

The young lieutenant tossed away his cigar, and turned his blue eyes on his brother's face with a half-eager, half-hesitating glance.

"Something very particular, Geoffrey?"

"Yes."

"I don't feel as if I wanted to hear any more particular news, Geoff. It is enough for me in the meantime that you are ordered to India."

"Oh, that's nothing. What's India in these days?" asked Geoffrey, with all the fearlessness of youth. "I want to tell you, Will, that I'm not going out alone if I can help it."

"Are you not?"

An amused smile dawned on William Ayre's lips, as he somewhat idly asked the question. He was listening to his wife singing in the music-room, and so had his attention directed for a moment from his brother's words.

"Come, let us go down the avenue a bit," said Geoffrey, a trifle impatiently. "If you stand here Emily will have you enticed in presently, and I want you."

He linked his arm through his brother's and led him down the terrace steps, the full, beautiful melody of Lady Ayre's song following them as they walked.

"I really think Emily's voice is growing more exquisite," said William Ayre, dreamily, for music was a passion with him, and he could scarcely resist its charm.

"She sings well, certainly; if singing will make you happy, Will, you ought to be in paradise," said Geoffrey, with a slight bitterness, which, however, his brother did not notice.

"Well, what is this weighty something you are yearning to confide to me?" the elder asked presently, when they were quite beyond hearing of the song.

"Perhaps it will surprise you very much, perhaps not," said the lieutenant, bluntly. "I'm going over to Pine Ridge presently, to ask Rachel Abbot to marry me."

"What?"

"Quite true. Is it possible, Will, that you haven't a suspicion of my interest in that quarter?"

"Well, I've heard Emily hint at it, certainly, but I laughed at her. Rachel Abbot! Geoffrey lad, are you not making a mistake?"

"I don't think so. Is yours the conventional objection such as I know Lady Ayre entertains?" asked Geoffrey, quietly. "A farmer's daughter is unfit, of course, in the world's eyes, to mate with an Ayre of Studleigh."

"It is not that, Geoffrey, though no doubt the world will have its say," returned William Ayre, quietly. "Other things being equal, that need not be an insuperable obstacle, for Rachel Abbot is a lady, and I admire her very much."

"Thank you, Will," interrupted the other with quick gratitude.

"I suppose you have some reason to believe that she will accept you?"

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

"And would you propose to marry at once?"

"Yes, and take her to India, if she will go."

"Take her to India! Would that be a wise step, and there is the old man to consider? Abbot must be seventy, if he is a day."

"Oh, but he is hale and hearty still," returned Geoffrey, lightly. "Besides, I think he will not stand in the way of his daughter's happiness."

"Well, if you marry, Geoff, I should certainly say take your wife with you. But there are a great many things to consider; many more than I suppose you have even given a passing thought."

"Anglo-Indian society, especially of the military order, is very exclusive. What do you suppose the officers' haughty wives will have to say to poor Rachel?"

"I am afraid she would find herself on the outside of the social circles."

"Why? If they knew her only as Mrs. Geoffrey Ayre, there will be no question of her position," said the lieutenant, hastily. "And they need know nothing more."

"They need not, but they will," answered the elder brother, with a significant smile. "These military stations are a perfect paradise for the gossip-monger and the tale-bearer. Very probably Rachel's antecedents will be discovered and dis-

cussed before your arrival, and her place assigned to her. If I am right in thinking her to be a particularly high-minded and sensitive woman, it will go hard with her in Delhi, Geoff, and she will suffer the most on your account."

"I had no idea you knew so much about her, Will," said Geoffrey, in genuine astonishment.

"But though her father is a farmer, Christopher Abbot is not quite like the ordinary farmer. The family is as old as our own, and has always been in Pine Edge."

"That is true. Well, perhaps, I have drawn the darker side of the picture, and Rachel herself is sweet and lovely enough to disarm all prejudice," said the master of Studleigh, generously. "But there is something else to be considered. India is in a very disturbed state. I heard Sir Randal Vane the other day saying he anticipated a rebellion every day. At any time you may be on active service, Geoff. You are no stranger to the fortunes of war; but war in India differs in some particulars from war in other places. In the event of a successful revolt by the natives, the ladies at the station might be in fearful peril."

"Oh, Will, how you croak. After Alma and Cossack sabres, who is going to be nervous about a handful of wretched Sepoys? I anticipated a great many objections on your part, but not one of those you have named. I confess my chief fear was that you imagine yourself lowered by such an alliance. Emily will be furious, I know."

"Emily has her family pride, I allow, but it is hers by heritage," said William Ayre, indulgently, for in his eyes his handsome wife could do no wrong.

"The daughter of a hundred Earls,
You are not one to be despised,"

hummed the lieutenant, with mild sarcasm. "Well, I confess I don't care a fig for Emily, begging your pardon, old fellow, as long as you don't mind."

"Well, perhaps I mind a little," returned William Ayre, with his quiet smile. "I would rather your ambition pointed a little higher. Perhaps one day you may be master of Studleigh."

