

THE CROSS OF PRIDE.

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(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER IV.

In one of the maritime counties of England, bordering on Wales, stood Ravenscliff, the ancestral home of Sir Reginald Vivyan. It was a noble pile of ancient architecture, occupying a bold and picturesque situation on the summit of a verdant acclivity which sloped gradually to meet the wooded plain below, except on one side where it descended precipitously towards the sea, whose waters—shut in by two lines of savage rocks—formed a deep bay laving its base. The mansion itself was an imposing structure suiting well its romantic locality. It was built of dark free-stone, the facade elaborately carved; the whole weather-stained, ivy-covered, and in some few places touched by the mouldering hand of time. Aged trees of picturesque form sheltered it from the wild sea-gusts which often swept up from the ocean, but could not shut out the solemn, ceaseless booming of the waves as they broke upon the shore below.

After spending the honey-moon wandering amid the sublime scenery of Switzerland and some successive months visiting a few of the principal cities of Europe, Sir Reginald Vivyan returned to his native land bringing his beautiful bride to the home of his ancestors. Sir Reginald had purposely delayed visiting Ravenscliff. He deemed it expedient to allow his plebeian wife to have the advantages of some months' residence on the Continent that her intercourse with people of fashion might make her familiar with the usages of society, and give her that air of high breeding which can only be attained by mixing in the fashionable world.

The Baronet's purpose had been attained. Lady Vivyan's already polished manners had acquired that peculiar refinement which her husband deemed indispensable. Now, but not before could he present her to his aristocratic relatives, and introduce her as the mistress of Ravenscliff.

It was a fine afternoon in the end of October when Sir Reginald and Lady Vivyan were expected home. Frost had already nipped the beauties of vegetation, and the keen blasts of autumn had thinned the leaves of the trees. Still, through their sparse foliage, on the damp ground beneath, streamed the bright sunshine, the more welcome, because of its short-lived glory, for even now the short autumnal course of the day god was nearing its close.

Along the high road from C— many eyes were directed, the tenantry having assembled to welcome Sir Reginald and his bride to his ancestral home. As the shadows began to lengthen on the green-sward, a traveling barouche was seen mounting the brow of a neighboring hill. A simultaneous shout rose from the assembled crowd, and one among them was instantly despatched to the house to tell Lady Esdaile, the Baronet's aunt, that the travelers were in sight. It was with mingled pride and pleasure that Sir Reginald Vivyan drove through the long line of tenantry waiting to receive him, and courteously returned their salutations. As their warm expressions of welcome filled the air he glanced towards Ellinor and saw by her countenance that she shared the elation of his feeling.

'In my country,' she observed, with a gay smile, 'the tenantry would be more demonstrative: they would relieve those jaded greys of their burden and draw us in triumph the rest of the way.'

'John Bull does not possess that exuberance of feeling which characterizes your wild country-men Ellinor. Here they manage things more quietly.'

The carriage had now entered the noble avenue of beech and elm leading up to the house, and as the ascent was rather trying for the tired horses, they proceeded slowly, allowing Lady Vivyan time to admire the high cultivation of the grounds, and the imposing appearance of her new home, as its antique walls peeped through the mass of foliage overshadowing them.

In the carriage with Sir Reginald and Lady Vivyan was a gentleman of foreign appearance, not young but handsome, and possessing that grave intellectual expression and distinguished air, which are often so imposing. He was a German Count whom the Baronet had met at Vienna and invited to spend the winter at Ravenscliff. As the carriage approached the house the servants were seen living the front entrance, and Ellinor's eye as it wandered over the building, detected two aristocratic faces peering from behind the drapery of a window.

'The Countess and Lady Philippa await you and Lady Vivyan in the library,' was the observation of a liveried menial to Sir Reginald, as the travelers entered the hall.

The reception which Sir Reginald's noble relatives gave his parvenue wife was studiously polite—nothing more. A bitter feeling crept into Ellinor's heart, and a haughty expression flashed from her brilliant eyes and curled her chiselled lip, as with graceful self-possession she returned these frigid attentions. At a glance both mother and daughter saw that their new relative's haughtiness equalled their own. Towards Count Altenberg the ice of their manner thawed. Lady Esdaile had known him formerly in Paris, and she and Lady Philippa were glad of this addition to their family circle.

Lady Esdaile was still a fine looking woman, though past the meridian of life. Her tall figure and stately presence suited well her noble contour of features. Pride was the characteristic of this lady; pride of rank, pride of birth and of a long line of noble ancestry, and this unchristian principle sat enthroned on her high forehead and looked out from the depths of her cold grey eye. Her daughter, Lady Philippa Lincoln, was the counterpart of herself, in character I mean, for she wanted her mother's beauty. Her features were irregular and their expression inanimate. Her only attraction was a pure English complexion. Yet she had an air of fashion, and, like her mother, that proud bearing, indicative of the character of both ladies. The interview in the library was soon terminated by the ringing of the dinner-bell, and the party retired to dress.

