



BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

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CHAPTER I.—IN CONFIDENCE.

Towards the close of a fine, mild February day, two gentlemen were enjoying a cigar on the terrace behind the mansion house of Studleigh, the Warwickshire seat of the Ayres. Ayre was an old name in the shire—a name honoured and beloved, synonymous with integrity and highest principle. The family history of the Ayres bore a fair record of grave responsibilities wisely carried, great opportunities turned to the best account, wide-reaching influence used wholly for good. These attributes were strikingly characteristic of the Squire,

who with his soldier brother paced the terrace that sweet spring day. They were strikingly alike, although the elder wore a short, pointed beard, and the younger's face was bare, and his appearance quite boyish. But he had a fine figure and a soldierly bearing, as became a lieutenant in the 54th. He wore his uniform and it suited him rarely well. Both were tall, but the master of Studleigh, William Ayre, had a slight stoop in his shoulders, and his face wore a peculiar look of delicacy. His skin was as fair and smooth as a girl's, and on his high, white brow the blue veins were perhaps too

visible. His expression was singularly mild and gentle; there was even a womanish sweetness about his mouth. Yet the face did not lack strength; and the clear, blue eye had a direct and fearless glance, which indicated an honest, straightforward soul. The younger had all these attributes, with perhaps an added touch of fire and strength. He enjoyed splendid health, and carried suggestion of his perfect strength in every gesture. There were times when William Ayre looked at his brother with a touch of envy; he had never in his thirty years of life known what it was to be perfectly well. Such health as he possessed was carefully cherished, and with great and unremitting care his physicians assured him he might live to be an old man.

"Will, I want to tell you something."