experience Rachel knew that there are some things which must be borne in their first keenness alone, when even the sympathy of nearest and dearest can only jar. If such an hour had come thus early to Evelyn, then her mother could only, as she had said, leave the child with God. But that night there was no sleep for Rachel Ayre.

#### CHAPTER XXV.—THE NEXT DAY.

Next morning Clement and his sister breakfasted alone. There was something about Evelyn he could not understand; he surmised, correctly enough, that something of an unusual nature had happened to disturb her, but as she made no allusion to it, he did not ask any questions. They talked of commonplace things, discussed the *fête* and the people who were there, but each knew that the thoughts of the other were otherwise occupied, though Evelyn did not yet know of her brother's engagement to Sybil Raybourne.

"Mamma was asleep when I looked in, Clem. She looks so worn and white that I am quite sure she cannot have slept any all night. Did Aunt Emily say anything to vex her, do you think? I saw them talking together for quite a long time," said Evelyn, turning aside at length from trivial gossip over the *fête*.

"I don't know what she said, Evy, and that's a fact; but she's a perfect tartar," answered Clem, with his usual candour. "I had the felicity of being introduced to her. What glorious eyes she has; they penetrate your whole being. I should not like to pick a quarrel with our august relative."

"I did not venture near her. She looked so scornfully at me several times that I began to feel wretchedly uncomfortable, to say nothing of my clothes, which, I was firmly convinced, looked limp and mean."

"Nonsense, there were few like you. That black muslin thing and the yellow fly-away ends looked stunning."

Evelyn laughed.

"Oh, Clem, to hear you call my fine combination of Spanish lace and Lyons velvet black muslin; but I appreciate your approval all the same. I think our own mother was the handsomest woman in the room, our aunt not excepted. Her hair is so lovely; and she looks so young."

"I agree with you; but I say, Evy, I don't think I enjoyed the thing. Do you think any of them will be over from Winterdyne to-day? If not—"

"If not what?" asked Evelyn, as she rose from the table.

"I must go there, that's all," and just then a servant appeared saying Mrs. Ayre was awake and would like her daughter to come up. Evelyn obeyed the summons at once. Perhaps she was glad to escape from further talk about the family at Winterdyne. Mrs. Ayre was having breakfast in bed—a most unusual occurrence with her. She set down her coffee-cup, and turned her eyes with keenest questioning upon her daughter's face.

"Good morning, my love. I am very lazy this morning. I heard none of the bells; but it was broad day before I fell asleep."

"I felt sure of it, mamma. I looked in as I went down, and you were sleeping so soundly I told Katherine not to disturb you. Have you everything you want?"

"Everything. How are you this morning, Evy?"

"Quite well, mamma, thank you. May I draw up the blind? The sunshine is so lovely. Are

you not shocked to hear that it is nearly eleven o'clock?"

Rachel was perfectly conscious that Evelyn was avoiding her gaze, and apparently ill at ease; but she took no notice of it.

"I hope Clement is down, and that he is very well this morning."

"Oh, yes. We have been gossiping over the *fête* since ten o'clock. Clem is in great spirits. We shall be very dull without him, mother. I cannot bear to think of it."

"Nor can I. I do not realise it yet," the mother answered slowly.

Evelyn wandered restlessly round the room, and finally stood still at the foot of the bed.

"Will you mind, mamma, if I go out this morning for a long walk?"

"Are you not tired enough, dear?" Rachel asked, quietly.

"I am not tired at all. I wish to go out this morning."

"May I know why?"

A painful flush overspread the girl's sweet face.

"I will tell you if you wish, mamma. Lord Raybourne will be here this morning and I do not wish to see him."

"Come round here, Evy?"

Rachel stretched out her hands to her daughter, and she came slowly round to the side of the bed, and kneeling down hid her face.

"My darling, I have gone through it all, and I understand. Tell me or not, whatever you think best. I know that whatever may happen you are my brave, good, dutiful daughter, who has never cost me a moment's pain."

"I will not, mamma, if I can help it. I think my duty is quite clear. I shall go out this morning, and—and by tomorrow he will have gone away, and when he comes back he will have forgotten."

"And you?"

With what unspeakable tenderness did the mother's hand rest on the bent head as she asked the question.

"Perhaps—then I shall have forgotten too," Evelyn said, and she pressed her cheek against her mother's soft palm, and for a moment there was silence. In that moment Rachel's heart rebelled for her child's suffering, asking passionately why it must ever be the weak who are called upon to suffer; and yet, conscious in her inmost soul that not even Clement, in all the pride of his manhood's strength, could be so strong to suffer and to endure for duty's sake as the gentle girl by her side.

