

of a new greeting she escaped hearing Sir Randal breaking the sad news to the Squire.

"Here we are, a pair of runaways. Emily, how are you?" she said, almost hysterically. "How Willie has grown; a great fellow. I should not have known him. We have come direct from Portsmouth; only landed this morning."

"Any news of Geoffrey?" asked Lady Emily, with an apprehensive glance through the open hall door to the terrace where the gentlemen stood.

"Yes, poor Geoffrey was one of the first to fall. Let me go in here a moment, Emily. I don't want to see Mr. Ayre just yet. Randal is telling him, I see."

"Is he dead?" asked Lady Emily, quickly, her delicate colour paling slightly as she held open the drawing-room door.

Lady Vane hastily nodded, and followed her into the room.

"Shot down trying to keep the rebels from entering the city—one of the first of the heroes this awful revolt will cost us," she said, with a shudder.

"How did you get home to England so quickly? Were you at Simla, or away from Delhi before the outbreak?"

"No, we were in it. When I can calmly speak of it, I'll tell you things which will keep you awake at nights. I have never had a sound sleep since it happened. I start up thinking I see those dreadful faces and the gleam of their sabres," said Lady Vane, and her hand trembled as it rested on the golden head of the child standing by her knee. He appeared to be drinking in every word.

"Did they kill Uncle Geoff?" he asked, with wide open eyes.

"Yes, my darling."

"With what—was he shot at or cut?" he asked, with the most intense interest.

"I can't say, Willie, I was not there," she answered, and then looked up at the beautiful mother, whose still face betrayed neither poignant grief nor consuming anxiety.

"It will be a terrible blow to William, although he has been expecting it. He has repeatedly said Geoffrey would lose his life this time," Lady Emily said slowly, and there was a minute's silence.

"What kind of a heart have you, Emily Portmayne," burst at length, almost passionately from Lady Vane's lips, "that you don't even ask whether poor Mrs. Geoffrey is dead or alive?"

Lady Emily's colour rose, and her lips compressed slightly.

"It is natural that I should be more concerned for my brother-in-law and my husband," she answered, with a distinct touch of haughtiness. "Has Mrs. Geoffrey returned to England with you?"

"No, poor darling, she only reached Calcutta. We left her in the hospital, where her second child was born."

"Poor thing!"

Somehow these two words, though they were uttered with apparent sympathy, irritated the impulsive Lady Vane.

"Emily, why will you be so unjust—so abominable to that sweet woman? Hush, I will speak to you! I have known you all your life, and it is my duty to speak! Poor Geoffrey's wife is a woman whom all classes of society in Delhi loved to honour. She is fit to grace any station. I for one am not ashamed to say that she has taught me a great deal."

"She can dispense with my poor commendations then," said Lady Emily, languidly. "Forgive me, Lady Vane, but I cannot go into raptures over—my sister-in-law, although I bear her no ill will."

"She is coming back to her father with her children as soon as she is able. Promise me that you will not make her cross any heavier," said Lady Vane passionately, as she looked into the fair, calm, almost expressionless face.

"I must go to Mr. Ayre and pay my respects to Sir Randal," said Lady Emily, and opening the long window, she stepped out upon the terrace. Then Lady Vane clasped the still wondering boy in her arms, and said—

"Poor darling, what a mother!"

CHAPTER XII—HOME TO ENGLAND.

There were signs of great excitement and preparation in the old home on the edge of the pine-wood, towards the close of a fine August day. The sun was down, and the long shadows of the twilight already darkening the little lawn, but within the house there was warmth and light and good cheer of the most tempting kind. In the dining-room a great fire blazed up the wide chimney, shedding its ruddy glow over the supper-table, which was groaning with its weight of good things. There had been no such table set in Pine Edge since the daughter of the house went away. Up and down the hall, with hands nervously clasped behind his back, paced the old man, with a red spot of excitement burning in his cheeks, and a curious air of expectancy in look and manner. When the old eight-day clock on the stairs chimed the half hour after six, Mattie, the housemaid, came out of the kitchen with the silver urn in her hand.

"Please, sir, would you just give a look at the table. The carriage has turned the bend in the copse road."

In a moment the old man was in the dining-room, with his eyes fixed on the well laden table.

"There's enough for 'em to eat, my lass, if sick hearts can eat," he said, abruptly. "But there's something wanting. It's the flowers! Why, what have we all been thinking on? Get out the bowls your mistress prized so, and I'll cut roses to fill 'em. The bend of the copse road—we've five minutes to get it done. Make haste, Mattie. I want the place to look home-like for Miss Rachel to-night of all nights. We mustn't forget anything. She sets such store always by the flowers, more than by the victuals, I used to say."

Before the heavy wheels of the old family coach grated on the gravel the finishing touch of the roses had been given to the table, and the farmer was standing in the doorway shaking in every limb when the expectant travellers arrived. He took a step forward, but his hand, weak with his strong agitation, was powerless to turn the handle of the carriage door.

