



THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

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EXT morning, when the sun lay warm and bright on all the fair world, a solemn and beautiful scene was enacted in the room where the old Squire had died. There were present only Lady Emily Ayre, Rachel and her children, and Lord and

Lady Winterdyne, by their own request.

"Till death do us part!"

A visible emotion thrilled all present as these significant words fell from the lips of the old Vicar who had officiated at that other marriage service we had witnessed long ago in the church of Studleigh.

It was believed by all present that William Ayre's marriage-day would likewise be the day of his death.

CHAPTER XXXV.—THE PHYSICIAN'S VERDICT.

"I confess I am surprised that Mr. Ayre has disappointed my expectations by gathering strength when he ought, by established precedent, to have

lost it. We cannot understand it, but the fact remains, and I for one, see no reason why he should not live for many years."

Of this opinion an eminent medical man delivered himself in the library at Studleigh on the afternoon of a dull, wintry-looking September day. He was in the room alone with Lady Emily, and he noticed a peculiar expression come upon her face while he was speaking. It was not exactly the expression he had looked for in response to his hopeful remarks, and he looked as he felt, extremely puzzled.

"I see you scarcely credit me, Lady Emily, but I assure you I speak in sober earnest. I find your son distinctly better since I examined him last at Bournemouth, in June. You may with confidence impart this hopeful news to his wife. Poor young lady, it will relieve her mind of a heavy burden."

"I question that."

The words seemed forced from Lady Emily's lips, and the physician regarded her with increased and visible surprise.

"Pardon me, but your words astonish me, Lady Emily," he said, quickly. "Is there any reason why the verdict I am justified in giving to-day regarding his state of health should not make her boundlessly happy?"

"Yes, there is a reason. Sit down, Doctor Phillips, and let me speak. You have known us for many years; you knew my husband, and it is sometimes a relief to speak to an outsider. My son's wife married him, believing that by so doing she would make happy the last hours of a dying man. As you are aware, she is my niece, but, perhaps, you are not aware that she was engaged to be married to Lord Winterdyne's son, who was killed at Isandhlwana."

"No, I did not know," said the physician, quickly. "And do you mean to say she married Mr. Ayre simply and solely for the reason you name, and that she has no affection for him?"

"I believe so. I am sure of it."

"Then she did him a great wrong," was the grave answer. "But I can scarcely believe it. To see them together one would believe them to be bound up in each other. You may be mistaken. I trust you are, for the happiness of all concerned."

Lady Emily shook her head.

"I fear not. What would you advise? It is a most painful situation, is it not?" she said, with a pathetic smile. "And yet my son cannot die, even if he would."

The doctor laughed.