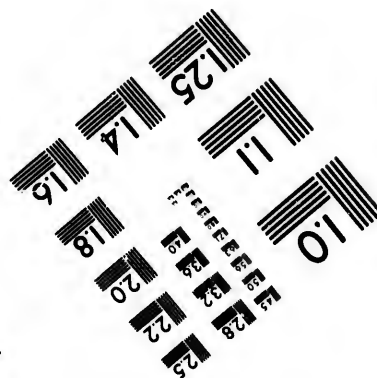
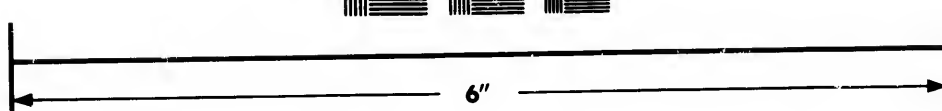
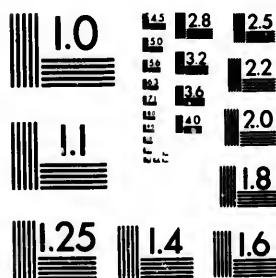


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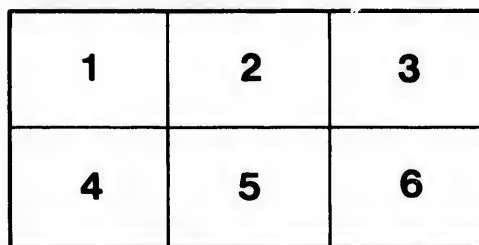
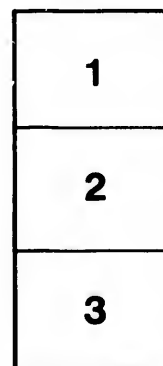
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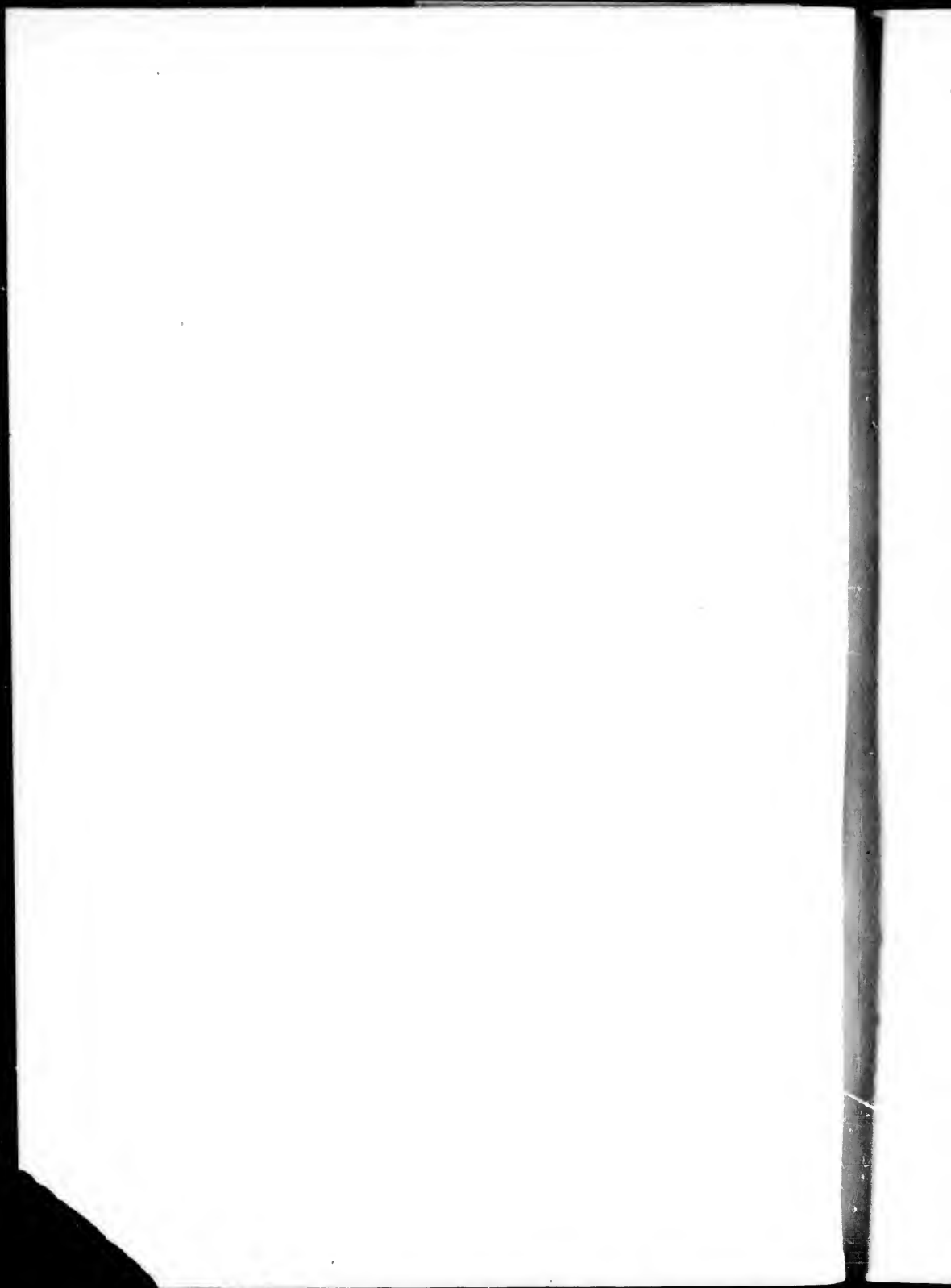
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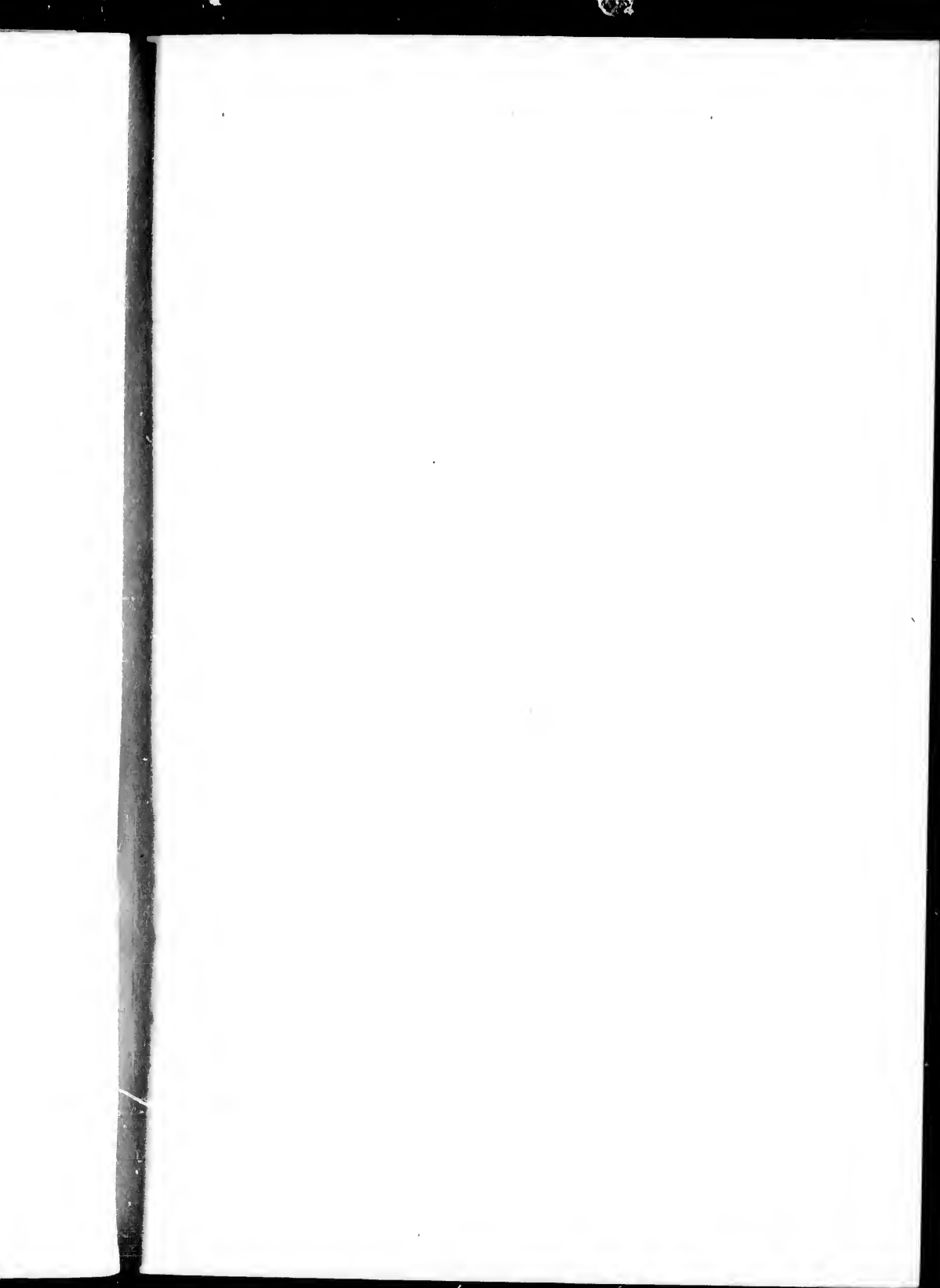


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THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.







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THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

(MRS BURNETT SMITH)

AUTHOR OF 'ALDERSYDE;' "SHEILA;" "ST VEDA'S;"
"MAITLAND OF LAURIESTON," ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. IN CONFIDENCE	7
II. THE PORTMAYNE CREED	16
III. THE SOLDIER'S WOOING	25
IV. DIFFERENCE OF OPINION	34
V. "TILL DEATH US DO PART"	42
VI. DARK FOREBODINGS	51
VII. THE BURSTING OF THE STORM	60
VIII. IN DEADLY PERIL	69
IX. THE FLIGHT FROM DELHI	76
X. THE AGONY OF SUSPENSE	85
XI. NEWS FROM A FAR COUNTRY	94
XII. HOME TO ENGLAND	101
XIII. A LAST INTERVIEW AT STUDLEIGH	109
XIV. A SURPRISE FOR MR GILLOT	118
XV. COUSINS	127
XVI. MR GILLOT'S ERRAND	136
XVII. IN VAIN	145
XVIII. "KIND HEARTS ARE MORE THAN CORONETS"	154

CHAP.	PAGE
XIX. A NEW AMBITION	163
XX. A HAPPY HOUSEHOLD	171
XXI. IN BITTERNESS OF SOUL	180
XXII. HOPES AND FEARS	188
XXIII. SYBIL'S FETE	196
XXIV. LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM	205
XXV. THE NEXT DAY	215
XXVI. TWO COUPLES	224
XXVII. ON ACTIVE SERVICE	233
XXVIII. ISANDHILWANA	241
XXIX. RORKE'S DRIFT	249
XXX. THE NEWS AT HOME	257
XXXI. A SOLDIER'S TALE	265
XXXII. A WOUNDED HEART	274
XXXIII. COUSINS	283
XXXIV. TILL DEATH US DO PART	292
XXXV. THE PHYSICIAN'S VERDICT	301
XXXVI. HUSBAND AND WIFE	310



THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

CHAPTER I.

IN CONFIDENCE.

