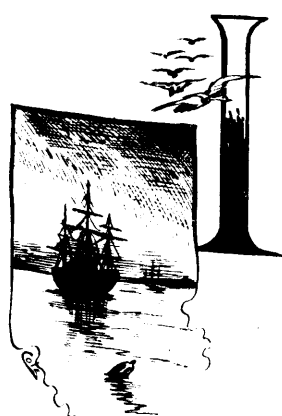


BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

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CHAPTER XXIV.—Continued.



"DON'T know whether you could justly be called a diamond at all when you speak like that," she said, quickly, and with flushing cheeks, for she could not understand the strangeness of his manner.

"Perhaps not; it doesn't matter. The worst you think me, the better perhaps in the end for me," he said, more gruffly still, and she turned her head

quickly away, but not before he saw the quick bright tear start to her eye, and Clem was not brave enough, nor prudent enough to see that and say nothing.

"Can't you see I'm doing it on purpose to hide my own misery?" he asked. "Come, let us go round to the sundial. It will be quiet there. Let them miss you. It's the last night I shall have a word with you anyhow; who knows? the last time we may ever meet on earth. Would you be sorry, Sybil? No, don't answer me. I've no right to, but as I live I can't help it, I love you better in my own soul, and if you should never speak to me again I'll go on loving you till I die."

So in that simple outspoken way did Clem keep his fine resolution; and the most curious thing of all was that Sybil made no disapproval, nor did she offer to leave his side.

"Forgive my confounded presumption, Sybil, and let me call you Sybil just for once. I didn't know how my soul clave to you till to-night, when I thought what lay before me, and that I might never see you again. Whatever happens, and on whatever blessed fellow you may bestow the treasure of your love, you may believe that nobody will ever love you better than I do, and will till I die."

"Do you want me to marry somebody else? Isn't that a curious kind of love, Clem?"

Something in the wavering tones of her voice made his heart give a great bound, and he bent his head from his tall height till he could look into her face.

"Sybil, what do you mean? It can't be that you care anything for a great lumbering creature like me, that you do more than tolerate me because I am Harry's friend?"

Still Sybil never spoke; but she lifted her sweet face to his, and her eyes answered him. And the next moment that face was hidden on Clement Ayre's heart, and she felt his strong arms tremble as they clasped her.

"My darling," was all he said, "I can't believe it! Couldn't you say something; just one little word to convince me that I am neither mad nor dreaming?"

And Sybil said the word, but what it was we will not ask, but leave them there with their great happiness—it will be through many deadly perils and agonies of suspense that they will ever so stand again. And even then there must rest upon them a cloud of sorrow which never shall be wholly lightened this side the grave.

It was natural, perhaps, that they should forget everything but each other so completely, but it was no wonder that ere long Sybil was missed from among the gay throng: and they began to whisper to each other that "the tall lieutenant"—as somebody had called him that night—was missing too. And many a smile and nod were exchanged; but they looked a little bewildered when, after a time, the tall lieutenant came sauntering back to the terrace alone, looking as unconcerned as possible. He had taken Sybil into the house by the open French window of the morning-room, and she had escaped unobserved upstairs; not quite unobserved, however, for Lady Emily, seated in one of the alcoves in the hall, caught a glimpse of the flying figure, with flushed, radiant cheeks and shining eyes, and with quick intuition read the girl's happy secret. She was not surprised, scarcely disappointed. The cup of her bitterness was full, indeed, and could not be added to. But she did wonder what Lord Winterdyne, with all his hope and pride in his children, would say to a double alliance with the son and daughter of the poor Geoffrey Ayre. From Lady Adela she anticipated no opposition, her views on marriage questions savouring not at all of worldly wisdom.

The brilliant fête drew to a close, and in the dark hush of the early morning the guests who had participated in the princely hospitality of Winterdyne drove away well pleased with their entertainment.

The little party from Stonecroft were among the first to go, though Clement pleaded for a respite. Rachel, however, was tired out, a cloud lay on her spirit; she could not say whether it was born of Lady Emily's strangeness or not. Evelyn also looked worn and sad. With much anxiety Rachel looked at her once or twice, wondering what the issue of the fête would be for her. Clement was at times jubilant, then relapsed into utter silence. His mother did not dream, however, that he had spoken irrevocable words to the daughter of the house.

When they reached home, Evelyn went directly upstairs, but Clement detained his mother a moment in the hall.

"Wait a moment, mother, I want to speak to you. I have frightfully disobeyed you, but I am the happiest fellow in the world."

"My son, what do you mean?" Rachel asked, and her wrap fell from her shoulders in the quick excitement of the moment.

"I have spoken to Sybil, mother, and she actually cares for a great awkward chap like me, who has nothing to offer her but an honest love."

"Oh, Clement, I fear it was not wisely done. You did not seek to bind her, I trust, by any promise. There is to be so much considered, as you say. What have you to offer to Lord Winterdyne's daughter that they would think worthy her acceptance? I trust, I trust that this rashness will not bring sorrow and disappointment to us all."

"Mother, I don't think it, and I can't help it," said Clement, earnestly. "Could a fellow go away loving her as I do, and never utter a word? I couldn't do it, and I'm ready to face the consequences."

He looked it, and in the flashing eye, which was yet subdued by a fine tenderness, his mother read what had given him courage, even as it had given his father courage in those unforgotten days to risk the world for love.

"Have you nothing but blame for me, mother?" he asked, wistfully, as he regarded her grave face. "If you only knew how I love her, and what it is to me to know that she is not indifferent you would not be so silent, mother. I will be worthier of her some day. I will not ask her to share an ignoble life."

"God bless you, my son; yes, and the sweet girl who is already as dear to me as my own," Rachel said, falteringly, and yet with a smile which Clement saw was not altogether forced. "Whatever be the issue it will be for good. I leave my children in God's hands."

She kissed him as she left him, but ere she reached her own room the smile died on her lips. Her heart was very heavy, and she sighed as she