

He was not sanguine about Lady Emily's reception of the news he had to give. Once or twice she had remarked upon Geoffrey's frequent visits to Pine Edge, and the curl of her lip, the very inflection of her voice, indicated that she thought it no place for him to spend his leisure. William did not believe she had any idea that Geoffrey's admiration for Rachel Abbot had so deepened that it had become the desire of his life to make her his wife. He knew that the news would not gratify her. He shrank in imagination from her measured, stately words, from the cold glance of her flashing eye, from the curve of her beautiful mouth. With all these in anticipation, and oppressed besides with a vague, haunting dread of coming evil, the Squire of Studleigh slowly approached the house.

CHAPTER II.—THE PORTMAYNE CREED.

The large windows of the drawing-room were open, and on the step which led down to the terrace stood Lady Emily Ayre, humming the refrain of the last song she had sung. She was a striking and rarely beautiful woman, with a pale, refined, exquisite type of beauty but seldom seen. Her figure was very tall and slender, her carriage graceful and stately, her white silk gown, with her half-open corsage, showed the perfect curve of neck and throat. Her face was, perhaps, too colourless, but the skin was clear and pure and soft, and the features absolutely faultless. The profile turned to the window was clear-cut and patrician, the eyes large, calm and lovely, of hue as blue as the summer sky; her hair was bright golden, and was like a crown to her perfect face. She was conscious of her own beauty, but not vain of it; she wore it as her natural right, the heritage of a house famous through all time for the beauty of its ladies. There was a suggestion of coldness about the whole woman. The white gown falling in spotless and stately folds to her feet, the cold gleam of the diamonds in her golden hair, the faint, slight smile on her proud lips as she watched her husband approaching, seemed to indicate that the Lady Emily Ayre was a woman who prided herself in her absolute self-control, in her calm, unruffled bearing, her measureless scorn for the littleness of mind which allows itself to betray nervousness and haste. Her manners were absolutely perfect—cold, calm, icily courteous, after the order of her race. Sometimes, though not often, she unbent to her husband, and gave him a glimpse of her inner self which made him happy for days. In the nursery, when no one was by, the heart of the woman was revealed before the unconscious smiles of her first-born son. Her love for her husband was a calm, steady, undemonstrative affection, which found expression in fulfilling to the uttermost the gracious functions of the mistress of Studleigh; her love for her child was a passion which filled her whole soul, a passion without reason or limit, which in years to come was to cause herself and others bitter sorrow.

"Where have you been, William, and where has Geoffrey gone?" she asked, as her husband came up the steps. "It is an hour since I left you in the dining-room."

"Pardon, mia," he said, and bending forward touched with his lips the round, exquisite arm. "We have been discussing grave matters, and Geoffrey has gone to Pine Edge."

Instantly her expression changed, and her lips curled in high disdain.

"Why does he spend all his leisure there? It is no compliment to me, William, that your brother should be impatient to be gone from my dinner-table to the society of a yeoman's daughter."

"There is excuse for Geoffrey, dear, since it is the society of his future wife he seeks," William Ayre answered, candidly. "Come in, for the dews are falling, and I want to talk this matter over with you."

She turned from him and withdrew into an inner room, where the lamps were lit, and the coffee on the table.

"You may go, Hodgson; we shall wait upon ourselves," she said, briefly, to the servant waiting with the coffee-tray; and when the tray was put down, busied herself in putting sugar in the cups. Her husband closed the long windows, and joined her in the smaller room.

"Thank you, my love," he said, as he took his coffee from her hand. "Sit down now and let us talk. Geoffrey has gone to ask Rachel Abbot to be his wife."

"His wife?"

Lady Emily turned slightly round with a swift rustle of her silken skirts, and looked at her husband with wondering eyes. "Has his folly gone so far as that?"

"Geoff does not think it folly, I assure you, Emily. I see that he is sincerely attached to Rachel Abbot."

"Did he tell you that he was going to Pine Edge on such an errand?"

"Yes; I have just parted with him at the cop-pice gate."

"And what did you say to him?"

"What could I say, Emily, except wish him God-speed in his wooing?" asked William Ayre, slightly smiling, deceived by the serenity of his wife's face and the calmness of her speech.

"You—you wished him God-speed, William?" she re-echoed. "Surely your folly transcends his, for he may be supposed to be blinded by a foolish passion," she said, quickly. "Do you mean to say that it will please you to see your only brother so degrade himself?"

"Your choice of a word is not very happy, Emily," said William Ayre, quietly. "It is not a word to use in connection with any pure and good girl, least of all, in regard to Rachel Abbot, who is a gentlewoman in mind and manners, whatever her birth may be."

"And this is the proud end of the hero of Alma Heights," retorted Lady Emily, in ineffable scorn. "There is a despatch for him to-night, announcing, I suppose, his promotion; at least I see by the evening paper that he has been gazetted captain in the 54th, scarcely a matter for congratulation, I think, *now*."

"Why?"