"Did he speak to you, last night, Evelyn? If you would rather I did not ask these questions, my dearest, tell me, but perhaps it may do you good."

"It will; it does. It is always good to speak to you, mother. He did say something," she added, slowly, and with difficulty. "I could not misunderstand him, though it was a great surprise. Mother, you do believe that I did not know; that I have never done anything to encourage Lord Raybourne; that I have not laid my plans, as they said, to catch him."

"Evelyn, what do you mean?" asked the mother, looking inexpressibly shocked.

"I heard them—some ladies—I did not know them—talking in one of the conservatories. They said all that, mamma, and a great deal more I cannot repeat. Oh, mother, how can people be so wicked—so cruel—when we have never harmed them?"

"My child, it is a hard, cruel world, and we have to harden ourselves against its evil-speaking, else we should fret ourselves into our graves. Do not let this idle speaking vex or grieve you for a moment, but believe what I do assure you, that you have ever been a model of maidenly propriety. These untrue and uncharitable words will only recoil on the heads of those who uttered them; they cannot possibly hurt you. Evelyn, tell me frankly, has Lord Raybourne asked you to be his wife?"

"No, mother, because I would not listen. I gave him no opportunity."

"Was it because of what you heard?"

"No, mother."

For a few moments Evelyn said no more.

"I made up my mind long ago, mamma," she continued at length, "that day you told me the story of your life, that I should never marry into a family which considered itself above my own."

Rachel mournfully smiled.

"My darling, your case is entirely different. Your father belonged to an older family than the Raybournes. I do not think you could hold to your decision unless there was a more potent reason behind."

"Then, am I quite wrong, mamma?"

"No, Evelyn, I think you were wise not to let Lord Raybourne speak—that you will be wise to keep out of his way, at least until he comes back. Then, if he is still of the same mind, the matter may be seriously considered. You are both so young, you can afford to wait a few months or years."

Rachel looked at her young daughter keenly as she rose from her knees. She would have liked to probe deeper, to ask how far her affections were involved, how great or how slight a sacrifice she was making. But there was something in the girl's still, proud reticence which kept back any further questioning.

"I shall go then, mother, and send Clem up to you. I may not come in till afternoon. If I walk as far as the rectory, I can lunch with Mrs. Peploe."

"Very well, my love, and meanwhile I suppose I am to deal with the braw wooer," she said, with a slight smile. "Well, you may leave the case in my hands. Has Clem told you that Sybil has promised to be his wife?"

"No. If that is so, it is another weighty reason in favour of my decision. I cannot be sorry, mother, nor pretend I am. Sybil is so sweet, and Clem such a splendid fellow. What a different world it would be if there was no world's opinion—none of these miserable distinctions and conventionalities to be considered."

Rachel Ayre passionately re-echoed these words in her heart, as, a little later, she watched Evelyn set out upon her walk. The girl's step seemed to have lost its buoyancy. Her movements were listless, as if she had lost interest in life. For a moment the anxious mother felt a slight bitterness in her heart against the man who had robbed the child of her peace of mind. And yet she chided herself for her own unreason, since it was Evelyn's own winsome charm which had won him.

It was a fine, clear autumn morning, a silvery brightness shone through the pensive veil of the sky, the still air seemed weighted with the rich autumnal odours; already the trees were tinged with sober browns and gaudy yellows, against which the glossy greenness of the pines and hollies showed in fine relief. The fields were stripped of their harvest riches, and flower had given place to fruit, even on late bearing bushes, so that there was subdued colouring everywhere, unrelieved by anything more vivid than the yellow of the beech leaves.

Stoncroft stood in a richly-wooded district, and the walk to the rectory at Brierly village could be taken entirely through the woods. As was natural, Evelyn chose that pleasant way. She was in no hurry. She was not expected at Brierly, and in that deep solitude, amid Nature's pensive beauty, it would seem less hard to face what was to her a real sacrifice, for with keen suddenness she had awakened to the knowledge that her heart was given, with all its love, to her brother's friend. It was to be expected that a daughter reared by Rachel Ayre would not grow up to regard marriage as the aim of a woman's existence; and Evelyn had given the matter less thought than is common with girls of her age.

Her perfect naturalness, her acceptance of Lord Raybourne's attentions in a spirit of comradeship, because he was her brother's most intimate friend, had not well prepared her for this shock and the decision for which it immediately called. She had tried to analyse her feelings, to convince herself that it would be no sacrifice to her to refuse Raybourne's love, if she could keep his friendship, but all that was left to her after she had so resigned herself was an aching heart. The thoughtless,