

fast breaking down ; in a word, that the old order changeth."

"It is a pity and a shame, I think. I cannot bear this levelling tendency. It threatens so much that we have been taught to cherish," said Lady Emily, with a passionate bitterness which amazed her friend.

"It depends on the view one takes," she said, good humouredly. "You must get into discussion with the Marquis. He will astonish you. But to return to Stonecroft. I thought one of the greatest inducements I could offer in my invitation was our proximity to your friends. Have I made a mistake?"

"Yes."

"I am very sorry for that. Your face tells me more than your brief monosyllable. But you must be quite frank with me, Emily. It will prevent unpleasantness while you are here. Have you and Mrs. Geoffrey quarrelled?"

Lady Emily's lips curled slightly.

"You do not know me very well, when you ask such a question. I never quarrel. We have only met three times since Mr. Ayre's death. I have disapproved of the marriage from the first, and never countenanced her afterwards. We have had no quarrel, Adela, but we do not meet."

Lady Winterdyne sat silent for a little. She was grievously disappointed in the friend of her youth.

"Did you take this course simply because you thought Captain Ayre was marrying beneath him?"

"Yes ; I did not think her a desirable wife for him in any respect."

"You had met ; you knew something of her before, then?"

Yes, as much as I might know of any of my husband's people."

"I am very much surprised, Emily ; I cannot understand it."

"It does not touch you so nearly, Adela. You, who have never been so tried, must not blame me."

"I am quite disappointed, and I confess I do not know what to do. You would not refuse to meet Mrs. Geoffrey, I hope, because I have asked her to come while you are here?"

"I shall not forget what is due to you, Adela, as my hostess, even if you were not my friend," Lady Emily replied, quietly.

"Fortunately I have only definitely invited them for Sybil's fête. I must just leave the rest alone. I dare say Mrs. Ayre will understand. I remember now that she said nothing at all when I spoke of your meeting here."

"Has she never complained of me to you?"

"Never. I think you are under some grave misapprehension regarding Mrs. Geoffrey. I cannot believe that you know her at all. How delightful if Winterdyne should be the birthplace of new and sweeter relations between Studleigh and Stonecroft."

Lady Emily shook her head.

"Is my nephew really as fine a fellow as they say? I have not seen him since he was a school-boy. And Will is too absurdly enthusiastic over the whole family."

"He is a fine fellow, a little outspoken and independent perhaps, but he has a right to be, and his tender devotion to his mother is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen."

"Are you not afraid, Adela, to encourage so much intimacy between them and your own young people? Is it wise?"

"I leave these things to right themselves. Emily. I am not one of the worldly-wise. I want my children, above all things, to be happy, and their father agrees in my way of thinking. Well, shall we go down. I fancy I hear Sybil singing."

"Is she musical?"

"Moderately so. Her voice is sweet and tuneful. Evelyn Ayre sings most exquisitely, and when her mother plays her accompaniment, I assure you it is a musical treat of no ordinary kind. Then her entire absence of consciousness, or straining after effect, adds to its charm."

"I am afraid that after all the gifts and graces of my relatives at Stonecroft, you will find us rather tame, Adela," Lady Emily said with a faint, ironical smile, which slightly annoyed her hostess, and

she led the way from the drawing-room without a word.

The music-room was downstairs, adjoining the library, and was a large, lofty room, with an exquisitely painted roof, and quaint niches in the panelling on the walls, which held statues of the great composers. The instruments were of the finest, Lord Winterdyne himself being an accomplished musician. It pleased Lady Emily well to see Will close by Sybil at the piano, evidently deeply interested in the fair musician. She thought, in the pride of her heart, what a goodly pair they made ; and a passionate desire, which was almost a prayer, took possession of her, and for a moment she was oblivious of the other occupants of the room.

"This is my boy, Norman," Lady Adela said, and a lank, rather sallow-faced lad, in an Eton suit, came forward and made a bow, then Lord Raybourne sprang up from the lounge and the evening paper to give the ladies a seat. The heir of Winterdyne was rather a common-place youth, with a square, manly figure, and a good-natured, though by no means handsome face. There was something very pleasant about him, however—a simple straightforwardness and sincerity which at once made him a favourite.

"My son seems very much at home," Lady Emily said, and her hostess marvelled to see the softening of her proud face into tenderness as her deep eyes rested on the young pair. "Will you not sing something else specially for me, Sybil? I may call you Sybil, I suppose, since I am so old a friend of your dear mother."

"Oh, certainly. But Mr. Ayre has promised to sing, and we were looking for something to suit him. Perhaps he is accustomed to your accompaniments, Lady Ayre. Let me resign my seat."

"Oh, no. I should like to hear you play. If you will be so kind, I am sure Will will sing all the better," Lady Emily said, and Sybil laughed at the lank compliment.

"Very well. Come then, Mr. Ayre, and you mustn't knit your brows as papa does when I make mistakes."

Will sang well. His voice, a sweet, clear tenor, rang through the room, and made Lord Winterdyne rise from his desk in the library and set the door wide open, in order that not a note might be lost.