TOWARDS the close of a fine, mild February day, two gentlemen were enjoying a cigar on the terrace behind the mansion-house of Studleigh, the Warwickshire seat of the Ayres. Ayre was an old name in the shire—a name honoured and beloved, synonymous with integrity and highest principle. The family history of the Ayres bore a fair record of grave responsibilities wisely carried, great opportunities turned to the best account, wide-reaching influence used wholly for good. These attributes were strikingly characteristic of the Squire, who with his soldier brother paced the terrace that sweet spring day. They were strikingly alike, although the elder wore a short-pointed beard and the younger's face was bare, and his appearance quite boyish. But he had a fine figure and a soldierly bearing, as became a lieutenant in the British Army. He wore his uniform, and it suited him rarely well. Both were tall, but the master of Studleigh, William Ayre, had a slight stoop in his shoulders, and his face wore a peculiar look of

delicacy. His skin was as fair and smooth as a girl's, and on his high white brow the blue veins were perhaps too visible. His expression was singularly mild and gentle; there was even a womanish sweetness about his mouth. Yet the face did not lack strength; and the clear, blue eye had a direct and fearless glance which indicated an honest, straightforward soul. The younger had all these attributes, with perhaps an added touch of fire and strength. He enjoyed splendid health, and carried suggestion of his perfect strength in every gesture. There were times when William Ayre looked at his brother with a touch of envy; *he* had never in his thirty years of life known what it was to be perfectly well. Such health as he possessed was carefully cherished, and with great and unremitting care his physicians assured him he might live to be an old man.

"Will, I want to tell you something."

The young lieutenant tossed away his cigar, and turned his blue eyes on his brother's face with a half-eager, half-hesitating glance.

"Something very particular, Geoffrey?"

"Yes."

"I don't feel as if I wanted to hear any more particular news, Geoff. It is enough for me in the meantime that you are ordered to India."

"Oh, that's nothing. What's India in these days?" asked Geoffrey, with all the fearlessness of youth.

"I want to tell you, Will, that I'm not going out alone if I can help it."

"Are you not?"

An amused smile dawned on William Ayre's lips, as he somewhat idly asked the question. He was listening to his wife singing in the music-room, and so had his attention directed for a moment from his brother's words.

"Come, let us go down the avenue a bit," said Geoffrey, a trifle impatiently. "If you stand here Emily will have you enticed in presently, and I want you."

He linked his arm through his brother's, and led him down the terrace steps, the full, beautiful melody of Lady Emily's song following them as they walked.

"I really think Emily's voice is growing more exquisite," said William Ayre, dreamily, for music was a passion with him, and he could scarcely resist its charm.

"She sings well, certainly; if singing will make you happy, Will, you ought to be in paradise," said Geoffrey, with a slight bitterness, which, however, his brother did not notice.

"Well, what is this weighty something you are yearning to confide to me?" the elder asked presently, when they were quite beyond hearing of the song.

"Perhaps it will surprise you very much, perhaps not," said the lieutenant, bluntly. "I'm going over to Pine Edge presently to ask Rachel Abbot to marry me."

"What?"

"Quite true. Is it possible, Will, that you haven't a suspicion of my interest in that quarter?"

"Well, I've heard Emily hint at it, certainly, but I laughed at her. Rachel Abbot! Geoffrey, lad, are you not making a mistake?"

"I don't think so. Is yours the conventional objection such as I know Lady Emily entertains?" asked Geoffrey, quietly. "A farmer's daughter is unfit, of course, in the world's eyes, to mate with an Ayre of Studleigh."

"It is not that Geoffrey, though no doubt the world will have its say," returned William Ayre, quietly. "Other things being equal, that need not be an insuperable obstacle, for Rachel Abbot is a lady, and I admire her very much."

"Thank you, Will," interrupted the other with quick gratitude.

"I suppose you have some reason to believe that she will accept you?"

"I think so. I am sure of it."

"And would you propose to marry at once?"

"Yes, and take her to India, if she will go."

"Take her to India! Would that be a wise step, and there is the old man to consider? Abbot must be seventy, if he is a day."

"Oh, but he is hale and hearty still," returned Geoffrey, lightly. "Besides, I think he will not stand in the way of his daughter's happiness."

"Well, if you marry, Geoff, I should certainly say take your wife with you. But there are a great many things to consider, many more than I suppose you have even given a passing thought to. Anglo-Indian society, especially of the military order, is very exclusive. What do you suppose the officer's haughty wives will have to say to poor Rachel? I am afraid she would find herself on the outside of the social circles."

"Why? If they know her only as Mrs Geoffrey Ayre, there will be no question of her position," said the lieutenant, hastily. "And they need know nothing more."

"They need not, but they *will*," answered the elder brother with a significant smile. "These military stations are a perfect paradise for the gossip-monger and the tale-bearer. Very probably Rachel's antecedents will be discovered and discussed before your arrival, and her place assigned to her. If I am right in thinking her to be a particularly high-minded and sensitive woman, it will go hard with her in Delhi, Geoff, and she will suffer the most on your account."

"I had no idea you knew so much about her, Will," said Geoffrey, in genuine astonishment. "But though her father is a farmer, Christopher Abbot is not quite like the ordinary farmer. The family is as old as our own, and has always been in Pine Edge."

"That is true. Well, perhaps, I have drawn the darker side of the picture, and Rachel herself is sweet and lovely enough to disarm all prejudice," said the master of Studleigh, generously. "But there is something else to be considered. India is in a very disturbed state. I heard Sir Randal Vane the other day say that he anticipated a

rebellion every day. At any time you may be on active service, Geoff, and war in India differs in some particulars from war in other places. In the event of a successful revolt by the natives, the ladies at the stations might be in fearful peril."

"Oh, Will, how you croak. Who is going to be nervous about a handful of wretched Sepoys? I anticipated a great many objections on your part, but not one of those you have named. I confess my chief fear was that you would imagine yourself lowered by such an alliance. Emily will be furious, I know."

"Emily has her family pride, I allow, but it is hers by heritage," said William Ayre, indulgently, for in his eyes his handsome wife could do no wrong.

" 'The daughter of a hundred Earls,
You are not one to be despised,' "

hummed the lieutenant, with mild sarcasm. "Well, I confess I don't care a fig for Emily, begging your pardon, old fellow, as long as you don't mind."

"Well, perhaps I mind a little," returned William Ayre, with his quiet smile. "I would rather your ambition had pointed a little higher. Perhaps one day you may be master of Studleigh."

"And the heir yonder, to say nothing of the brothers and sisters who may come," laughed the lieutenant. "Besides, you will be the white-headed Squire, perhaps, long after I have fallen before the enemy's gun or sabre, covered with wounds and, I trust, glory. Do you wish me good luck, then, Will, from your heart, in my mission to Pine Edge?"

In their talk they had strolled off the wide avenue and crossed the park to a gate which led into the open fields.

It was a fine mild evening, the dusk tenderly falling after the bright radiance of the sun had faded. The air was very still, and seemed laden with the promise of the spring. The trees had tender tufts on their bare boughs, and in sheltered nooks the early flowers were in bloom. Somewhere, indeed,

the sweet violet was already giving its hidden and exquisite fragrance to the evening hour. It was a pleasant scene upon which their eyes looked, a fertile English landscape, with its rich mosaic of green and brown, its varied undulations, and its peaceful homes, a scene which has countless parallels in old England, but which never palls upon the eyes of those who call it home.

To William Ayre that scene was one of the fairest in the world. It was his own patrimony—every field and tree and breadth of sunny meadow, reaching to the far hills, was his, and every foot of the ground was precious in his sight. He had taken up his birthright as a sacred trust, to be held for the honour of the dead and the sake of those to come. Entering upon his heritage in such a spirit, and seeking in every word and action to be a blessing to the place and the people, it was no wonder that his name was spoken with love and reverence which knew no bounds. They did not expect him to live long. Such goodness, they said, was incompatible with long life—they said his good deeds were preparation for another life. There may have been truth in their verdict too, yet it was certain that William Ayre had a large, sweet, sympathetic soul, a high regard for honour and integrity, a shrinking from everything ignoble or wrong, and he was singularly free from arrogance or pride, which is sometimes seen in those who have less to boast of. This was evidenced by his reception of his brother's love story. Although Geoffrey had expected nothing but courtesy and forbearance at his brother's hands, in this, as in every other matter upon which he had consulted him, he was secretly amazed at the heartiness of his manner. It had betrayed surprise, certainly, but neither annoyance nor disgust. And his praises of Rachel Abbot had been generous enough to send the hot flush of gratitude to his young brother's face. Never so long as he lived would Geoffrey Ayre forget these unsolicited words of appreciation—all the more prized that they came unsought.

"Why should I not wish you well, Geoff? You are my only brother, and I have never been anything but proud of you," he said, with that gracious smile which was like a benediction. "If I tell the truth, I am prouder of you than ever, because you have all the courage of a true and unselfish love."

Geoffrey stretched out his hand quickly, and gripped his brother's, but spoke no word. His impulsive heart was indeed full.

"And if Rachel is to be my sister you will tell me to-night, and I shall go to Pine Edge to-morrow," continued William Ayre. "In the meantime, I suppose I may tell Emily?"

"If you wish, Will; but don't let her prejudice you against us. I—I think she does not like Rachel. I cannot tell why."

"She thinks her proud, I believe," returned the other, musingly. "It is a curious thing which has always interested me how slow good women are, sometimes, to appreciate each other. But if Rachel Abbot really becomes your wife, Geoff, I hope she and my wife will be like sisters. It is rather a disappointment to me that there is so little sympathy between Emily and you."

"No doubt it is my blame," said Geoffrey, quickly, touched by his brother's look and tone. "I am only a rough-and-ready fellow, Will, more used to the freedom of the barracks than to my lady's bower."

"Nevertheless, Emily is secretly proud of her soldier brother," said William Ayre, as he laid his hand affectionately on his brother's shoulder. "And if she seems to be less hearty than you would like about this affair, try to remember it is because she thinks there are few noble families in England who would not be proud to ally themselves with the Ayres. *Au revoir*, then, and may all good luck attend you."

So William Ayre tried to prepare his brother for what he

felt certain would ensue—Lady Emily's haughty displeasure over such an alliance. He was conscious of a strange feeling of sadness and despondency as he slowly retraced his steps alone towards the house. His own domestic relations were of the happiest, because he adored his wife, and his gentle disposition never clashed with her haughtier will. But he knew her to be a woman of matchless pride. She was an Earl's daughter, and in marrying plain William Ayre of Studleigh may have thought herself taking a step backward on the social ladder. It had been a love-match, however; and whatever her demeanour to others, Lady Emily was an affectionate and lovable wife. There was a slight constraint in her relations with Geoffrey. His quick, proud spirit could not brook her arrogance; he felt slights where William saw none, and when probably none were intended. It was well for the peace of Studleigh that Lieutenant Ayre's furloughs should be few and far between, and that he should not for any length of time be a member of that family circle. To the Squire this was a grief of no ordinary kind. He loved his wife, but his brother was not less dear to him. There was a touch of fatherly regard in his deep love, for Geoffrey had ever looked up to him as a wise counsellor, although there was but slight disparity in years between them. He could not understand how the two, each so lovable, could not be true and close friends. It was so delicate a theme to handle in conversation, that the Squire could only mourn over it in secret, and hope that time would mellow the relationship between his wife and his brother, and bring about a happier state of matters.

He was not sanguine about Lady Emily's reception of the news he had to give. Once or twice she had remarked upon Geoffrey's frequent visits to Pine Edge, and the curl of her lip, the very inflection of her voice, indicated that she thought it no place for him to spend his leisure. William did not believe she had any idea that Geoffrey's admiration for Rachel Abbot had so deepened that it had

become the desire of his life to make her his wife. He knew that the news would not gratify her. He shrank in imagination from her few measured, stately words, from the cold glance of her flashing eye, from the curve of her beautiful mouth. With all these in anticipation, and oppressed besides with a vague, haunting dread of coming evil, the Squire of Studleigh slowly approached the house.






CHAPTER II.

THE PORTMAYNE CREED.

