

They were at home with each other so far that there was no ceremony observed. They had known each other since babyhood, and yet Lucy Vane looked at her cousin sometimes, and asked herself if she had ever reached the real woman. She was undoubtedly handsome, tall, and striking-looking, with an eagle eye and a haughty, determined mouth—a woman born to rule rather by fear than love. Lucy Vane, on the contrary, was a slight, fair woman, looking ridiculously young—she was almost of an age with her cousin. Her face was pleasant and sunshiny, with a certain archness of expression which made it peculiarly winning. She was a shrewd woman, too, and one who could hold her own; too candid and outspoken at times to please Lady Portmayne, of whom she did not in the least stand in awe.

"Well, I think that is all. Emily will be here soon," said Lady Portmayne, as she sealed her last note and laid down her pen. "I am glad you will have a chance of seeing her and the boy. He is a dear child, Lucy."

"I am sure of it," said Lucy Vane, quickly. "But for one reason I would rather she had not been coming. I think you have been positively cruel to that brave young soldier, Julia."

The Countess shrugged her shoulders.

"Cruel but to be kind. It is perfectly incomprehensible that William Ayre should have allowed a thing to go so disgracefully far."

"But, my dear Julia, you forget Captain Ayre is not a child, and that his brother could not control him even if he had the wish."

Lady Portmayne quite impatiently shook her head.

"My dear Lucy, why so obtuse? There are a thousand ways of forbidding besides actually laying down a command, which as a rule, especially with headstrong young gentlemen, defeats its own end. I flatter myself I could have managed our young Lieutenant."

There was a suspicious moisture in Lady Vane's bright blue eyes as she listened to this assurance.

"You will be perfectly horrified at us, of course, Julia," she said with a twinkle. "But Randal and I have written to Mr. Ayre inviting ourselves to the wedding, and I have also written specially to the bride, promising her my companionship, and what care I can give, being always so sick, on board the *Salamis*. So we must leave," she added, with a distinct note of triumph in her sweet voice, "at least a day sooner than we intended."

Lady Portmayne looked distinctly annoyed.

"And may I ask, Lucy, what such an extraordinary proceeding signifies? You have gone out of your way to do this, knowing my views upon it. It looks like a direct slight."

"If you choose to look at it in that light, of course you may," returned Lady Vane, with the utmost serenity. "You know that we have never agreed on certain questions, and never will. But I intend to tell Emily quite plainly what I think of her treatment of her dear husband's only brother. I will be frank with you, Julia. Randal called it inhuman, and I am sure the word was not a bit too strong."

"Your husband, of course, may be expected to take their side," retorted Lady Portmayne, with slighting significance, "and I hope you will say nothing to Emily. Pardon me for reminding you that this is a purely family matter, with which you have nothing to do."

"I won't make any promises," answered Lady Vane, quite good-humouredly. "You know I am given to plain speaking, and I really do think that you have not been courteous to Mr. Ayre. I leave Emily out of it altogether. She has not done her duty, and she will regret it, and so will you, for giving her such bad advice. Of course, I have not seen Miss Abbot, but I am very sure, knowing what I know of Geoffrey Ayre, that she will be all we could desire. In any case I intend to be kind to her, for Heaven only knows what may be in store for her as well as for us all in India during the next year."

Lady Portmayne pursed up her haughty lips and remained silent. There was nothing to be made of arguing with her remarkably candid and far-seeing cousin. So the matter was allowed to drop, and when Lady Emily arrived was studiously kept in the background. But the Vanes felt that by so freely expressing their sympathy with the young pair they had given grave offence at Portmayne, offence which would not be easily forgotten or forgiven. The atmosphere during the closing days of their visit was frigid, and they were glad to hasten their departure.

"We are going straight on to Studleigh, Emily," Lucy Vane said, as they rose from lunch to prepare for their journey. "William has very kindly asked us to remain the

night with him. I suppose we may take your kind permission as granted?"

"You are always welcome at Studleigh, Aunt Lucy," Lady Emily answered, somewhat formally, although she used the name by which Lady Vane was sometimes called in the Portmayne circle. Lady Vane looked into the lovely face searchingly, and suddenly laid her hand on her shoulder entreatingly. By this time they were alone in the room.

"Emily, do you think better of it, and come with us. Think of Mr. Ayre before anything else. It is your duty, as it ought to be your greatest happiness. You may regret it, dear, all your life."

A curious look passed over the impassive face, but whether it indicated relenting, her aunt never knew, for just then Lady Portmayne swooped down upon them, and the opportunity was lost. That lady took care that there should be no further opportunity for private talk between Lady Vane and Squire Ayre's wife.

Although it was evening when the Vanes arrived at Studleigh Station they were met by the Squire himself. The expression of his face, as he bade them welcome, indicated how greatly he appreciated their true act of friendship.

"But where's the bridegroom?" asked Lady Vane, gaily. "It was the very least he could do to come and meet us. I must talk seriously to him. He does not know how he has braved the wrath of the queen of Delhi society."

"Oh, Lucy, hold your peace," quoth Sir Randal, though looking with admiration at his wife's radiant face. She was in her element. To do a really kind action was a rare pleasure to her, and one which she seldom missed.

"Oh, Geoffrey is at the farm. I promised we should drive that way. You would like to see Miss Abbot before to-morrow."

"Oh, of course, I should. I intended to take our gift to her myself this evening. Are you satisfied with your future sister, Mr. Ayre?"

"Entirely so. She is a noble and good woman. I think Geoffrey has been most fortunate."

"I am glad of it. I felt sure of it. She will be quite an acquisition to us in Delhi."

