

ness, Rachel was most particular about the manners of the children, and had taught Clement to be courteous and attentive to herself and his sister. Wild and rollicking as he was in his play, Clement was a perfect gentleman in his manners. Rachel Ayre's face had not aged much during the last ten years, but her hair was quite grey, though still lovely and abundant. Sometimes the imaginative and sensitive lad from Studleigh looked at her in wonder, thinking of the terrible sorrows which had given to her in youth one of the first attributes of age. But the grey hair was not unbecoming; nay, it seemed to give a sweeter and more gracious dignity to her face.

Never had Will seemed more reluctant to leave the farm. He lingered about after tea was over, until the servants began to come in from the fields. Then his aunt gently reminded him that he must go.

"It is so dull at Studleigh, Aunt Rachel. I wish mamma and I lived at a farm," said the lad wistfully. "Do say you will let Clem go back to Eton with me."

"I'll think about it, dear boy. It is a great comfort to me that you and Clem are such friends. I hope this young friendship will grow stronger as the years go on."

"Oh, I am sure it will. Clem is such a splendid fellow. Why, he'd be a king at Eton. He's just the sort of chap to be that. You've no idea of it, auntie, and I'd be so proud of him."

"God bless you! You have all your father's unselfishness, Willie," returned his aunt, with eyes full of tears.

"I wish papa had lived. It would have all been so different, auntie. Mamma is so quiet and sad; she does not like me to make a noise, or even to speak much. I have been very good this recess, or I should have been sent to Grandmamma Portmayne's, as I was at Christmas. That was awful."

The boy's outspoken confidence touched Rachel as it had never done before. She understood it all so well. The young, bright, unselfish spirit they were trying to curb and to shape to their narrow creed was beginning to chafe at the restraint, and to long for all that makes early youth the sweetest possession on earth. Out of her boundless pity and love for him, she had lavished upon him more tokens of affection than she had given to her own children, because she knew he needed them more—not knowing that in thus binding the boy's heart to herself she was committing a sin in the eyes of Lady Emily, for which she would never be forgiven.

Clement and Evelyn walked, as they had so often done, half-across the park with their cousin. They knew, in a vague kind of fashion, that the haughty lady of the manor did not regard them with a friendly eye. Clem was profoundly indifferent to her, but Evelyn watched her on Sundays with great awe as she swept round the stately manor pew, admiring her beauty—as all must who looked upon it—but yet feeling in a dim childish way that something marred it—a something which made it an unspeakable comfort to look up into her own mother's serene face, and slip her hand in hers under the desk. Children are quick to discern, and their judgments are seldom at fault.

They talked so eagerly as they walked that they did not notice how near they had come to the house, until the deep, solemn boom of the gong warned them.

"That's the dressing bell; I'll need to hurry up," said Will, quickly. "Good-night, dear; good-night, Evy. Saturday afternoon then, at the Pool. I'll bring two rods, Clem, and Evy can get yours."

He stooped down and kissed Evelyn, as he had often done; then the brother and sister turned away.

From the window of her dressing-room Lady Emily saw that parting, and bit her lip. Rosanna, who was attending to her toilet, wondered what caused this angry flush to overspread the cheek of her mistress, apparently without a cause. The last two holiday times Will had been required to dine at seven o'clock with his mother, and he found the dressing and all the formality of that elaborate meal very irksome. He never demurred, however; Lady Emily had no fault to find with her son's be-

haviour, which was exemplary in every particular. Had she absolutely forbidden him to visit the farm, however much it had hurt him, she would have been obeyed. He made such haste with his dressing that he was in the drawing-room before her, and when she entered she thought how handsome he looked in his evening dress, the velvet jacket setting forth the fairness of his face. It was too fair, more like a girl's fragile loveliness than the sturdy beauty of a growing boy.

"You have lost no time, Will," she said, greeting him with a smile, for in her heart she loved him with a surpassing love. "I am sure it is not fifteen minutes since I saw you cross the park."

"No, I stayed too long. I am glad I have not kept you waiting, mamma," he said, courteously, and offered his arm to lead her to the dining-room.

Dinner at Studleigh was always a quiet and rather tedious meal, to Will at least. It was as ceremonious in every particular of service as if the long table were filled with guests; and it was always a relief to him when his mother rose.

"Come with me to the drawing-room, dear, I want to talk with you," she said, as he held open the door for her. "I don't suppose you want to sit here. Just come now."

He followed the graceful figure across the hall, thinking that the glistening black draperies seemed to add to her greater dignity and height. Will Ayre had a passionate admiration for his mother's beauty; he loved her, too, and would have poured the treasures of his boyish adoration at her feet, had she allowed it. But the same distant coldness of mien which had been wont to chill the husband now chilled the son.

"Come and sit down here, Will, opposite to me. I want to talk to you. You have been at the farm all afternoon. I saw your cousins walk over with you."