"Because, the higher the height the greater the descent," she answered, coolly. "It will be better if we do not discuss this matter, William. It is utterly disgraceful that Geoffrey should have allowed himself to be inveigled in such a manner by these Abbots; and that you should all along have stood calmly by and witnessed, nay, encouraged it, is not only a mystery, but a wrong, which I can scarcely regard lightly. If you have no respect for your own name, you might have given a thought to me."

She spoke quietly, without any betrayal of passion, and yet he felt that her bitter anger was roused. Her face was paler than its wont; her lips trembled as she spoke, and her bosom rose and fell quickly under the soft laces of her gown. But William Ayre was equal to the occasion, because his sympathy was wholly with his brother.

"It ought to be a matter of congratulation with us, Emily, that Geoffrey has behaved so honourably to Rachel Abbot. We have not very far to go among our neighbours to find more humiliating sorrow than this need be to us. Except for the accident of her birth, Christopher Abbot's daughter is as truly a lady as any of my acquaintance."

"I thank you for the comparison and the compliment, Mr. Ayre," said his wife, and she swept him a little curtsy, while her lip curled in a slight, cold smile.

"Emily, you are not wont to be so uncharitable," he said still quietly, though his manner betrayed his vexation. "Is it not some personal dislike of Rachel Abbot?"

"On my part?"

She swept round to him as she asked the question, and drew herself up as if the very suggestion were an insult.

"Yes—Geoffrey thinks you do not like her."

"Geoffrey is needlessly concerned, you can tell him. I can have no dislike to Rachel Abbot. She is too far removed from me even to occasion me a thought."

"You are very bitter, Emily."

"Am I? Not more so, I think, than the occasion merits. When I married you, William, I did not dream that I should be called upon to meet your tenants on equal ground, and I refuse to do it."

"Does that mean that, in the event of Geoffrey marrying Rachel Abbot, you will not countenance her?"

"You would not ask me, William, to receive her here?" she replied in her iciest tones.

Then the Squire of Studleigh's rare anger rose—"I must say, Emily, you are going too far," he said, with most unusual haste. "Although the Abbots are my tenants, their family is as old and honourable as mine, and their tastes are as refined. You were amazed at the refinement and elegance of Pine Edge when I took you there after our marriage."

"I was. I suggested, you may remember, that it was a little too much an assumption on the part of those who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. And Rachel Abbot received me then as if the honour of the visit was mine, and not hers. I have never forgotten it, and never will."

"It is as I said, Emily, you are prejudiced against Rachel Abbot, and will not look at the matter from a just standpoint," he said with a sigh. "But we need not grudge poor Geoffrey his happiness, even if it is to come through the daughter of a tenant farmer. It is hard, after his long campaign amid the rigors of a Russian winter, to be ordered to India at the very beginning of his furlough. I have a strange presentiment that he will never return."

"Nonsense, William, he will grow lazy and indolent in Delhi, like all our Indian officers. Does he intend to take his bride out with him, then?"

"Yes, if she will go."

"Oh, she will go fast enough," said Lady Emily, with a short, hard laugh. "It would be too great a risk to let him go free. Well, I do not envy Mrs. Geoffrey Ayre, left to the tender mercies of Lady Randal Vane and her exclusive circle. I question if even Geoffrey's devoted love will be able to stand that test."

"You could do a great deal to make her experience of Indian society agreeable, Emily," said the Squire, involuntarily.

"In what way?"

"You might ask Lady Vane to meet her here. It is possible they may be going by the same steamer."

"I have told you, William, that I decline to countenance this affair."

"Not even for my sake?"

She hesitated for a moment, not that there was any wavering in her mind, but because she did not wish to give a direct refusal. In a sense she was a just woman, she appreciated her husband's habitual gentleness and consideration for her; it pained her to give him pain, or to inflict upon him any disappointment, however slight. But on this point she was inexorable. She deemed that her position and her heritage demanded that she should take up an unequivocal stand. She could not receive Rachel Abbot into the house on equal ground, welcome her as a sister to be honoured and loved. The condescension would be too great. The law of her order forbade it, and she had been reared to consider that law sacred and binding. It is certain, however, that a deep-rooted and strange dislike of Rachel Abbot gave strength to her decision. She recalled the tall, stately, graceful figure, the grave, calm face, the deep, lustrous eyes, the perfect grace and dignity of mien, the unconsciousness of any inferiority of position in her demeanour towards her, Lady Emily, who belonged to one of the proudest families in England. In that short interview Rachel Abbot had erred unpardonably. She had been kindly, courteous, hospitable to the Squire's aristocratic wife, but perfectly self-possessed, and neither humble nor deferential. It was not pride, however, though Lady Emily regarded it as such; it was simply unconsciousness that difference in rank demanded any special recognition at her hands. Perhaps Miss Abbot had been spoiled and petted by the Squire's folk until they had forgotten the distinction between them. There had always been a warm and close intimacy between Pine Edge and Studleigh.

(To be Continued.)