So with music, and song, and happy talk, the pleasant evening wore away ; and when Lady Emily retired to her dressing-room she sat long over the fire brooding on past memories and disappointments, from which, however, her brilliant dreams for the future took the sting.

CHAPTER XXII—HOPES AND FEARS.

"What shall we do to-day?" Sybil asked at the breakfast-table next morning.

"Drive to Stonecroft," responded Raybourne, with a promptitude which brought a curious twinkle in his sister's bright eye, but under her brother's steady gaze she dropped them quickly, and a faint colour rose in her face. Then Raybourne smiled a satisfied smile and looked towards his mother.

"I should like to drive Will and Sybil in the dogcart, if you would take Lady Emily in the phaeton."

"We shall not go out this morning, Harry, dear," his mother answered quickly. "After her long drive yesterday Lady Ayre wants a rest. Will you come back to luncheon?"

"It depends ; don't bind us, mother. I have such a lot to say to Clem."

"Plotting against the nation's peace," laughed his mother, but she was secretly at a loss what to do. She felt the desire to offer an unstudied and generous hospitality to the family of Stonecroft, but she was in duty bound to consider her guest. She was quick to note the eagerness with which young Will acceded to Raybourne's proposition, and concluded that he was very far indeed from sharing his mother's dislike of his kindred. She felt slightly vexed with Lady Emily, and yet in a sense sorry for her. It was perfectly evident that she was a woman who had tasted but little of the brightness of life ; it made it none the less pathetic that it was

in a great measure entirely her own fault, and that she wilfully passed by the good she might from day to day enjoy. Lady Winterdyne's philosophy, to make the best of everything as it came, and extract as much sunshine as possible even from gloomy days, was of a kind unfathomable to her old friend. It was the bright, happy woman's desire, already confided to her husband, to try and convince Lady Emily of her mistake, and to induce her to take a larger, sweeter, more generous view of life.

Winterdyne, looking on, watched the experiment with admiring interest. Warned by his wife, he was careful to make no allusion to Stonecroft ; but it was impossible to keep young mouths silent, even if it had been advisable, and Lady Adela foresaw that twenty times in every day her guest would be compelled to listen to praise of the kindred she abhorred. It was part of her punishment, which Lady Adela may be forgiven for thinking was not quite undeserved.

It was a very happy party which set out for the drive across country an hour later. The young Squire was already "Will" to Raybourne and his sister, and if Lady Emily had been better versed in the ways of young people, she would not altogether have approved the frank, confident, sisterly demeanour of Sybil towards her son. It showed clearly that she was very much disposed to regard him in a sisterly light which is death to any nearer tie.

She looked very dainty and sweet, in her tailor gown and felt hat, with the fresh, keen wind blowing the little ringlets about her bright face, and when Lady Emily saw Will tucking the rugs about her with the greatest possible care, and the radiant smile with which she thanked him, her heart swelled with the proudest hope which had yet visited it. Oh, that fair creature would make a royal mistress of Studleigh, and the lustre of her own rank would sustain the prestige which Lady Emily imagined her title had added to the honour of the Ayres. She did not know how they said in Ayreleigh that luck had departed from Studleigh since the very day its first titled mistress entered it.

"They are a merry party. Just listen to Harry's stentorian laugh. What a great strong fellow he is. He will deal destruction to the enemy who is unfortunate enough to encounter his strong arm," said Lady Adela, as a high-stepping mare carried the dogcart splendidly down the avenue.

"Yes, you have fine children, Adela. You may thank Heaven you have more than one," said her friend, with a return of that bitterness she had exhibited on the previous night.

"Why? Your ewe lamb may be worth my trio," said Lady Adela, with her happy laugh. "I do think, Emily, you fret yourself needlessly over trifles, and leave all the good of life untouched. Why, at your age, and in your circumstances, you ought to be enjoying life to the full! If all Winterdyne tells me about your husband is true, dear, I cannot but think it would grieve him that you should be so melancholy ; and another thing—I am going to speak quite plainly to you—it is not just or kind to your boy. You have saddened his early manhood. I see how anxiously he looks at you always—have you never noticed it yourself?"

"He cannot say but that I have devoted myself to him," cried Lady Emily, almost fiercely. "I have sacrificed my whole life to him—no mother could do more."

"No. Your devotion has been very perfect, but I think he has felt it weigh upon him. He does not wish you to sacrifice yourself. He would be far happier if he saw you happier and enjoying life. You must stir yourself up for his sake, and give him more latitude in every way. We cannot curb youth too much, Emily, or it becomes a narrow, stunted existence, barren of usefulness or happiness. Leave your boy alone. Let him choose his friends, let him love his cousins if he chooses, and I repeat it they are worthy of his love. I could not bear to see how he looked at you this morning when Harry spoke of Stonecroft."

"You are not afraid to speak, Adela," said her guest, with a strange smile.

"No, why should I be? We are not acquaintances of yesterday. We are in a sense women of the world, Emily, and the world's wisdom, to keep