THE large windows of the drawing-room were open, and on the step which led down to the terrace stood Lady Emily Ayre, humming the refrain of the last song she had sung. She was a striking and rarely beautiful woman, with a pale, refined, exquisite type of beauty but seldom seen. Her figure was very tall and slender, her carriage graceful and stately, her white silk gown, with the half-open corsage, showed the perfect curve of neck and throat. Her face was, perhaps, too colourless, but the skin was clear and pure and soft, and the features absolutely faultless. The profile turned to the window was clear-cut and patrician, the eyes large, calm, and lovely, of hue as blue as the summer sky; her hair was bright golden, and was like a crown to her perfect face. She was conscious of her own beauty, but not vain of it; she wore it as her natural right, the heritage of a house famous through all time for the beauty of its ladies. There was a suggestion of coldness about the whole woman. The white gown falling in spotless and stately folds to her feet, the cold gleam of the diamonds in her golden hair, the faint slight smile on her proud lips as she watched her husband approaching, seemed to indicate that the Lady Emily Ayre was a woman



who prided herself in her absolute self-control, in her calm, unruffled bearing, her measureless scorn for the littleness of mind which allows itself to betray nervousness and haste. Her manners were absolutely perfect—cold, calm, icily courteous, after the order of her race. Sometimes, though not often, she unbent to her husband, and gave him a glimpse of her inner self which made him happy for days. In the nursery, when no one was by, the heart of the woman was revealed before the unconscious smiles of her first-born son. Her love for her husband was a calm, steady, undemonstrative affection, which found expression in fulfilling to the uttermost the gracious functions of the mistress of Studleigh; her love for her child was a passion which filled her whole soul, a passion without reason or limit, which in years to come was to cause herself and others bitter sorrow.

"Where have you been, William, and where has Geoffrey gone?" she asked, as her husband came up the steps. "It is an hour since I left you in the dining-room."

"Pardon, mia," he said, and bending forward touched with his lips the round, exquisite arm. "We have been discussing grave matters, and Geoffrey has gone to Pine Edge."

Instantly her expression changed, and her lips curled in high disdain.

"Why does he spend all his leisure there? It is no compliment to me, William, that your brother should be impatient to be gone from my dinner-table to the society of a yeoman's daughter."

"There is excuse for Geoffrey, dear, since it is the society of his future wife he seeks," William Ayre answered, candidly. "Come in, for the dews are falling, and I want to talk this matter over with you."

She turned from him and withdrew into the inner room, where the lamps were lit, and the coffee on the table.

"You may go, Hodgson; we shall wait upon ourselves" (she said, briefly, to the servant waiting with the coffee-tray); and when the tray was put down, busied herself in putting sugar in the cups. Her husband closed the long windows, and joined her in the study room.

"Thank you, my love," he said, as he took his coffee from her hand. "Sit down now, and let us talk. Geoffrey has gone to ask Rachel Abbot to be his wife."

"His wife!"

Lady Emily turned slightly round with a swift rustle of her silken skirts, and looked at her husband with wondering eyes.

"Has his folly gone so far as that?"

"Geoff does not think it folly, I assure you, Emily. I see that he is sincerely attached to Rachel Abbot."

"Did he tell you that he was going to Pine Edge on such an errand?"

"Yes; I have just parted with him at the coppice gate."

"And what did you say to him?"

"What could I say, Emily, except, wish him God-speed in his wooing?" asked William Ayre, smiling slightly, deceived by the serenity of his wife's face and the calmness of her speech.

"You — you wished him God-speed, William!" she re-echoed. "Surely your folly transcends his, for he may be supposed to be blinded by a foolish passion," she said, quickly. "Do you mean to say that it will please you to see your only brother so degrade himself?"

"Your choice of a word is not very happy, Emily," said William Ayre, quietly. "It is not a word to use in connection with any pure and good girl, least of all, in regard to Rachel Abbot, who is a gentlewoman in mind and manners, whatever her birth may be."

"There is a dispatch for him to-night," she said, "announcing, I suppose, his promotion; at least I see by

the evening paper that he has been gazetted captain, scarcely a matter for congratulation, I think, *now*."

"Why!"

"Because, the higher the height the greater the descent," she answered, coolly. "It will be better if we do not discuss this matter, William. It is utterly disgraceful that Geoffrey should have allowed himself to be inveigled in such a manner by these Abbots, and that you should all along have stood calmly by and witnessed, nay encouraged it, is not only a mystery, but a wrong, which I can scarcely regard lightly. If you have no respect for your own name, you might have given a thought to me."

She spoke quietly, without any betrayal of passion, and yet he felt that her bitter anger was roused. Her face was paler than its wont; her lips trembled as she spoke, and her bosom rose and fell quickly under the soft laces of her gown. But William Ayre was equal to the occasion, because his sympathy was wholly with his brother.

"It ought to be a matter of congratulation with us, Emily, that Geoffrey has behaved so honourably to Rachel Abbot. We have not very far to go among our neighbours to find more humiliating sorrow than this need be to us. Except for the accident of her birth, Christopher Abbot's daughter is as truly a lady as any of my acquaintance."

"I thank you for the comparison and the compliment. Mr Ayre," said his wife, and she swept him a little curtesy, while her lip curled in a slight, cold smile.

"Emily, you are not wont to be so uncharitable," he said, still quietly, though his manner betrayed his vexation. "Is it not some personal dislike of Rachel Abbot?"

"On my part?"

She swept round to him as she asked the question, and drew herself up as if the very suggestion were an insult.

"Yes; Geoffrey thinks you do not like her."

"Geoffrey is needlessly concerned, you can tell him. I

can have no dislike to Rachel Abbot. She is too far removed from me even to occasion me a thought."

"You are very bitter, Emily."

"Am I? Not more so, I think, than the occasion merits. When I married you, William, I did not dream that I should be called upon to meet your tenants on equal ground, and I refuse to do it."

"Does that mean that, in the event of Geoffrey marrying Rachel Abbot, you will not countenance her?"

"You would not ask me, I think, William, to receive her here?" she replied, in her iciest tones.

Then the Squire of Studleigh's rare anger rose—

"I must say, Emily, you are going too far," he said, with most unusual haste. "Although the Abbots are my tenants, their family is as old and honourable as mine, and their tastes are as refined. You were amazed at the refinement and elegance of Pine Edge when I took you there after our marriage."

"I was. I suggested, you may remember, that it was a little too much an assumption on the part of those who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. And Rachel Abbot received me then as if the honour of the visit was mine, and not hers. I have never forgotten it, and I never will."

"It is as I said, Emily, you are prejudiced against Rachel Abbot, and will not look at the matter from a just standpoint," he said, with a sigh. "But we need not grudge poor Geoffrey his happiness, even if it is to come through the daughter of a tenant farmer. It is hard, after his long absence from us, to be ordered to India at the very beginning of his furlough. I have a strange presentiment that he will never return."

"Nonsense, William, he will grow lazy and indolent in Delhi, like all our Indian officers. Does he intend to take his bride out with him, then?"

"Yes, if she will go."

"Oh, she will go fast enough," said Lady Emily, with a short, hard laugh. "It would be too great a risk to let him go free. Well, I do not envy Mrs Geoffrey Ayre left to the tender mercies of Lady Randal Vane and her exclusive circle. I question if even Geoffrey's devoted love will be able to stand that test."

"You could do a great deal to make her experience of Indian society agreeable, Emily," said the Squire, involuntarily.

"In what way?"

"You might ask Lady Vane to meet her here. It is possible they may be going by the same steamer."

"I have told you, William, that I decline to countenance this affair."

"Not even for my sake?"

She hesitated a moment, not that there was any wavering in her mind, but because she did not wish to give a direct refusal. In a sense she was a just woman, she appreciated her husband's habitual gentleness and consideration for her, it pained her to give him pain, or to inflict upon him any disappointment, however slight. But on this point she was inexorable. She deemed that her position and her parentage demanded that she should take up an unequivocal stand. She could *not* receive Rachel Abbot into the house on equal ground, welcome her as a sister to be honoured and loved. The condescension would be too great. The law of her order forbade it, and she had been reared to consider that law sacred and binding. It is certain, however, that a deep-rooted and strange dislike of Rachel Abbot gave strength to her decision. She recalled the tall, stately, graceful figure, the grave, calm face, the deep, lustrous eyes, the perfect grace and dignity of mien, the unconsciousness of any inferiority of position in her demeanour towards *her*, Lady Emily, who belonged to one

of the proudest families in England. In that short interview Rachel Abbot had erred unpardonably. She had been kindly, courteous, hospitable to the Squire's aristocratic wife, but perfectly self-possessed, and neither humble nor deferential. It was not pride, however, though Lady Emily regarded it as such; it was simply unconsciousness that difference in rank demanded any special recognition at her hands. Perhaps Miss Abbot had been spoiled and petted by the Squire's folk until they had forgotten the distinction between them. There had always been a warm and close intimacy between Pine Edge and Studleigh. More than once an Abbot and an Ayre had sat side by side at Eton, and been undergraduates together at Oxford, for centuries of thrift and well-doing had accumulated good money in the Pine Edge coffers, and there had never been a spendthrift or a ne'er-do-weel among them. There was no heir now to fill Christopher Abbot's shoes—he dwelt alone in the old house, a widowed man with one child, a daughter, who was the sunshine of his life. There never had been a large family in Pine Edge. Christopher himself was an only son, as his father had been before him. There had been no daughter born to the house for a century before Rachel.

"Not even for my sake, Emily?" repeated the Squire, anxiously, and his tone smote her to the heart.

"You make it hard for me, William, but I cannot do it," she said, slowly. "I have others to consider. You know what my people think on such questions. I confess, though I am not a nervous woman, I do not like to contemplate my mother's reception of this news. She would be indignant even at so slight a hesitation on my part. She would be quick to tell me that my duty was absolutely clear."

"I understood, dear, that when a woman married she might in a sense be expected to concur a little in her

husband's views, at least to give them some slight consideration," said William Ayre. "Perhaps it is not to be expected that I should entertain sentiments so lofty as the Countess of Portmayne," he added with mild sarcasm, "yet I cannot but think my own views are more in keeping with the broad spirit of charity the Bible itself teaches. If Geoffrey truly loves this woman and she loves him, I think it is my duty, and yours, too, for my sake, to send them on their way with words of love and hope."

She slightly shook her head and made a movement towards the door.

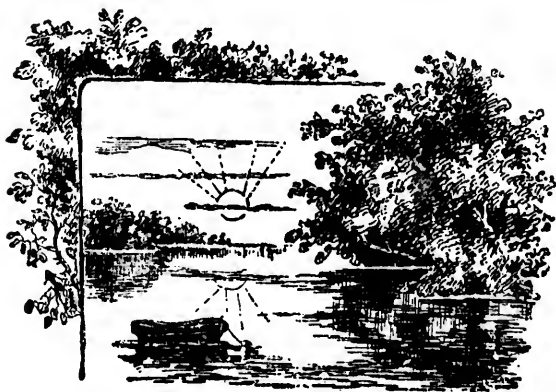
"Is there no hope, then, Emily? If the marriage takes place at all, it must be immediately. Will you not at least countenance it with your presence?" he asked, eager for some concession.

"I cannot tell. I am anxious to do my duty. I shall write to my mother to-night," she answered somewhat hurriedly, for she felt the appealing glance of his eye, and it distressed her to appear so obdurate. She gave him no chance of further pleading just then, for with a murmured excuse that the child would require her in the nursery she left the room.

William Ayre sighed as he heard the silken skirt sweep through the doorway. He was both hurt and disappointed, and the idea that she should deem it needful to consult Lady Portmayne before deciding a matter which was of moment to them alone, caused him a sense of irritation, which his wife's august kindred had too often awakened already. They were distinctly condescending in their behaviour to the Squire of Studleigh, and he had an intuitive feeling that they regarded their second daughter in the light of a social failure because she had married him. Even to his gentle nature such a thought was galling, and he found it more conducive to his peace of mind not to come too much in contact with them. A certain amount

of intercourse was inevitable, for Lady Emily was devoted to her own people, and thought they could do no wrong. Her mother was her pattern, and though it was an immaculate pattern so far, it had few touches of kindness or gentleness of heart to beautify it.