The suite of rooms which Lady Vivyan was to occupy was in a wing of the building commanding a view of the sea. They were spacious, and furnished with modern taste and elegance. The coup d'œil was very pleasing and Ellinor stood for some minutes expressing her admiration.

'You had better ring for your maid and attend to the business of the toilet, or you will be late for dinner,' observed Sir Reginald; 'Lady Esdaile is very precise in all the household arrangements; she is displeased when dinner is kept waiting.'

'Is Lady Esdaile to be mistress here?' asked Ellinor, with a slight elevation of her pencilled brows, expressive of surprise.

'Certainly not, what an absurd question!'

There was irritation in the Baronet's tones.

'One would suppose so from your remark; it implied as much.'

'Lady Esdaile has been mistress here since my mother's death, and has fulfilled the duties of a mother to me; I regard her as such and I wish, nay I require, that all due deference be paid to her Ladyship. Her feelings and wishes must be regarded, even her prejudices must be borne with, and, by conciliatory means if possible, overcome. By her reception I perceive that her prejudices against you are very strong. My marriage, which she deems a mis-alliance—pardon me for using the word—has deeply wounded her pride. The pride of noble birth and the prejudices of rank are not easily overcome, unless where passion holds undisputed sway. Now, I desire earnestly that you would try to win Lady Esdaile's regard, and prove to her that you were worthy of the sacrifice I made to obtain your hand.'

The entrance of Lady Vivyan's maid now gave the Baronet an excuse to leave the room, which he did very willingly, for he perceived by the expression of Ellinor's face that his strange remarks had raised a tempest in her soul. Strange words they were, indeed, for Sir Reginald to utter! With what deep power to wound did they fall upon the ear of the haughty Lady Vivyan. Her husband's return to his palace-home and his mingling again with his proud relatives, had evidently developed a latent dissatisfaction at his marriage; and caused him to experience a vain regret that she whom he had selected to be mistress of that home was not by birth suited to her elevated position.

What a dark foreshadowing of coming events gathered round the deeply wounded Ellinor. Was it surprising that, in this first moment of bitterness experienced since her marriage, should suddenly flash upon her, the remembrance of Captain Travers, and the question present itself to her mind, had she acted wisely in preferring to him one who was capable of wounding her feelings so carelessly as Sir Reginald had just done. His pointed and unkind remarks tore away the veil from her eyes and showed her a glimpse of his true character. How deficient was his nature in that generous kindness which prompts us to observe a tender consideration for the feelings of others—a virtue so essential to render the intercourse of persons pleasant!

Those cruel words! his marriage a mis-alliance—the sacrifice he had made! how could Sir Reginald utter them! how could he wound so poignantly? had he suddenly ceased to love her? It must be so! And as this conviction forced itself upon her mind, a feeling of desolation filled the heart of the young wife.

With a weary listlessness she submitted to have her maid perform the business of the toilet. Silent and unhappy she sat buried in bitter reflection, the vision of happiness in the married life—so long dwelt upon—rapidly fading away from her mental view. At last, casting her eye on the mirror, she started to see the impression the last half-hour's painful revery had left upon her features. Pride, that ruling principle of her character, came to her aid. She swept back the tide of sorrow with a strong will. A deep spirit of resentment towards her husband took the place of sadder and more tender feelings. Soon, the strange beauty of excitement effaced the traces of troubled thought, and arrayed in rich and elegant costume she never looked more beautiful.

It was some time after the ringing of the second dinner-bell when she descended to the drawing-room, for she purposely delayed making her appearance, in order to annoy both Sir Reginald and Lady Esdaile.

The Baronet observed the eye of the Countess follow with a momentary expression of admiration the queenly form of his beautiful wife, as with more than her usual stateliness she swept into the apartment. Lady Esdaile felt no little surprise that her parvenue niece should really possess not only rare beauty, but that distinguished air, which, in her exclusiveness, she supposed could only belong to the aristocracy. Sir Reginald perceived by the expression of Ellinor's haughty eye, that she was still displeased. He saw by the proud resentment it flashed upon him that the storm he had raised had not yet subsided. He blamed himself for allowing the irritation he felt at his aunt's cold reception of Ellinor to make him unkind to her, but there was no time now to endeavor to heal the wound his insulting remarks had made.

Dinner was immediately announced on the appearance of Lady Vivyan, and Sir Reginald offered his arm to Lady Esdaile. Count Altenberg led Lady Vivyan to the dining-room; and a young officer from C—, who formed one of the party, followed with Lady Philippa Lincoln.

On entering the dining-room Lady Esdaile, who was conversing earnestly with her nephew, in a moment of forgetfulness, made a movement towards the head of the table—her usual place for many years; but Sir Reginald drew her gently back, allowing Count Altenberg to lead Ellinor to that seat of honor. At this moment Lady Esdaile met Lady Vivyan's dark expressive eyes, and the look of triumph, of haughty defiance which she saw there, caused a feeling of hatred to spring up in the heart of the proud Countess.