"And the heir yonder, to say nothing of the brothers and sisters who may come," laughed the lieutenant. "Besides, you will be the white-headed Squire, perhaps, long after I have fallen before the enemy's gun or sabre, covered with wounds and, I trust, glory. Do you wish me good luck, then, Will, from your heart, in my mission to Pine Edge?"

In their walk they had strolled off the wide avenue and crossed the park to a gate which led into the open fields.

It was a fine, mild evening, the dusk tenderly falling after the bright radiance of the sun had faded. The air was very still, and seemed laden with the promise of the spring. The trees had tender tufts on their bare boughs, and in sheltered nooks the early flowers were in bloom. Somewhere, indeed, the sweet violet was already giving its hidden and exquisite fragrance to the evening hour. It was a pleasant scene upon which their eyes looked, a fertile English landscape, with its rich mosaic of green and brown, its varied undulations and its peaceful homes, a scene which has countless parallels in Old England, but which never falls upon the eyes of those who call it home.

To William Ayre that scene was one of the fairest in the world. It was his own patrimony—every field, and tree, and breadth of sunny meadow, reaching to the far hills, was his, and every foot of the ground was precious in his sight. He had taken up his birthright as a sacred trust, to be held for the honour of the dead and the sake of those to come. Entering upon his heritage in such a spirit, and seeking in every word and action to be a blessing to the place and the people, it was no wonder that his name was spoken with love and reverence which knew no bounds. They did not expect him to live long. Such goodness, they said, was incompatible with long life—they said his good deeds were preparation for another life. There may have been truth in their verdict, too, yet it was certain that William Ayre had a large, sweet, sympathetic soul, a high regard for honour, and integrity, a shrinking from everything ignoble or wrong; and he was singularly free from

arrogance or pride, which is sometimes seen in those who have less to boast of. This was evidenced by his reception of his brother's love story. Although Geoffrey had expected nothing but courtesy and forbearance at his brother's hands, in this, as in every other matter upon which he had consulted him, he was secretly amazed at the heartiness of his manner. It had betrayed surprise, certainly, but neither annoyance or disgust. And his praises of Rachel Abbot had been generous enough to send the hot flush of gratitude to his young brother's face. Never, so long as he lived, would Geoffrey Ayre forget these unsolicited words of appreciation—all the more prized that they came unsought.

"Why should I not wish you well, Geoff? You are my only brother, and I have never been anything but proud of you," he said, with that gracious smile, which was like a benediction. "If I tell the truth, I am prouder of you than ever, because you have all the courage of a true and unselfish love."

Geoffrey stretched out his hand quickly, and gripped his brother's, but spoke no word. His impulsive heart was indeed full.

"And if Rachel is to be my sister, you shall tell me to-night, and I shall go to Pine Edge to-morrow," continued William Ayre. "In the meantime, I suppose I may tell Emily?"

"If you wish, Will; but don't let her prejudice you against us. I—I think she does not like Rachel. I cannot tell why."

"She thinks her proud, I believe," returned the other, musingly. "It is a curious thing, which has always interested me, how slow good women are, sometimes, to appreciate each other. But if Rachel Abbot really becomes your wife, Geoff, I hope she and my wife will be like sisters. It is rather a disappointment to me that there is so little sympathy between Emily and you."

"No doubt it is my blame," said Geoffrey quickly, touched by his brother's look and tone. "I am only a rough-and-ready fellow, Will, more used to the freedom of the camp fire and the trenches than to my lady's bower."

"Nevertheless, Emily is secretly proud of her soldier brother," said William Ayre, as he laid his hand affectionately on his brother's shoulder. "And if she seems to be less hearty than you would like about this affair, try to remember it is because she thinks there are few noble families in England who would not be proud to ally themselves with the hero of the Alma. *Au revoir*, then, and may all good luck attend you."

So William Ayre tried to prepare his brother for what he felt certain would ensue, Lady Emily's haughty displeasure over such an alliance. He was conscious of a strange feeling of sadness and despondency as he slowly retraced his steps alone towards the house. His own domestic relations were of the happiest, because he adored his wife, and his gentle disposition never clashed with her haughtier will. But he knew her to be a woman of matchless pride. She was an earl's daughter, and in marrying plain William Ayre of Studleigh, may have thought herself taking a step backward on the social ladder. It had been a love-match, however; and whatever her demeanour to others, Lady Emily was an affectionate and lovable wife. There was a slight constraint in her relations with Geoffrey. His quick, proud spirit could not brook her arrogance; he felt slights where William saw none, and when probably none was intended. It was well for the peace of Studleigh that Lieutenant Ayre's furloughs should be few and far between, and that he should not for any length of time be a member of their family circle. To the Squire this was a grief of no ordinary kind. He loved his wife, but his brother was no less dear to him. There was a touch of fatherly regard in his deep love, for Geoffrey had ever looked up to him as a wise counsellor, although there was but slight disparity in years between them. He could not understand how the two, each so lovable, could not be true and close friends. It was too delicate a theme to handle in conversation, so the Squire could only mourn over it in secret, and hope that time would mellow the relationship between his wife and his brother, and bring about a happier state of matters.