It was the prayer of William Ayre's life that his wife would be saved from such a soulless character.



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CHAPTER III.

THE SOLDIER'S WOOING.

PINE Edge was rightly named. The house stood upon the abrupt face of a wooded slope, and overlooked the whole valley of the Ayre, and the fine old park of Studleigh. It did not look like a farm house, especially as the out-buildings and the barnyards were quite behind, and not visible, except from the north windows. It had originally been a low, flat-roofed house, built in cottage style, but roomy and commodious within. From time to time it had been added to—a room here, and a larger window there—indeed, it had assumed the dimensions of a small mansion. These improvements had, as a rule, been made by the Abbots themselves, at their own expense, but sanctioned by the Squire. They had been so long in the place that they looked upon it as their own. The result was as picturesque and desirable a residence as any man could wish. It was built very near to the edge of this woody hillock, but there was room before the house for a belt of green sward, which was close and rich as finest velvet. The house was overrun with creepers, and the sunniest gable had a fine old rose tree clambering upon it, which was seldom without blooms. The dining-room was large for a farm house, because, when

Christopher's father married, he had built a new drawing-room, and thrown the old one into the dining-room. It had two long windows—one opening upon the little lawn, and the other looking right into the pine woods. The furnishings were old and heavy and sombre; the carved sideboards had stood in Pine Edge for generations. The pictures were old, too—family portraits, with one or two modern landscapes, all good and valuable as works of art. A great silver bowl stood in the centre of the table filled with roses, and two quaint china jars on the mantelpiece held some graceful sprays of the dogberry and wild grasses. It was a sombre room; the crimson velvet hangings at the window were not relieved by the customary lace beside them, they hung in straight, rich folds from the heavy gilt cornice, and were not fastened in any way. Yet there was a subdued and pleasant charm about that room which every one felt. The drawing-room was very pretty, filled with light and bright beautiful things; but the sombre window which looked out upon the pine wood was Rachel Abbot's favourite seat in the house.

She was sitting there in the pleasant gloaming that evening, with her work lying on her knee, and her hands folded above it. Of what was she thinking as her eyes looked into the dark shadows of the pines? We may look at her in her reverie undisturbed. She was leaning back in her chair, and her cheek touched the rich velvet of the hangings. The warm tint against her cheek seemed to give it a tinge of colour not usual to it. Rachel had not a fair complexion. She was dark skinned, like her father; but it was a clear, healthy hue, and it was in keeping with the masses of her dark hair, and the fringes of her eyelashes. The eyes themselves were wonderful, of that strange, uncertain, lovely hue which, for lack of a better name, we call hazel. They were very deep and liquid, not mirroring every passing thought like lighter orbs; you had to look into their depths to find Rachel Abbot's soul. Her mouth was very strong

and resolute, yet indescribably sweet ; the whole expression one of power and thought, yet suggestive of the tenderest attributes of womanhood. She wore a grey gown of some soft, fine material, without a touch of any colour to relieve it, but there was no suggestion of anything lacking. Everything Rachel Abbot wore became her, and seemed to be part of herself.

Such was the woman Geoffrey Ayre had chosen, and as she sat there she looked fit enough to reign in Studleigh, ay, even in Lady Emily's place. It was because Lady Emily had recognised her superiority—had been compelled in her own mind to acknowledge her a queen among women, that all these years she had been silently jealous of her, although the mere hint that she could be jealous of any woman, least of all a farmer's daughter, would have sent the flush of pride to the patrician's haughty cheek. In her own mind, too, so quick of intuition are some women, Rachel Abbot was conscious of her ladyship's disapproval and dislike. For long it had not troubled her—but now——

“Lieutenant Ayre, Miss Rachel.”

The housemaid's voice roused her, and she sprang up just as Geoffrey was shown in.

“Good evening, Mr Ayre,” she said, quickly, and even with a trace of nervousness. “Bring the candles, Lucy, and tell father Mr Ayre has come.”

“It is you I want to see, Miss Abbot,” said Geoffrey, pointedly, and Rachel was glad that the friendly gloom hid her flushed face. “I don't think candles are at all necessary,” he added, with his swift, bright smile. “Are you well to-night?”

“Yes, I am always well,” Rachel answered. “If you don't mind the window, may I leave it open? The evening air is so delicious in spring.”

“Your father is not in the house, is he?” asked Geoffrey, following her to the open window, and taking the chair opposite.

"No, he never *is* in just now," answered Rachel, with a slow, beautiful smile. "There is nobody in this world so busy as father, or so utterly idle as I."

Lucy entered just then, set two tall silver candlesticks on the table, and discreetly retired. Rachel had never asked herself what brought the brave soldier so often to Pine Edge; but in the kitchen the matter had been settled long ago, and it was only a question now where Miss Rachel would get her bridesmaids—she had so few girl friends.

"I have come to tell you, Rachel, that I am ordered to India," he said, without any preparation, and keeping his eyes fixed keenly on her face. He saw it change, and her hands tremble over her work.

"Immediately?"

She did not look at him as she spoke.

"Yes, I am to sail with Sir Randal Vane, of the East India Company, and the other officers, from Portsmouth, on the 26th. The troopship, with my regiment, leaves on Tuesday."

"You have had a very short furlough," she said, in a still passionless voice. "Is there—is there any trouble in India?"

It was with difficulty she asked the question. Geoffrey Ayre's pulses thrilled as he noted the hesitation in her voice. It was not Rachel's wont. On all occasions her bearing was quiet, serene, self-possessed. He leaned forward in his chair, and laid his strong hand on both of hers.

"Not in the meantime, Rachel. You know I love you. Will you go with me?"

"What are you saying?"

She spoke almost piteously, and now her eyes met his—large, open, wistful, almost imploring.

"I am asking you to be my wife, my darling, and to share a soldier's fortunes. Is it too much to ask? Perhaps so; but, as I live, loving you as I do, I cannot go away so

far for an indefinite period without you. *Do you care for me a little, Rachel?*"

"You know I do."

The answer was characteristic of the woman. Evasion of any questions, even the harmless coquetry which in love affairs is supposed to be a woman's right, were unknown to her. In the face of perhaps an eternal separation, she would be true and honest, as was the man who sought her love.

"My darling."

Geoffrey Ayre folded her to his heart, and she let her hands fall upon his shoulders, and her eyes met his radiant with her love. She had given him her whole heart, and with it a trust so boundless and so perfect that she had not a question to ask.

"Perhaps, perhaps, I have been too lightly won," she said at length, with an exquisite wistfulness. "It has been so short—scarcely two months—and yet we cannot always help these things——"

"Hush, my dearest, hush. Too lightly won! Until I saw your face to-night I had no certainty of what your answer would be. As God is my witness, Rachel, it will be my life endeavour to be worthy of your faith in me."

"The 26th!" repeated Rachel, after a time. "That is only two weeks, Geoffrey. How awful to part from you so soon."

"There will be no parting, if my wife will go with me."

"Yes, she will go." She spoke quietly, but with a touch of strange emotion, which indicated that the very depths of her being were stirred. "It seems very awful to be able to decide so momentous a question in a moment. But I feel as if it were decided for me; as if the way were laid out for me to go."

"It will be a good preparation for the vicissitudes you may experience as a soldier's wife," he said, with a fond smile. "This afternoon, when I got my marching orders, I was fearfully inclined to rebel, but now I bless the

circumstances which have won me a wife, whom, perhaps, I would not have won, in the ordinary way, for many months."

Rachel smiled slightly.

"But there is no war?" she said, inquiringly. "What does so unexpected a summons mean?"

"I suppose there are rumours of disaffection at least. Will says so, but at the most it will be a mere trifle. You are not afraid, Rachel?"

"I afraid! Perhaps some day you will see that I do not know the meaning of fear."

She withdrew herself from him and sat down, pointing him to a chair also.

"No, no, sit down," she said with a sweet, low laugh. "I am afraid we have both been extremely rash. We must try and redeem ourselves by discussing this matter calmly, as if we had no interest in it. Do you think it a possible thing that I could go with you on so short a notice?"

"Well, it is short, but—but I won't go without you, Rachel."

"Could I not come to you after?"

"No, because I intend to take you with me," he repeated, calmly. "You said you would go. No drawing back now, my lady."

"But there are a great many things to consider, and people besides ourselves," she said, soberly. "Does—does the Squire know?"

"Yes; he walked to the coppice gate with me and bade me God-speed. He will come and see you in the morning, Rachel."

Rachel's eyes filled suddenly, she could not tell why. Although she said nothing, Geoffrey Ayre divined that she, like all others, loved and revered his brother, and was continually touched by his delicate consideration for others.

"Then there is—father."

Rachel spoke more slowly still, and Geoffrey saw her brows contract and her lips droop slightly.

"Yes—I confess, dearest, that it is the thought of your father which makes me feel that I may be a little selfish, and yet I am not afraid to leave it to his decision."

"Can you imagine what it will be for him were he without me, Geoffrey?"

"It will be terrible for him, I know; but I have this feeling, Rachel, that all along he has anticipated this, and been preparing himself for it."

"Do you think so?"

Again that wistful, upward glance which touched him to the quick. Before he could answer they heard a heavy foot in the hall, and Rachel sprang up as the door of the dining-room was opened. The words of hearty greeting on Christopher Abbot's lips were arrested by the expression on his daughter's face. She swiftly crossed the room, lifted up her face and kissed him, then went out and left them alone.

"Why—why, what's all this; what's the matter with my girl?" he queried, as he laid his broad hat on the table and turned to the young soldier standing by the open window. The old man was quite a picture as he stood there, dressed in the yeoman garb—kneebreeches of fawn cloth, and a blue coat, with a white kerchief round his throat. He had a fine, tall, erect figure, and a clear, open face, ruddy on the cheeks like a winter apple, grey eyes like Rachel's, and plentiful white hair, which became him well. There were no signs of advancing age about the farmer of Pine Edge. He was as well preserved and hearty as many men half his age.

"You can guess, Mr Abbot," said Geoffrey, as he offered him his hand. "I have to offer myself now for your acceptance as a son, since Rachel has agreed to be my wife."

"Ay, ay, and that's how the wind has blown. Do you

think it's a fair thing now for a gay young soldier like you to come and steal away the heart of a quiet, country girl like my Rachel?"

"She stole away mine first, Mr Abbot; so it is a fair exchange," laughed Geoffrey, and then hesitated, for there was something more to tell. "I love your daughter sincerely and devotedly as a man should when he seeks a wife," he began, in that frank, earnest way of his, which won all hearts. "If you will give her to me, Mr Abbot, it will be my life endeavour to make her happy."

"I'm not afraid of that, sir—not at all. If I had been, do you think I'd have let you come here so much, and never a word about 't? I know what the Ayres are, Mr Geoffrey, and have ever been—the best that live; but there are other things to be thought of, lad. Although there has always been peace and friendship between Pine Edge and Studleigh, marrying's a different thing. What does the Squire say?"

"The Squire says, God bless us, Mr Abbot; he will say it to you himself to-morrow."

"He thinks it is no bemeaning of the family then to marry into Pine Edge?" asked the old man, quickly. "We are only farmers, of course, but we have our pride and our self-respect, and I wouldn't wish my daughter to push herself into an unwilling family, who would maybe break her heart."

"I assure you that could not possibly happen in our case. My brother himself told me to-night he would come and see Rachel to-morrow if she promised to be my wife. Of course it is possible that Lady Emily may not altogether approve; but, though she is William's wife, she is not exactly our family."