During dinner the conversation turned upon topics of local interest which Lady Vivyan did not understand. She therefore allowed Count Altenberg to engage her in an animated discussion on the merits of two celebrated singers they had heard at Vienna. Count Altenberg possessed a cultivated mind, and brilliancy of imagination, which gave a peculiar charm to his conversation. He spoke the English language well, but with a foreign accent. His manner towards ladies possessed much of that deference which marked the chivalrous knights of the olden time.

Yet with all these attractions he had not hitherto been able to win the favor of Lady Vivyan. She had formed rather a harsh judgment of his character. She always treated him with politeness, but with a cold formality. To-night, however, her manner lost much of its iciness. In her present state of wounded feeling, with the remembrance of Sir Reginald's slighting words preying upon her mind, the respectful attentions of the noble foreigner were peculiarly gratifying. Anxious to create an effect on Sir Reginald's proud relatives, Ellinor exerted all her conversational powers, which were naturally good, and which had become really brilliant from her habits of thought and observation during her recent intercourse with the fashionable world. More than once the Countess and Lady Philippa paused to listen to her glowing remarks and the brilliant wit which occasionally flashed forth. Both Sir Reginald and Lady Vivyan noticed this, the former with gratification, the latter with pride, exulting in the thought that she would convince these narrow-minded exclusives that intellect of a high order as well as beauty and refinement, were not confined to the elite circles of fashion.

When the ladies retired to the drawing-

room Lady Philippa Lincoln, who possessed sufficient discernment to see that Lady Vivyan's haughty nature would brook no supercilious airs from her husband's relatives, courteously requested her to favor them with some music, adding that Reginald had spoken rapturously of her proficiency in that accomplishment.

Surprised at her altered manner, but having sufficient tact to receive her assumed cordiality graciously, Ellinor complied and seated herself at the harp, which was her favorite instrument. For a moment she paused to consider what she should play, then, in her excited mood selecting one of the wild, plaintive airs of her native country, she poured forth her troubled feelings in notes of touching pathos. Her voice was fine, possessing no ordinary compass, and it had been well cultivated during her residence on the Continent. Soon a volume of rich melody filled the apartment, rolling away through the halls and galleries; the clear, thrilling notes penetrating to the dining-room and compelling the listeners there to abandon the worship of Bacchus, to pour out their homage at the shrine of the fascinating singer.

On entering the drawing-room Sir Reginald advanced towards the fire-place, where Lady Esdaile, buried in a luxurious fauteuil, was watching from half-closed eyes with no tender feelings, the beautiful plebeian who had come to usurp the place she had so long graced in the home of her ancestors; for Ravenscliff had been the abode of her youth, and since her early widowhood she had resided there at the request of her brother, Sir Reginald's father.

To any bride whom her nephew might have brought to Ravenscliff the Countess would not have given a cordial welcome, but when his bride belonged to a rank so inferior to her own, was it surprising that the proud, selfish woman should experience towards her no common enmity, a feeling which Ellinor's haughty demeanor served to augment. There was, besides, another cause for Lady Esdaile's displeasure at her nephew's marriage. Her hope for many years had been to form an alliance between him and Lady Philippa. The princely fortune of the Baronet prompted this wish, the circumstances of the Countess being comparatively poor. On the death of her husband, his estate being entailed had gone to the next heir, leaving her and Lady Philippa only a limited income. From this they had suffered no inconvenience whilst they continued to reside at Ravenscliff; but now, the time seemed not far distant when this desirable residence must be given up. Such was the train of thought which occupied the mind of Lady Esdaile when Sir Reginald joined her.

'Lady Vivyan is really a charming singer,' she observed, 'How fortunate that she is one so well calculated to grace the exalted station to which you have raised her.'

'Ellinor would adorn any station in the realm,' said the Baronet proudly.

'She is certainly a beautiful creature; what a pity she is not of gentle blood! Pardon me my dear Reginald; but you know how strong my prejudices are against all mis-alliances. I did hope that the pure blood of the Vivyans would never mingle with that of a plebeian race.'

A dark expression broke over the Baronet's face.

'I have to request, Lady Esdaile, that you will not again allude to the subject of my marriage. In this matter I had a right to judge for myself.'

A pause followed this haughty remark. 'Count Altenberg admires your beautiful wife vastly,' continued Lady Esdaile, breaking a silence which both found embarrassing.

'That is not to be wondered at,' was the Baronet's cold reply.

Lady Esdaile felt piqued at her nephew's manner, and her next remark was uttered in a spirit of revenge.

'Lady Vivyan seems immensely gratified by his admiration; her attention was given exclusively to him at dinner; but that is not surprising, his manners are so fascinating.'

'There you are quite mistaken,' broke in Sir Reginald, eagerly; 'he is no favorite with Ellinor; she expressed much reluctance to his accompanying us to Ravenscliff.'

'Her Ladyship's feelings must have changed since,' said the Countess with a sneer; 'I should not like to think dissimulation formed a part of her character; but observe her for a moment. Assuredly her manner towards the Count shows no dislike. See, the pleased smile which plays over her face as he bends over the harp and speaks in his low insinuating accents.'

Sir Reginald experienced an acute pang as these invidious remarks met his ear. A