It was quite dark when they drove up the steep ascent to the farm. The roll of the carriage wheels brought the inmates of the house to the door, and Captain Ayre was the first to assist Lady Vane to alight; but just behind stood the old man, erect and dignified looking, with a pleased light on his face. It gratified him beyond measure to see that Lady Emily stood almost alone in her bitter opposition to the marriage which was to take place on the morrow.

"How do you do, Captain Ayre? We have torn ourselves from the bosom of our family to come to you in your extremity," said Lady Vane, with a twinkle in her bright eyes. "I hope you are properly grateful. Is this Mr. Abbot? What a splendid old man." She lowered her voice so that the farmer did not hear her; but, seeing that she was looking directly at him, he came forward and took off his hat.

"Proud to see you, my lady, at Pine Edge," he said heartily, and with that fine courtesy which had nothing servile in it. "My daughter is very proud to see so many of the Captain's friends wishing to be kind; very proud but a little broken down, too, by it all," he added, softly, "bein' only a woman, an' so young."

Lady Vane shook hands very heartily with the old man, and in a few graceful words expressed her pleasure at meeting him. Then she went into the house, and within the dining-room door saw standing, a tall, slight figure with a beautiful, grave, earnest face, and a pair of shining gray eyes, which were full of feeling.

"Is this the future Mrs. Geoffrey? My dear, let me kiss you. You are lovely, and I know I shall love you. I had no idea you would be like this."

The noble simplicity of the country maiden won Lady Vane's heart at once and completely, and they parted that night like old friends. There was a great deal of gentle banter of the young pair, as well as much serious talk about the life they were about to enter; and Rachel, looking into the true face of Lady Vane, felt that she had made one friend who would stand by her across the seas.

The one who suffered most, who could see but little brightness in this happy bridal, said least about it, and that was the old man about to be left desolate at the farm. On the last night Rachel slept soundly, but Christopher Abbot paced the floor till morning, and more than once stole softly to his daughter's room, as if he grudged the hours spent in sleep, when to-morrow she would be gone. But he

showed a brave front. He had his little joke ready when Rachel sent away her breakfast untouched; but she was not quite deceived. She saw a certain haggardness in his face, a wistful, pathetic gleam in his clear eye, a nervousness of manner which betrayed something of the inner pain. When she came downstairs dressed in her wedding-gown, and saw her kind old father waiting for her in the hall, it came upon her suddenly, how awful the desolation at Pine Edge that night, when he should return to the old house alone.

"Are you ready, my lass? Oh, what bravery. I hardly can call so splendid a lady my lass. Hush, hush; no tears or shaking."

"Father—father—forgive my selfishness! I ought not to go, I ought not to go!" she cried. "I will stay even yet, if you bid me."

"Nay, nay, we must go; your bonnie bridegroom is waiting for you," he said, a trifle huskily. "I only want to say, lass, that you have been the best of daughters to me, and if it should please God that this be our last parting, you may know that when I die it will be blessing you with my last breath. And if we should be spared to meet again, and if my old eyes should look on a grandchild in Pine Edge, why, then, I'll bless the Lord for His goodness. But wherever you may go, my lass, or whatever your fortune, this is your home while I am in it. Come, come; fie, no tears, or the Captain will be drawing his grand sword to me at the very altar steps!"

So they drove away; and as they entered the church porch arm-in-arm, the assembled villagers did not know which to admire most—the beautiful bride, or the stately, handsome old gentleman, beaming on his neighbours with his own happy smile.

"Abbot 'o Pine Edge deserves his luck," they said one to the other. "An' she's fit for the Captain, very fit; an' a finer lady than her ladyship's own self, with all her pride!"

It was a brilliant assemblage and a brilliant wedding in the old church that sweet spring morning—a wedding that was long talked of by all who witnessed it. There was something in the romantic and touching circumstances which appealed to every heart, and many an eye was wet—many a lip trembled as the beautiful service went on.

Even the Lady Emily was but slightly missed, and the bridal lacked nothing though the august effulgence of the Portmayne was withdrawn. The provincial paper containing the elaborate accounts duly found its way to Portmayne Castle; and when Lady Emily glanced over the list of guests, and saw there the names of the most exclusive in the County, a boundless surprise took possession of her.

But as behoved her in the circumstances, she made no comment.

CHAPTER VI.—DARK FOREBODINGS.

On the shaded verandah of a bungalow in the European part of the city of Delhi, two English ladies were sitting at their sewing towards the end of a sultry evening in May. In the pleasant garden below, a native nurse-bearer, with his dusky head enveloped in a brilliant turban, was leading by the hand a little child just beginning to toddle uncertainly alone. He was an English child, with a fair, pure skin, large grey eyes, and brown curls clustering on his brow; a lovely boy of whom any parent might have been justly proud.

He chatted incessantly to his nurse, his sweet, shrill tones ringing out clearly in the heavy air, mingling with the tender cadences of the nurse-bearer's voice. His dark face, bent upon the fair boy by his side, was transfigured by its devoted love. Only those who have been resident in India, and have proved the patience, the gentleness, the absolute fidelity and endurance of these native bearers, can understand the relations between an English mother and her Indian servants.

It had been a day of heat almost too intense to be borne. The woodwork of the bungalows was blistered and split in some places where the sun beat most fiercely upon it, while within, the furniture was burning to the touch, the very linen in the drawers smelt as if it had but been newly removed from a fire. That hour was the least trying of the day, it was the first time the ladies had ventured out of the darkened recesses of the house. All Nature seemed to be sickened of the sun; the birds, with drooping wings and gaping bills, suffered intensely from the hot wind which experienced residents knew preceded a visit of the dread tornado.

The prospect spreading out before the cantonment was not without its picturesque effects. The glittering dome of the Jumna Masjid, the great mosque which is one of the glories of the ancient city, the imposing battlements of the