"Well, I will say that, if you have the Squire's goodwill and sanction, I would not let that stand in the way, though sorry to vex her ladyship," said Christopher Abbot, with a slight smile which told much. "I shall be glad to have a

talk with the Squire himself to-morrow. My daughter will not be a penniless bride, Mr Geoffrey."

"*That* does not matter, Mr Abbot. It is Rachel herself I love. Having won her I care for nothing else. But the worst is to tell yet. I want to take her away in a fortnight. I am ordered to India, and sail on the 26th."

"You want to take her away in a fortnight. You ask a great deal, Mr Geoffrey. She is all I have, and you ask me to let her go away to foreign lands on a moment's notice. Young men are very hasty, and they know nothing—how should they?—of a father's feelings."

Geoffrey was silent, disheartened a little by the old man's speech.

"What does Rachel herself say?"

"She is willing, but thinks of you, as I do——"

"If she is willing, that is enough. Rachel is not a child, and she knows her own mind. The Word bids her leave father and mother and cleave to her husband. Why should I hinder her? Take her, Geoffrey Ayre, and may God deal with you as you deal with her."





CHAPTER IV.

DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

IT was late that night when Geoffrey Ayre returned to Studleigh. Lady Emily had retired to her own sitting-room, but the Squire was in the library waiting for his brother.

"Well, old fellow?" he said, looking up with affectionate interest when he entered. "I need scarcely ask anything. Your face tells me the momentous question is happily settled. Am I right?"

"Yes. I had no idea, Will, that there could be in this world such perfect happiness," Geoffrey answered; and it pleased William Ayre well to see the fine earnestness and subdued emotion which indicated that all the high hopes of his manhood were awakened.

"I wish you much happiness, Geoff," the Squire said, and they shook hands on it again, then a somewhat graver look stole to the elder brother's face.

"What did Abbot say? Did you see him?" he asked.

"Yes: we had a long talk. He is a fine old man, Will—a gentleman, in the highest sense. But he is making a great sacrifice."

"You will take her with you, then?"

"Yes. We shall be married on the 24th, go to London, and thence direct to Portsmouth to join the *Salamis*."

"Quick work, Geoff; but I think you are right--yes, I think you are quite right. I shall go over to Pine Edge first thing after breakfast to-morrow morning."

"Thank you, Will. Did you tell Emily?"

"I did."

"And what was her verdict?" asked Geoffrey, with a slight smile.

"Unfavourable. I hope, Geoffrey, that it will not be a great pain to Miss Abbot, if my wife does not appear so cordial as one might wish. It is to be left to Lady Portmayne's decision, so you can anticipate how it will end."

"I am not surprised. If we were going to live in the neighbourhood, it might be a serious matter," said Geoffrey, lightly, for his sister-in-law's disapproval did not then seem of much importance. "We must just endeavour to survive the withdrawal of the Portmayne effulgency from our simple nuptials," he added, with mild scorn. "Perhaps some day Lady Emily may be proud to acknowledge my wife."

"I am glad you feel no bitterness over it, Geoff."

"I! Oh, no; and Emily is not to be blamed. I am going in direct opposition to every tenet of her creed. I am committing social suicide," said Geoffrey, lightly. "Oh, is there anything for me to-night?"

"Yes, your promotion," said the Squire, heartily. "So you have to be doubly congratulated, Captain Ayre."

"I hope it will be General Ayre some day, old boy. I shouldn't mind a bit of active service in India. It gives a fellow a chance."

The Squire shook his head.

"I thought you had had enough of glory for a while," he said, with a slight laugh. "No man can say you are not devoted to your profession. For your wife's sake, I hope there will be nothing to disturb the peace of the lieges while you are in Delhi. Well, I must go upstairs. Do you see what o'clock it is?"

"Yes, but this is a special night in a fellow's life, Will.

I am not inclined for sleep, so I shall sit here for a bit, if you don't mind. Tell Emily it is all right. I hope she won't tackle me, Will, for I couldn't stand it. The Portmayne theories are too many for me," said Geoffrey, half apologetically. "Good-night."

"Good-night, and God bless you and yours for ever, Geoff," said the Squire, with unwonted solemnity, and with a warm hand-clasp he left the room. As he passed by the door of his wife's boudoir she called to him to come in.

"Has Geoffrey come in?" she asked, when he entered. "I thought I heard your voices. Is it all settled?"

"Yes; they are to be married on the 24th."

"I guessed that there would not be much uncertainty," she said, with a smile. "Well, I have written to mamma; you can read the letter if you like, William, then I can add the postscript that the date is fixed."

"Thank you, but I don't mind reading it," he answered, and, leaning up against the cabinet, he looked for a moment at the graceful figure in the rich dressing-gown, at the fair, calm face bent over the *escritoire*. How lovely she was, and yet how hard of heart! "I am going to Pine Edge in the morning, Emily. I suppose you will not go."

"I? Oh, no. There will be time enough after mamma writes. I have asked her to reply by return of post," she answered, placidly, as her pen busily traced the postscript to the closely-written sheet.

"Lady Portmayne's reply may be anticipated, Emily," he said, quietly; "I think that in this matter you might have decided for yourself, and shown a little consideration for me. I have no kindred in the world but my brother Geoffrey, and it is not fair that you should treat him so ungenerously at such a time as this."

Lady Emily's face flushed, and she bit her lip. She was not often rebuked, and she was quick to resent it.

"We cannot quarrel over it, William—it is not worth it," she said, without looking round. "I regret that you should

feel obliged to use such a word as ungenerous to me. I am not conscious of having failed in courtesy to your brother, who has so often been an inmate of our house."

She intended the last sentence to indicate that she had felt the soldier's frequent presence at Studleigh something of a burden. William Ayre flushed high to the brow, and, turning on his heel, he left the room. His wife had sent a shaft to his heart which would long rankle. She knew she had hurt him; but convinced that he deserved it, it did not cause her any remorse or concern. She elaborated her postscript a little, and gave to her mother the subject of the conversation they had just had, and folding her letter she sealed it and went calmly to bed.

There was a slight constraint in the atmosphere of the breakfast-room at Studleigh next morning. The Squire, usually so cordial and so courteous, was curiously silent; but Lady Emily evinced no sign of any unusual agitation, and talked freely to Geoffrey on commonplace things, never, of course, alluding in the remotest degree to the matter which was uppermost in all their minds. Immediately after breakfast the brothers set out to walk to Pine Edge. It was a lovely morning, the dawn had been dull and misty, but a glorious burst of sunshine had dispelled the gloom, and restored the warmth and brilliance of a beneficent spring to the earth. But the dew lay heavy on the grass, and hung in filmy mists about the trees, dissolving into glittering diamonds under the sun gleams. They walked to the avenue gates, and turned up the high road towards the farm, the short path through the fields being soaked with the heavy dew.

"There's Mr Abbot, Will," said Geoffrey, pointing to the paddock adjoining the house. "I'll go and speak to him, while you go on to the house. I would rather you saw Rachel alone."

"So should I," the Squire answered; and with a wave of his hand to the farmer, he entered the little avenue and

strode on to the house. Rachel saw him come, and herself opened the door to him. As he crossed the little lawn, and saw her standing in the green shadow of the porch, he thought her one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. There was a strange hesitation in her manner, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes moist as she waited for him. He lifted his hat with his grave, kind smile, and when he stepped up to her, put his arm about her shoulders, and kissed her.

"I have never had a sister, Rachel," he said, with a sunny smile. "Who would have dreamed in the old days when we hunted for blackberries in the coppice woods that it would have come to this?"

Rachel could not speak. She led the way silently into the cool, shady dining-room, and when she had closed the door she turned to him with a swift gesture, and a look he never forgot.

"Oh, sir, do you think I am worthy? He would not listen to me, and perhaps I did not try very hard to make him listen," she said, with a swift flush. "But I have been thinking all night long, and I will speak plainly. Do you think, Mr Ayre, that I shall be any weight upon him to drag him down? His life is before him. And if you, who are always so wise and good, think so, I—I can give him up. It would be easier now than to feel when it was too late that we had made a mistake."

Her words touched William Ayre inexpressibly. He saw that it was an effort for her to utter them, but that the very highest motive prompted them. Rachel Abbot was a woman to whom self-sacrifice was a sacred duty, from which, when it was made plain to her, she would never flinch. It was no small pain at that moment to the master of Studleigh to recognise in her a fairer and more noble womanhood than was dreamed of in his wife's philosophy.

"I think, Rachel, that instead of dragging him down, you will urge him on towards what is highest and best. There is

nothing I will not hope and expect from my brother now," he said, with most generous sincerity.

"My father spoke last night to me about the difference in our stations. I confess I did not think of that at all," she said, frankly, and the Squire could not but smile at the very unconsciousness which in Lady Emily's eyes was so heinous an offence. "Father said, too, that it was your great goodness and kindness which had made the difference so little felt. Of course, when he spoke I saw it at once, and I have to speak of that too. Would it make any difference to him, would it keep him back in his profession, or make him suffer in any way? I ask you these things, Mr Ayre, because I am so ignorant of the world, and because I know it is no use asking Geoffrey. You will be true with me, I know."

"I will, Rachel, it is your right. There may be some who will think Geoffrey has not aimed so high as he might, but only those who do not know you. I do assure you there is no prejudice or hostile feeling which you will not be able to overcome, none which can cause Geoffrey the slightest vexation, except on your account. Do you believe me, Rachel?"

"Yes. You are always true," she answered, simply. "I will try to do my duty, Mr Ayre, and learn what I do not know, in order that Geoffrey may never be ashamed."

"Ashamed, my dear child! He has no need. As you are, you are so charming that I expect half the subalterns in the regiment will lose their heads over you. These lads always fall in love with the captain's wife, when she is lovable, and it does them a world of good. Yes, you will be a captain's wife, Rachel. His promotion came last night. But here comes Geoffrey. I have had my say, and now I must see your father. Good-bye just now, in case I do not come in again, and remember that Geoffrey will not be fonder of his wife than I shall be of my new sister."

He kissed her again as he went away, leaving the sunshine

behind. He had a long talk with Christopher Abbot out in the orchard, but Lady Emily's name was not once mentioned.

Two days later Lady Portmayne's answer came, when they were at breakfast at Studleigh. Happily, Geoffrey was absent in London on business connected with their voyage.

"Mamma says I had better come over to Portmayne with baby, and remain till the end of the month, William," Lady Emily said, looking up calmly from her perusal of the letter.

"The marriage is to take place on the 24th," the Squire answered. "Will you go before then!"

"Mamma means that; this is Thursday. I shall go on Monday, the 20th," she replied placidly.

The Squire's colour rose, and he kept his eyes on his plate, saying nothing.

"The Vanes are going to Portmayne for a day or two, they will arrive to-day," Lady Emily read on calmly. "They sail in the *Salamis* on the twenty-first. That is Geoffrey's ship. It is unfortunate, but perhaps on the other hand well, that they should be prepared for what they may expect in India."

"What do you mean, Emily?" asked the Squire with darkening brow.

"Just what I say. Lady Vane is a very proud woman. I cannot conceive how you do not see as I do in this."

"Although Lady Vane is your mother's cousin, Emily, I must say I have never seen anything of this terrible pride of which you speak," said the Squire. And if I know Sir Randal at all, he is one of the frankest and most unconventional of men. I shall not be greatly surprised if they disappoint you in their treatment of Geoffrey's wife."

"We shall see," said Lady Emily, with an enigmatical smile.

"You intend, then, to accept the invitation to Portmayne?" he said inquiringly.

"Of course I do. What is the use of asking advice if one does not accept it? Mamma is very decided about it. She says unhesitatingly that there is no other course open for me."

"Ah, then, it would be madness for you to disobey," said the Squire, with mild sarcasm, which his wife did not deign to notice.

"I suppose you intend to be present?" she asked after a slight pause.