"Here I am, father," said Rachel's voice, quite steady and cheerful, and stepped out at the other side, and with a quick step went to him and laid her arms about his neck. Then heedless of the other occupants of the carriage, Christopher Abbot drew his daughter into the little office opening off the hall, and shut the door.

"My darling, my dear, my own poor dear child, welcome home."

Rachel rested her two hands on his shoulders and looked into his face with an expressible pathos of tenderness. "Dear, dear father, thank God that I and my bairnies have such a home to come to."

Then she kissed him again, still with that beautiful slight smile on her lips, and never a tear, and bade him come away and take his grandchildren in his arms. Christopher Abbot was sore amazed to see his daughter so calm and self-possessed, with a certain beautiful stateliness about her, too, which was new to him. Her face was that of a woman who had endured great tribulation, but it was not the face of a woman whose heart was crushed with a hopeless despair, and for that Christopher Abbot thanked God; he had greatly feared for his child, and had prayed that she might be restored to him something like the Rachel of old.

"Clement, you little rogue," he heard her sweet ringing voice say. "Grandpapa, here is a young man who has to be taught the meaning of fear. Don't you see him trying to lift old Dobbin's forefoot. Come here and salute your grandpapa, sir."

A shrill, sweet laugh, which strangely stirred the old man's heart, rang out in the still dusky air, and the little boy marched forward and gravely gave the military salute.

"Is this grandpa? Why, ma, his hair is white."

"Take him up, father. I shall feel that it is really home when I see him in your arms," the young mother said with a smile and a tear. The old man needed no second bidding, and in another moment had his grandson on his shoulder.

"Where's the other one, the little lass?" he asked, with a tremor in his voice.

"Here!"

The nurse-girl stepped from the carriage, and Rachel took the sleeping mite from her arms and held her up to her father's face.

"Kiss her, too, daddy. You'll need to be father and grandfather, too, to little Evelyn. She is called for Geoffrey's mother. I thought he would have liked it."

Christopher Abbot nodded, and then the servants came shyly to the door, eager for a word from the dear young mistress they had all loved, and who had come back to them under such sad circumstances. Rachel spoke to them all, and then presented her son, whose bold, soldierly bearing was a perpetual delight to his grandfather, after the agitation of the meeting was over. It was all so much easier and better than he had dared to hope for. Instead of the fretful, broken-hearted woman he had compassionately expected, there was only a grave, dignified, beautiful mother, who appeared to think her children worth living for. Again and again Christopher Abbot, in his inmost heart, thanked God that grace and strength had been given Rachel to bear her cross. At the table once little Clement suddenly looked round piteously, as if a sense of loss had visited him anew, and said with quivering lip:

"Oh, ma, will daddy come soon?"

Then Rachel trembled all over, and her very lips whitened. But she stretched out her fair hand, and laying it on the sunny head, gently quieted the boy with that gentle touch.

"It is so hard, father, when Clement misses his father like that," she said with a quivering smile, which sent the unaccustomed tears into the old man's eyes.

Rachel was greatly touched when she went upstairs to put the children to bed to find that her own old nursery had been aired and brightened up with many little thoughtful touches in anticipation of its new occupants. She sat by her little boy till he fell asleep, tired out with his great questioning about the chickens and the calves and the ponies he would see on the morrow. Then she went down stairs, nerving herself for what she had to do. She had decided that it was her duty to tell her father all the fearful story of their escape, and then let it be buried forever.

She found him sitting in his own big chair by the dining-room hearth waiting for her.

"It is something like the old times, father," she said, gently. "But to-morrow those lively babies will convince us that the old times will never come any more."

She smoothed the white hair back from the rugged brow as she passed by the chair, and said, with a tender smile:

"Poor old father, it has been very hard for you, too, and now to have your evening rest broken in upon by two babies; but we had no hesitation in coming home at all."

"Why should you, my lamb? Where would my little girl come to in her sorrow except to her old father?"

"Nowhere else in the world, surely," Rachel answered, and, taking her old chair on the opposite side of the hearth, sat down for a time in silence.

"There is a story to tell, father, before we begin our life," she said at length; "and I will begin at the very beginning. Did you think there was anything in my letters through the winter to make you anxious? I always tried to write cheerfully, but we were all living in such uncertainty and dread that perhaps I did not succeed very well."

"I knew there was something. The squire and I used to compare notes, but I think the Captain spoke out quite frankly to his brother about the state of affairs."

"He did. He told him everything. Two brothers were never more to each other than Geoffrey and the Squire. I will go up to Studleigh in the morning, father, to see him, for I know he is not able to come and see me."

"I hope, Rachel, you may not be too late. He was very low this morning, and I know they are only waiting on the end."

Rachel sighed.

"How hard life is, daddy. It has seemed so very hard of late," she said, a trifle wearily. "There is so much to bear when one grows up."