"Yes, mamma," answered the boy, eagerly, encouraged by the kindness of her voice. "Mayn't I have Clem and Evy over to spend a day here? They've been so awfully good to me; you've no idea."

"If your fondness for the place is any evidence, I don't need to be told of their goodness," she said, drily. "If you are bent on having them over, I am quite willing; but I think it right to tell you that I do not wish to continue this close intimacy at Pine Edge."

"Why not, mamma? They are my cousins, and I like them so much."

"It did not matter very much when you were quite children, Will," said his mother, calmly. "But as you grow up it must be something different. It will not be good for you nor them that you should be so intimate, because, of course, they are not your equals."

"Why, mamma, Uncle Geoff was papa's own brother."

"Yes; but his wife was only a farmer's daughter, Will; and if you associate too much with your cousin Clement, you will unfit him for the station he must fill. He must soon be working for his bread."

"Why, mother, he is going to be a soldier," cried Will. "I am quite sure Aunt Rachel has really made up her mind to send him to Eton, and, of course, he will go to Sandhurst after, and I'm sure he'll be a general in no time, he's such a splendid fellow."

Lady Emily's passionate colour rose—"Eton and Sandhurst!"

"Eton and Sandhurst."

"I thought your aunt had common sense, Will, whatever else she lacked," she said, with the haste of anger. "I see I have been mistaken."

"Mamma, I wish you would explain things to me," said the boy. "Is Aunt Rachel not a lady that you cannot ask her here, nor go to see her? I think she is nearly as lovely as you."

A slight bitter smile touched the proud mother's lips.

"Thank you for your compliment, dear. I am honoured by it. I will try to explain this to you, for I do not wish you to think me hard or unjust. It was a great mistake for your Uncle Geoffrey to marry beneath him as he did, though, of course, he

was too honourable a man to draw back. It was perhaps just as well that he died when he did."

"Mamma, didn't papa like Aunt Rachel? I think he must have been very kind to her, she talks of him so beautifully."

"Your father, dear, was too good for this world, and your Uncle Geoffrey could make him do anything. He *was* kind to her, and I am glad she is so grateful for it. Do you understand, Will, that it will please me very much if you are a little more reserved to your cousins, and do not go so frequently to the farm? There need be no open rupture; you can leave off gradually so as not to hurt their feelings. Believe me, when I say it will be much better for you and for them—but especially for them—that the parting should be made now. You think it hard, dear. I have long wished to speak of this, but waited until you were old enough to understand me. Some day you will know your mother was wise for you, though you do not see it now."

The boy looked troubled; nay, there was a positive pain in his eyes. A hundred questions and expostulations were on his lips, but he restrained them. He felt that his mother's decision being made, it was useless for him to protest. But, for the first time in his young life, a hot and bitter rebellion filled his soul.

CHAPTER XVI.—MR. GILLOT'S ERRAND.

Meanwhile the other mother and son were earnest in conversation at the farm. When Clement and his sister returned from escorting their cousin across the fields, the boy went straight to the dining-room to his mother, with a question on his lips. For the first time it had struck the happy-hearted Clement that there was something very odd and one-sided in their relationship with Will. And, as was natural to him, the thought must be spoken out at once. Candour was an essential part of Clement's character.

"Mother, why does Will come so much here, and never—never ask us to go to Studleigh? I never thought of it till now, but I think it's horrid mean when he has so many jolly things up there."

Rachel laid down her sewing and turned her large, calm eyes on her son's bright face. Of late she had had many questionings to answer, but this was a delicate ground which she had always avoided, though knowing very well it must be cleared some day. There were times when Rachel almost longed to keep her darling bairns about her knee, so that she could still their wonderings and imaginings with a kiss. But that could not be.

"I wonder, Clement, whether you are old enough to understand what I am about to say," she replied, "or if it will be wise for me to tell you just how it is."

Clement looked surprised.

"Why, yes, mother; am I awfully stupid? I always know what you mean."

"Well, dear, I must go back a little. When your father married me I was only a farmer's daughter, and Lady Emily, your Uncle William's wife, being the daughter of Lord Portmayne, did not think I was fit to be received as her equal. I cannot explain to you why, my boy. As you grow older you will learn to understand these things. They cannot be explained. I know very well, Clement, that Lady Emily does not approve of Will coming so often here, but so long as he does come, we must be kind to him—must we not, dear?"

"Of course. Will's an awfully good fellow; and I'll tell you what, mother, I'm no end sorry for him, though he is the Squire of Studleigh; for his mother isn't so jolly as ours." Clement spoke in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice; but that unstudied and loving tribute sent a thrill to the mother's heart, and she smiled; but presently her face grew graver again.

"As you grow older Clem, I fancy it will be more difficult to know just how to act towards Will and his mother."

"But mother, do you mean to say Aunt Emily thinks she is better than *you*?"

Honest and fiery indignation sat supreme on Clement's flushed face.

"In a sense, yes. As I said before, you will understand these distinctions only when you grow up and go into the world."