"It is a superfluous question," he answered, curtly. "I thank God I am not bound by the Portmavne creed."

Lady Emily's faint colour once more rose.

"I would not lose my temper were I you," she said, with a slight curl of the lip. "Captain Ayre has reason to flatter himself that he is of considerable importance. I have seldom seen your composure so ruffled."

"You have never tried me more sorely, Emily, and I protest I do not deserve it at your hands," said the Squire, passionately. "Your kindred have always received from me the most delicate consideration, even when it was more than an effort for me to give it."

"I am sick of this mutual recrimination," retorted Lady Emily, losing her habitual self-control. "I could wish that Captain Ayre had spent his furlough elsewhere, rather than have come to make this painful dispeace at Studleigh."





CHAPTER V.

"TILL DEATH US DO PART."

SIR RANDAL VANE had long held an important post in the East India Company, and had been resident at Delhi for many years. He was not himself of aristocratic birth, being only the son of a poor vicar in an outlying Yorkshire parish ; but his great ability and shrewd foresight had enabled him to render such signal service to the English government in India that he had been knighted as a reward. He had married somewhat late in life the sister of a colonel commanding a small British regiment at Meerut, a member of the illustrious family to which the Countess of Portmayne also belonged. The match had been accepted as the inevitable ; and during the brief visits paid by the Vanes to England they were always well received and made graciously welcome even at Portmayne. Sir Randal was reported to be fabulously wealthy, and as they were childless, it was within possibility that some of his rupees might ultimately find their way into the somewhat empty coffers of the Portmaynes. Sir Randal, while of necessity civil to his wife's fine kindred, was superlatively bored by their attentions, which he appreciated at their true value. The Countess herself was a great trial to the plain, honest English gentleman,

who hated pretensions and humbug; and it was only his genuine love for his wife that enabled him to endure the martyrdom of a visit to the Castle. Lady Vane was indeed a charming woman. As sweet Lucy Baker she had been adored by the European colony at Meerut, and had received many offers of marriage. But she remained heart-whole until she astonished all who knew her by accepting plain, bluff, honest-hearted Randal Vane.

Portmayne Castle was a magnificent residence, which certainly threw Studleigh far into the shade. It stood on a wooded height, amidst far-spreading ancestral trees, itself a monument to the greatness and importance of the Portmaynes. It made a perfect picture, with its weather-beaten and castellated towers standing out against the sky, with the picturesque ruins of a yet older castle in the background adding a kind of pensive grace to the scene. There was reason enough for a quiet pride in those who had so long called that beautiful spot a home, whose family history was inseparable from it, whose family records told of many deeds of chivalry and valour. But with this pride, excusable in itself, there was no grace. The name of Portmayne was regarded with awe and a certain respect, born of long usage to its haughty sway, but there was no love between Castle and cottage—none of that perfect service given and received from the heart, such as blessed the relations between the manor house and the people of Studleigh.

In Lady Portmayne's boudoir, which commanded a magnificent view of one of the finest bits of English scenery, she was sitting with Sir Randal's wife on the afternoon of the day on which Lady Emily was expected at the Castle. Lady Portmayne had been writing some notes of invitation for a small dinner, and her guest was busy with a piece of Indian embroidery for a dress she was to give to little William Ayre.

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 yet 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 such 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 soldier."

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

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"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 upon 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 shall. 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 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 Mr 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 act of true 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 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 great pleasure to her, and one which she seldom missed.

"Oh, Geoffrey is at the farm. I promised we should drive round 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 a 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, "being only a woman and 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 the tall, slight figure, with a beautiful, grave, earnest face, and a pair of shining grey 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 Lucy 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 bonny 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 old 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 which 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 Portmaynes 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.

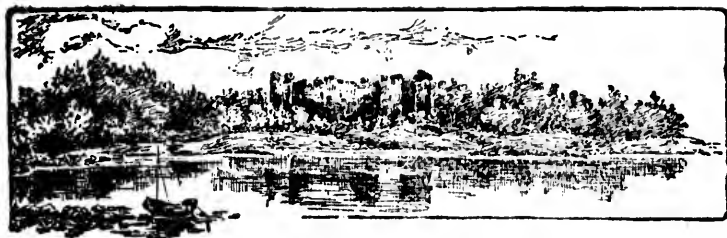
But, as behoved her in the circumstances, she made no comment.



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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 close 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 chattered 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 been but 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 Musjid, the great mosque which is one of the glories of the ancient city, the imposing battlements of the palace, the graceful and refreshing spots made by the acacias drooping over the flat roofs, the tall date trees, and the sluggish windings of the Jumna, with its picturesque bridge of boats and imposing fortifications, combined to form a unique and lovely picture ; but it had lost its charm for these two women who sat busy at their sewing, and talking low and earnestly, with visible anxiety on their faces. One was elderly, a grave, sweet faced English lady, whom we last saw before the altar in the old church at Studleigh, and who had amply fulfilled her promise to befriend the English girl who that day became a soldier's wife. Rachel herself had changed ; the climate of the East had tried her sorely. She was very slender, and the white muslin gown hung loosely upon her figure, and her face was much thinner, and had lost its ruddy hue. But there was a dignity and grace about her, intensified by a sweetness of expression and demeanour, which made her a lovely woman. Her health had been indifferent in India ; she had long been delicate after the birth of her little son. Until lately her poor health had been the only cloud on her own and her husband's happiness, but now there were other and more pressing anxieties, forebodings which not only blanched the faces of frail women, but made the hearts of men quail in their breasts, not with craven fear for themselves, but with

concern for the women and children who were dearer to them than their lives. The rumours of disaffection among the natives which had been lulled for a time had again broken out, accompanied this time by signs there was little mistaking. On that eventful Saturday night a council of English officers was being held in the Flagstaff Tower to consider the best measures to take in view of a revolt among the Sepoys at that station, their behaviour having lately undergone a somewhat suspicious change. They were arrogant and disrespectful in their demeanour towards the Europeans, and in cases of punishment for insubordination had been heard to mutter threats about a day of reckoning rapidly approaching when these insults to native pride would be amply avenged. Sir Randal Vane and Captain Ayre were among those present at the council, and their wives were anxiously awaiting their return.

"It is hard for you, my dear," said Lady Vane, with affectionate kindness. "The first years of your married life have been passed in anxiety, and even in a certain degree of peril. Are you never tempted to wish yourself safe back in that sweet, old farm-home at Studleigh?"

"I think of it very often, I confess," Rachel answered, with a smile and a quick, starting tear. "But I would not exchange my present life for the old way, Lady Vane. I seem to have really *lived* only since I came to India."

"You have taught some others how to live too, my dear," responded Lady Vane significantly. "I thought it my duty some time ago to write a somewhat copious epistle to Lady Emily Ayre."

Rachel's colour faintly rose.

"On what subject?" she asked, quickly.

"On the subject of the sister-in-law of whom she is not worthy," said the elder woman with great energy. "Shall I tell you something of what I said?"

"I know it would be kind. You are always kind to me. Without you I could not have been so good a wife and

mother as I have been. You have taught me everything, and shown me the highest ideal of a woman's duty."

"Nay, my dear, you are crowning me with your own laurels," said Lady Vane, shaking her head. "That is just what you have been showing to us every day since you came. I said to Lady Ayre that you had set an example to the young married women of our European colony in Delhi which cannot be over-estimated, an example of all a gentlewoman and a Christian wife and mother should be, and —"

"Oh, Lady Vane, hush!"

"My love, I am doing right to tell you this, because your spirits are down a little, and you are in the mood to be hard and unkind to yourself. There are times when a word of encouragement is as necessary to our fainting hearts as bread to the starving body. Oh, I shall not spoil you. If necessary, as you know, I can reprove you too."

"You have been very indulgent to me, dear Lady Vane. Geoffrey and I can never be grateful enough for the great kindness shown to us by you and Sir Randal."

"I wish, Rachel, that there was any possibility of getting you and that precious baby of yours away to the hills," said Lady Vane, as she looked with undisguised anxiety on her companion's pale face. "Sir Randal is talking of sending me to Simla in June. Could you tear yourself away from Captain Ayre for two months, you most devoted of wives?"

"Yes, I could for Clement's sake," responded the young mother quickly, as her glance wandered towards a clump of acacia trees in the garden, from whence came sounds of childish merriment. "How good and gentle Azim is, Lady Vane! I confess when I saw my baby first in his arms I had a curious feeling, but now I know he is safer than with me. I believe he would lay down his life for his charge."

"There are many instances on record of such devotion among the Hindoos. Long, long may these beautiful relationships between the European and the native ser-

vants be maintained," said Lady Vane, gravely; and then a strange silence fell upon them, and though each knew what was occupying the thoughts of the other, it was not put into words. A strange uncertainty had crept into European life in the old city on the banks of the Jumna—an uncertainty which had in it the elements of apprehension and fear. It seemed as if they were waiting for some stupendous crisis, as if each step brought them nearer the edge of an unknown precipice. The Council being then held in the Flagstaff Tower was the first direct acknowledgment that the state of matters in the city were such as to cause any anxiety. The ladies were still silent when Sir Randal and Captain Ayre entered the garden by a side gate, and came somewhat hastily up the path. They were talking earnestly, and both faces wore their gravest look. Rachel rose hurriedly from her chair, for a faint curious sickness seemed to come over her, a prevision of immediate danger.

"There is nothing to alarm you, my love," Geoffrey said, reassuringly, as he laid his strong hand on her arm, and looked into her face with protecting tenderness. "Yes, we will tell you exactly how matters stand, and what we propose to do. We agreed in Council—didn't we, Sir Randal?—that though there was no imminent danger, we were justified in taking every precaution. The first is to remove the defenceless to a place of safety at once. You knew that Major and Mrs Elton had arranged to leave Delhi on Monday for Calcutta, Lady Vane?"

"I heard something of it; but surely they have hurried on their plans?"

"Possibly. Mrs Elton is utterly prostrated with nervousness, and they leave quite a week earlier than they intended. We proposed as we walked down that they should take you and Rachel and the boy in their travelling carriage, which is large enough for four."

"Did you propose any such thing for me, Randal?" said

Lady Vane, with a humorous smile. "Did you think it likely that I would leave you in the lurch? It is quite different with Mrs Ayre. She has her child to consider. But I have nothing but you, and I mean to keep by you to the last."

"You'll have to obey orders like the rest of us, madam," said Sir Randal, gruffly, but he turned his grey head quickly away from her, and his eyes grew dim.

"I am not amenable to authority, my love," responded Lady Vane, placidly. "But I am delighted to hear of such a chance for dear Rachel, Captain Ayre. I have just been urging upon her the necessity for her having an immediate change. Have you no friends at any of the hill stations?"

"Don't ask him, Lady Vane," interrupted Rachel, quickly, "nor put any such ideas into his head. Whatever may happen, I shall not leave him, unless I am compelled to do so."

She drew herself up—her momentary fear gone—and in its place came a quiet strength and resolution which impressed them all. Rachel had awakened to the first duty of a soldier's wife, a calm and heroic endurance in times of anxiety or peril.

"If Mrs Elton would take charge of Clement, Geoffrey, and take him home to England, I should send him," she said, suddenly. "I believe Azim would go with him."

"Home to Studleigh?" asked Geoffrey, quickly.

"No, to Pine Edge," answered Rachel, with a slight pressure of her lips.

Lady Vane took her husband's arm, and led him down the verandah steps into the garden, so that for a few moments the young couple were left alone.

"Could you really part with the boy, Rachel?" Geoffrey asked.

"I could. I have been fearfully oppressed all day with a sense of impending evil. If baby were safe, I would not

mind for myself. Besides, this heat takes the life out of him. He has been so languid all day. Will you tell me, Geoffrey, quite frankly, what is the danger you apprehend, and what its consequences would be? It will be better for me to know exactly what may happen."

