



"As she watched it from the dining-room window."

THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

BY ANNIE S. SWAN.

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CHAPTER XV.—COUSINS.

It was a pretty picture. Mrs. Geoffrey thought so as she watched it from the dining-room window at the farm. Right in the middle of the thick pines the old swing, which Rachel herself had loved in her baby days, held two occupants—a tall, slim, fair-haired boy, with a refined, delicate face, and a bonnie, red-cheeked, plump little girl, with hair and eyes as dark as sloes. They were standing together on the wooden seat of the swing, with arms intertwined, holding on as best they might to the rope on either side. The colour was ruddy in the lad's fair face, and Evelyn's dark locks tossed in the wind, and she gave a shriek of delight when Clement, with a stronger shove than usual, sent them up nearly to the topmost bough.

"Another! Clem, it's lovely," cried Evelyn, in her sweet shrill voice. "Isn't it splendid, Will?"

"That's ten turns; two more, and we'll let the cat die," said Clem, in his matter-of-fact way. "Don't you think a pair of you are rather heavy on a fellow's arms?"

"Yes, it's a shame, let's die now, Evy, and then we'll give Clem one."

"Oh, no, thanks. I can send myself up to that high branch. It's rather slow fun any way; and it must be nearly tea time."

Mrs. Geoffrey watched the happy group for a few moments with a curiously tender smile on her

face. But it grew graver again, and she presently went out of doors and sauntered across the lawn to the swing.

"Here's mother. Want a swing, mother? It's no end jolly. I've been pushing these two great lazy things ever so long," cried Clem. "Isn't it near tea time?"

"Not for half-an-hour. I came to tell you, Will, that I saw your mother driving up the copse road; will she not be looking for you soon?"

"Oh, I don't think so, Aunt Rachel. She never expects me in the drawing-room to tea, and it's hours till dinner," returned the lad. "Mayn't I stay to tea here? It's so jolly."

"Clem and Evy think it is jolly to have you I don't doubt," returned his aunt, with a smile. "But—"

"You don't mind, auntie?" asked the lad, hastily. "You're always so kind."

"I love you, Will," she answered, in a curious, still voice, and laid her hand a moment on his tall shoulder.

His grey eyes met that tender, motherly gaze with a passionate light in them. It is no exaggeration to say that the young Squire of Studleigh loved his aunt with a most reverent devotion, and she was worthy of it. She looked so gracious, so calm, so sweet, as she stood by his side in her soft, black gown, looking at him with that unspeakable tender-

ness to which he was a stranger at home. The Portmayne creed taught that any exhibition of passion or emotion was undignified, and perfectly unnecessary in all relations of life. It did not forbid affection, only required that it should never be paraded, either in public or private. The hungry heart of William Ayre's boy had gone out most passionately towards the kindred at Pine Edge, whom his mother despised. He was beginning vaguely to understand some things. He knew that the visits to the farm, the brightest spots in his own existence, did not give pleasure to his mother, though she had not as yet forbidden him. He had never yet dared to ask why there was such a gulf fixed between the manor and the farm, nor why neither aunt nor cousins were ever on any pretence invited to Studleigh. He pondered these things constantly in his heart, and had often been on the point of questioning his mother, but she never gave him the slightest encouragement to speak of his relatives, and he knew, by the hardening of her face and the prouder pressure of her lips, when they were mentioned, that the subject was not pleasant to her. He puzzled himself often and sorely over the matter. He could not understand any human being bearing a grudge against the sweet, loving, gracious woman who had been his Uncle Geoffrey's wife. Uncle Geoffrey was Will's hero, and Clem and he were united in one common bond of adoration for his memory. Often the two lads talked over that far-off exciting time which even to this day thrills the heart of those who read it. Rachel herself told the boy, as soon as he was able to understand it, the story of his brave father's life and death. And the bright youthful imagination had filled in the picture, and there were times when his mother's heart somewhat failed her, so ardent and unmistakable was the bent of the boy's mind after the profession his father had so loved. He was a noble boy. As he stood leaning against the gnarled old trunk of a pine tree, with his hands in his pockets, his face flushed with his exertions, his eye glowing with the fire and spirit of youth, and tall, straight, manly for his years, he looked every inch a soldier's son. Beside him the heir of Studleigh looked even more delicate and fragile than his wont. Rachel felt the contrast, and her heart went out to him in a rush of motherly compassion and love. He was painfully like his father, and for that father's sake, if for no other, the boy must ever be dear to Rachel Ayre.

"Of course you can stay, dear, if you like. You know we like to have you, but we must not be selfish. Mamma might be vexed with us for keeping you so much here, especially as your holidays are near an end."

"Oh, I don't think mamma minds much. She says I bore her talking so much about school. Oh, Aunt Rachel, I wish you'd let Clem go to Eton this term."

"That's right, Will!" exclaimed Clem, quickly. "It just amounts to this, mother, if you had to be a boy at that poky old Grammar School at Ayreleigh you'd know the difference."

"But what would I do, Clem, without both Will and you?" asked Evelyn, with wide, reproachful eyes.

"Oh, you'd sew, and knit, and learn to be a good girl till we came back," responded Clem, with all the coolness of a big brother. "And you'd have mother."

"That is the tea-bell, children," exclaimed Mrs. Ayre. "It is later than I thought. Come, then, Willie, we can't send you off now."

It was no marvel that the lonely boy loved the homely cheer of his Aunt Rachel's table. Her children were always with her, and she made it her endeavour that the meal hours should be the brightest in the day. They dined early, and their four o'clock tea was the pleasantest meal of the day. In their grandfather's time tea had been a great institution. Often when he came in hungry from the fields it had been supplemented by cold fowl, or perhaps a dish of brook trout, or something else as tasty. Then there was always an abundance of home-made cakes and bread, sweet yellow butter, and golden honey, which the healthy young appetites caused to disappear in a marvellously short time. But though there was no formality or stiff-