Geoffrey Ayre hesitated a moment. The nature of the danger was easily known; its consequences were such as not an Englishman in the city, soldier or civilian, dared face. It meant a handful of Europeans in the grasp of a mighty horde of Mohammedans, in whose breasts the instincts of a savage race had not been extinguished or much modified by the touch of civilization.

"There has been a revolt at Meerut, Rachel. A dark runner brought the news this morning; and he says the mutineers are marching on to Delhi," he replied, briefly, but kept back the fact that the greater portion of the European residents in Meerut had been massacred. "If our Sepoys join the rebels it will go hard with us, we must admit that, dear, for we are only a handful."

"And have you any idea of the state the Sepoys are in?" Rachel asked, quite quietly still.

"Disaffected still, so far as we can judge or trust them," answered Geoffrey, somewhat gloomily. "The commandant ordered out the regiments this forenoon and told them the news, and exhorted them to stand true to their colours. They cheered him to the echo: but it is just possible that an Indian cheer and an English one may have different meanings. I wish you would take advantage of the Eltons' carriage, dearest. Such scenes and anxieties are not for you just now."

"When are they going?"

"On Monday morning."

"I shall go to Mrs Elton now, and see if she will take baby."

"And you?"

"No, I shall stay here with you, Geoffrey."

"My darling, it will be terrible to part from you; but it would make my mind easier if you were away."

"And what about my mind, Geoffrey?" she asked, with a slight, sad smile. "I should certainly die of apprehension about you. I came to India because I loved you, and that love makes it easy for me to share every risk to which you are exposed. Let it be as I say."

He put his arm about her slender shoulders and drew her to his heart.

"My wife, in such troublous times as these I could almost wish I had left you in safety at home. Do you not blame me?"

"I blame you!"

"Never had her eyes looked into his with a more enduring and perfect trust. She touched his bronzed cheek with her white fingers, and that touch had the power to thrill him as of yore.

"Though this should be the last day of my life, Geoffrey, I bless the day I became your wife. There is no happier woman in the wide world than I."

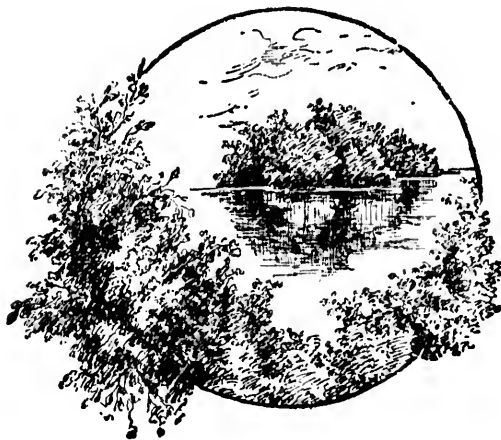
It was an assurance passing sweet to the soldier's heart—an assurance recalled with sudden vividness a few hours later, when the storm broke, and he was where those who knew him expected him to be—in the very hottest forefront of the battle. To her life's end Rachel Ayre thanked God that in that last moment of confidence she had been moved to utter these true, tender, wifely words.

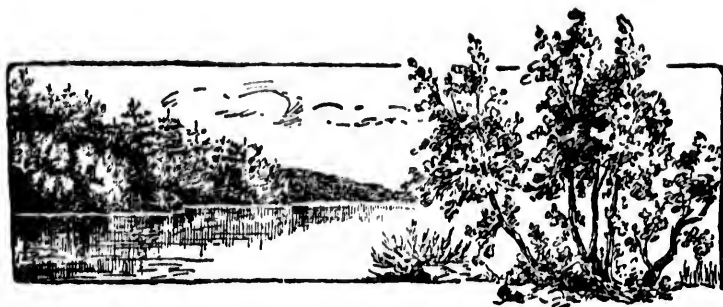
"It's going to be an ugly business, Lucy," said Sir Randal Vane to his wife in his gruff, practical way. "An ugly business. I suppose it will take the total extermination of the Europeans in different parts of India to convince that wooden-headed Government at home that the military service in India is a perfect mockery of the name. Why, we've nothing but the Company's servants and a few English officers to cope with these Mohaminedan devils. I beg your pardon, Lucy, but they're nothing else. Graves had

them out this forenoon appealing to their loyalty. Loyalty !
As well appeal to that rat's loyalty. It would be about as
satisfactory."

"We must just be brave and trust in God," said his
wife.

"I suppose so. It's all that's left to us anyhow,"
responded Sir Randal, quickly. "There's no man's help
in this forsaken place to be depended on. Before another
sundown it may be, every man for himself, with us all."





CHAPTER VII.

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM.

SUNDAY, the 10th of May, passed over peacefully in Delhi. The usual services were held in the churches, and there were no alarming signs of any disposition to rebellion among the natives. But anxiety still possessed the Europeans, and they rose on Monday morning apprehensive of some great crisis. The uncertainty regarding the nature of this crisis was the hardest trial these few brave hearts had to bear. On Sunday morning Captain Ayre had made every arrangement with his friends, the Eltons, to take the boy, with his native nurse, in their carriage to Calcutta, and thence home to England. Rachel was up before dawn on Monday morning gathering together her baby's wardrobe, thankful for anything which would divert her mind from the parting, and from the anxieties which encompassed them. Although she was in weak health, her wonderful power of endurance and quiet resolution never deserted her for a moment. Her husband watched her in mingled amazement and admiration, knowing that her passionate love for the child must make the sacrifice one of no ordinary kind. Once, when he tried to express something of this feeling, she lifted her face to his, and her mouth trembled,

"Don't, Geoffrey!" she said, almost sharply, and he saw that it would be wise to leave her alone. So with a kiss he left her, and went to meet with his brother officers.

Rachel continued her preparations, breathing many a passionate prayer into the folds of the little garments. God alone knew what a sacrifice she was making. With her, however, mother love had not eclipsed wifely love. Her husband was still first and dearest, and she had chosen as her heart dictated. While the child slept through the cool hours of the early morning the faithful Azim watched by him, dividing his attention between his idolised charge and the mistress he loved with scarcely less devotion.

"Come here, Azim," she said at length, when her task was almost done, and motioning him to follow her to the verandah, where they could talk without fear of disturbing the child. With a low salaam Azim obeyed, and stood before her with his arms meekly folded, his large expressive eyes fixed intently on her face. For a moment Rachel Ayre met that look with one of keenest questioning, which the native felt to indicate that his beloved Mem Sahib was debating within herself how far he was to be trusted. In spite of his silent and voiceless ways, Azim had a quick understanding and an acute perception. But, though the slight suspicion visible in the expression of his mistress's face hurt him, he made no sign.

"Azim," she said quickly, "the Sahib and I are about to give you the greatest proof of our confidence that we have in our power. We entrust the life of our child in your hands."

The Oriental bowed, and laying his hand upon his heart uplifted his eyes to heaven. He knew enough of the English to understand what his mistress was saying to him, but his own tongue had only mastered a few simple words, and he could not answer her except by signs.

"Major and Mrs Elton have kindly undertaken to convey our precious Bābā home to England, but it is on you we

depend to care for him and to shield him with your life. For such a service gold cannot pay, though it will not be lacking. The fervent gratitude of a lifetime will be yours, Azim. Is your love for the Baba strong enough to undertake this charge?"

Again Azim bowed himself to the ground so low that his lips touched the feet of his mistress; then he raised himself, laid his hand on his heart, and pointed to the inner room of the bungalow where lay the unconscious child. "Azim die, Baba live," he said, with eagerness, and his lustrous eyes shone. "Sahib and Mem Sahib, trust Azim. He not forget. Azim die, Baba live!"

Rachel's eyes filled with tears, and, extending her hand, she grasped that of her dusky servant in a fervent grasp.

"May God reward you, Azim, and deal with you as you deal with him," she said, quickly. "Now, you must awaken Baba, for the carriage is to pass at eleven, and we must not keep it waiting."

"Let the poor child sleep while he may, Rachel," said the voice of Lady Vane, and she came hurrying up the verandah steps, her face paler than her wont. "We are too late. Sir Randal has just sent a servant to tell us that the rebels have arrived from Meerut, and entered the city by the Bridge of Boats; and we are to make ready at once to withdraw to the Flagstaff Tower."

Rachel scarcely grew a shade paler, and betrayed no sign of fear.

"But will that prevent the Eltons from leaving?" she asked, quickly.

"I should imagine so. Yes, certainly."

"And where is Geoffrey?"

Lady Vane hesitated a moment; but the steady look of the younger woman demanded that there should be no concealment.

"The 52nd have gone out to meet the rebels."

Rachel turned her face away, and after an instant of

silence passed into the inner room, while Azim was busily engaged dressing his charge.

"Azim die ; Baba live," he reiterated, and a faint, wan smile touched Rachel's lips.

"The 52nd have gone out to meet the rebels." She realised in that awful moment what it was to be a soldier's wife. Lady Vane followed her into the room, and sat down calmly on a rocking-chair.

"If this is to be our last day of life, Rachel, so be it, and our blood be upon the head of the English Government. No, I will not hush—I am not so good as you. I have always told you so ; and I must relieve my mind. We'll be obliged to die, and every soldier in the city will fight to-day against fearful odds. A hundred to one, Randal said. I hope, if both our husbands, my dear, must die, it will be at their posts, and not before they have each sent half-a-dozen of these vermin into eternity. Do you hear that firing? Isn't it amazing how quietly we can take it when it comes? But God only knows what is before us."

"God will take care of us," murmured Rachel, as she threw on the child's dress, and held him while the nurse's skilful fingers fastened it.

"Perhaps He will, but unless the age of miracles should be renewed, there is not an atom of hope," said the elder woman with the philosophy of despair. "It depends, of course, on how many faithful souls are left among the Sepoys. I believe myself that Azim there may be the only one. I have a revolver, Rachel, which I learned to use when I came to India first. I will keep it for you and for myself, should the worst emergency come. Here is a carriage, and poor Mrs Elton looking like a corpse in it. Ah, the Major, too. It revives one to see an English soldier. Well, what has happened?"

Major Elton, a tall, stout, military man, cleared the verandah steps at a bound.

"Come both of you ! The streets are comparatively

quiet. We shall reach the Flagstaff Tower in safety, perhaps, if we take the by-ways."

"You cannot leave the city, then?" said Rachel, as she hastily threw on a wrap.

"The city is in the hands of the rebels. There's a hand-to-hand combat going on at this minute at the Cashmere Gate. Resistance is absurd, and simply means butchery of our poor fellows; God help us all!"

Rachel folded the child in her arms. The Major gave his arm to Lady Vane.

"There is no room for the bearer. Let him be. If he is faithful he'll find you out again," he said, waving Azim to keep back. A low guttural cry escaped the servant's lips, and he stood on the verandah step the picture of unutterable despair, as the ladies hastily stepped into the carriage and the Major sprang to his saddle.

Rachel looked out and waved her hand, not forgetful even in that trying moment of her faithful nurse. Little Clement, too, clapped his hands and crowed, delighted at the prospect of a ride. When the carriage was out of sight the faithful fellow retired into the bungalow, and began quietly and methodically to gather together such things as he knew his mistress prized, though in the peril and anxiety of the moment she had taken no heed of them, but gladly left her home to the mercy of the spoiler, in the hope that life would be spared. Leaving the bungalow behind, the carriage dashed down a retired and leafy road skirting the busiest streets; the Major galloping ahead, scarcely daring to hope that they would make good their escape. The massacre in the city had begun, but the interest of the insurgents was chiefly centred at the gates, which the Europeans were heroically trying to defend from the mutineers without. It was a forlorn hope. At the end of the road from the bungalow the fugitives had to cross a busier street in order to reach the ascent to the heights on which stood the Flagstaff Tower. Just as the carriage

dashed across the square a stray bullet from an insurgent rifle knocked the Major from his saddle. The driver of the carriage, faithful to his charge, dashed on, and so spared the helpless ladies the sight of their protector's death. A sabre cut finished the work of the treacherous bullet, and one more brave English soldier was added to the list of the dead. This incident attracted the attention of a party of marauders passing along the road to the cantonment, and, supposing the inmates of the carriage to be rich Europeans flying with their treasures of money or jewels, instantly gave chase. The driver of the carriage, faithful even still to his dead master, and to the helpless women in his care, spurred on his horses and reached the tower gates, though himself wounded in his right arm by a bullet. The whole party, carriage and all, were at last hastily withdrawn into the temporary refuge of the tower, where poor Mrs Elton instantly swooned away. Sir Randal Vane, overjoyed to see his wife in comparative safety, came from his place on guard to greet them.

"Where's the Major?" he asked, quickly.

"Dead or mortally wounded, Randal," his wife answered, mournfully. "He was shot at, anyhow; and we could not wait to see. Poor Mrs Elton," she added, glancing compassionately at her prostrate friend. "It might be better for her never to be restored. What chance of life have any of us?"

"Meagre enough, certainly," returned Sir Randal, fiercely tugging his grey moustache. "Mrs Ayre, you set an example to us. Although this is your first experience of active service, if I may use such honourable words about this dastardly business, you look entirely self-possessed."

"There is no use making a fuss, and adding to the anxieties of our protectors," Rachel answered, quietly. "Is there any news of the 52nd?"

"They are at the Cashmere Gate yet, but it is a forlorn hope. We have no means of knowing what is going on, except

by the firing. It's a work of death anyhow," said the old man, unable to present a semblance of cheerfulness, for he was in despair. "Some may escape; we can't tell. All we can do in the meantime is to defend ourselves until help comes."

"Where is it to come from?" asked Lady Vane, with a fleeting, melancholy smile.

"Meerut. Our only chance is that Hewett will send after the mutineers, unless he is utterly demoralised or massacred."

"Is there any part of the ramparts from which we can see the operations at the Cashmere Gate, Sir Randal?" asked Rachel, as she slowly rocked her baby to and fro in her arms.

"Yes, my dear, if the atmosphere were clear, but you can't expose yourself there. Believe that Captain Ayre, wherever he is, is doing his duty as an Englishman and a brave soldier should. And if we have seen the last of him, a soldier's wife has to accept every hazard of war."

"Yes," Rachel admitted with a pitiful droop of the lips. "But this is not war. If you will hold Baba, Lady Vane, and Sir Randal will allow me, and show me the way, I should like to go outside."

"Who so positive as a woman? Well, well, Lucy, take the little lad, and let her have her wish. This way, Mrs Ayre; but I promise you you will see nothing but the smoke of the firing and the flames of the bungalows. The miscreants are in 'he midst of their fiendish work."

Rachel took the old soldier's arm, and he led her to the ramparts, where the soldiers were busy preparing ammunition for their defence.

The Flagstaff Tower being built on a height, commanded a magnificent and uninterrupted view of the city and all its gateways. It was, however, as Sir Randal had predicted. There was nothing to be seen but the smoke of the battle, lit here and there by the lurid flames of the burning bungalows. A strange din and tumult filled the air, and the whole

scene was indescribably weird, and calculated to inspire horror and fear.

"Where are the 52nd, Sir Randal?" Rachel asked, after a moment's contemplation of the scene.

"Yonder, where the smoke is thickest, my dear. You see you can discover nothing yonder. I doubt not your hero is doing his duty. My God, what is that?"

A fearful report, like the roar of an earthquake, or the explosion of a volcano, rent the air, and a mighty tongue of fire shot up to the sky, lighting for an instant the sombre-laden atmosphere, and causing every object to stand out with startling vividness.

"It's the Residency. They've blown it up," cried the gunners, but in a moment the truth burst upon them, and they gave a faint cheer.

"Some of the brave boys have blown up the magazine. Heaven grant that a thousand of the dogs have gone up with it! Anyhow, they can't shoot us with our own ammunition now," cried Sir Randal. "It's like a thing Geoffrey Ayre would do. I never saw a cooler hand in an emergency."

Rachel shook her head and crept away from the ramparts. She had seen enough. There remained in her mind not the shadow of a doubt that her husband had lost his life in that struggle against fearful odds.

She found that Baba, unconscious of the perils surrounding his innocent life, had fallen asleep, and that Lady Vane had laid him down, in order to assist in attending some of the wounded who had just been brought in. Rachel sprang forward as she recognised in one poor, shattered form Geoffrey's own Colonel, who could doubtless give her some news of him. "I asked him, my love," Lady Vane whispered, reading the intense questioning in the young wife's eyes. "He was uninjured last time the Colonel saw him, and fighting like a lion. If he should be wounded they'll bring him here, if possible. Look at these poor fellows,

and what can we do for them? We have nothing to alleviate their suffering. Surgeon Paine has been killed going back to the laboratory for the things we need. Oh, Rachel, Rachel, God help us all!"

If women's tears, or the agony of their compassion, could have healed them, these wounded heroes had not long been prostrate.

That dreadful day was but the beginning of sorrows for the Europeans in the old Mohanmedan city.



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CHAPTER VIII.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

WE may go back a few hours, and follow Captain Ayre through the perils of that awful day. When he left Rachel in the early morning he walked across to the cantonments, and found his brother officers making preparations for battle. The natives of the 52nd betrayed no immediate signs of insubordination, and obeyed their orders quietly, and with apparent readiness. Directly the news was brought that a small number of mutineer cavalry from Meerut were crossing the Jumna by the Bridge of Boats, Colonel Ripley gave orders to advance to meet them. This order was quietly obeyed, and for a time all went well.

Geoffrey Ayre, field-officer for the week, hoped that in the moment of action at hand his men would not fail. The influence of his personality was very great, he knew they loved him; but he depended on it too much. The mutinous mania is one which speedily crushes out all better feelings, because it appeals so powerfully and irresistibly to the basest passions of the human heart. The British officers hoped, by intercepting the approaching mutineers before they obtained entrance to the city through any of the gates, to crush the insurrection in its infancy. Even the most

despondent among them had no idea how completely and silently the seeds of treachery and rebellion had been sown within the city, and that before the first blow had been struck every movement and its probable result had been considered. They had forgotten to look to the state of matters within the Royal Palace of Delhi itself. At the Cashmere Gate the mutineers were to meet with their first repulse. Without a moment's hesitation Captain Ayre ordered his men to fire on the rebels, but not a musket moved.

"It's all up with us, Geoff," the Colonel whispered, and, wheeling his horse round before the dusky body of men, he exhorted them once more in a brief, passionate appeal to stand true. His words received a sudden check, for one of his own servants, a man whom he had befriended and trusted to the uttermost, gave him a sabre thrust in the back. It was the first taste of blood, and with a yell the savage instincts of the race rose, and in a moment the handful of gallant British soldiers were surrounded. They fought dearly, not for life, for that they knew was forfeited, but the thought of the dear, defenceless ones within the city nerved each arm with a desperate courage. Colonel Beresford was speedily left for dead, and in the midst of the melee was borne away by his body-servant, assisted by one of the Sepoys, whose fidelity returned at sight of his kind Colonel's white face and bleeding form. Between them they managed to convey him without further molestation to the Flagstaff Tower. Geoffrey Ayre, with his lieutenants and sergeants, fought bravely on; and when he fell at last his sword had despatched half a dozen of the mutineers. Scarcely waiting to see whether their victims were really dead, the insurgents, in company with the now revolted 52nd and the gate-guard, marched on into the city. Geoffrey opened his eyes feebly, and tried to raise himself on one arm. Close by a young ensign, a mere boy, who had tasted battle that day for the first time, was kneeling with his hands clasped before him.

"Harry!" said the Captain, in a faint whisper, but there was no response; and when by a further effort Geoffrey managed to crawl round nearer to him, he saw that he was dead. With a groan Geoffrey Ayre fell back, and relapsed into unconsciousness, lying with his face upturned to the merciless sun, the bright hair which Rachel had so often caressed clotted on his brow. When he awakened again there was some one bending over him, and he felt a hand stealing into his watch pocket. Already the human jackals were prowling about to rob the dead. With a muttered exclamation the wounded man tried to raise himself again, and his hand stretched out seeking for his sword. But the murderer was before him, and so Geoffrey Ayre died by a treacherous hand, his own sword the weapon which dealt the blow. There were many such scenes, and many even more horrible, witnessed in the old Indian city that bright May day—scenes which go to make up one of the darkest pages of British history.

Meanwhile, in the Flagstaff Tower the refugees waited in a state of painful uncertainty, not knowing how far the mutiny had spread, nor anything indeed of what was happening in the city. It was evidently, however, in a state of revolt and commotion, and there was no hope left that any Europeans who had trusted themselves to the mercy of the insurgents could have escaped with their lives. To add to the horrors of the day, the scum of the populace and the wild gipsy marauders from without the city followed in the rear of the Sepoys, and finished the work of destruction they had begun. By three o'clock in the afternoon there was scarcely a living English person in Delhi save those in the tower, and the whole plain on which the city stood was like one vast conflagration, with the flames of the burning bungalows. It became apparent to the refugees in the tower that they could not long hope to escape the attention of the mob. The building itself stood on a good site, and was very strong. They had two guns and a

plentiful supply of ammunition; and the commandant was not without hope of being able to hold the place till aid should come from without. The ladies, themselves, instead of giving way to fear or nervousness, kept up bravely, and even volunteered to assist in keeping the guns loaded, but before the day closed, it became apparent that the tower could no longer be considered as a refuge. Part of the 38th regiment, the main body of which had already followed the mutineers, was in the tower, and the wretched inmates watched them with a fearful and agonising interest, wondering how long they could be depended on. Since the Colonel had been brought into the tower there had been no further news from without. In one of the inner apartments of the tower, towards the close of that terrible day, the women were gathered, sitting quite quietly, with white, grave faces, which yet indicated the highest courage and endurance. Rachel kept poor Baba close in her arms, and sometimes even smiled in response to his childish chatter, but between them few words passed. Major Elton's delicate wife, whose nerves had been shattered by the anxieties of the past weeks, appeared to have become imbued with a new and amazing fortitude. Her pale, worn face betrayed no sign of fear, and she was even able to impart courage to others. Rachel could not but look at her sometimes in simple wonder. Lady Vane was satirical and indifferent, accepting these extraordinary circumstances with philosophy, and expecting nothing but death. So they sat huddled together, a melancholy band, waiting the development of events. They were not, however, very long kept in suspense.

Late in the afternoon, when the ladies were partaking of a little meagre refreshment, the door of their apartment suddenly opened, and Sir Randal came in, followed by Mrs Ayre's nurse, Azim, whom they had left behind at the bungalow in the morning. Rachel sprang up, her face flushing with expectancy and newly inspired hope.

"Oh, Azim, have you any news of the Sahib?" she asked hastily; but the native mournfully shook his head, and unwinding his turban from his head gave into her hand a little packet wrapped in a linen handkerchief.

"Sahib no more. Azim bring these to Mem Sahib. Them precious to her."

Tears sprang to the eyes of all present as the young wife unfolded the parcel and revealed a lock of bright hair and a soldier's medal, which told their own tale. Rachel lifted her eyes to the servant's face, and by that look bound him to her anew for life.

"Where did you get these, Azim?"

"From poor Sahib—dead at the gate. Azim seek him all day, find him, and bring these to Mem Sahib, and more money and jewels from bungalow, all burned down," he said, eagerly; and taking from his ample robe another packet, he handed to his mistress all the money and the trinkets, each precious because of its history and its memory, which, in the haste of the morning's flight, she had left behind.

"God bless you, Azim," she said, and her hand trembled as she took her treasures from the dusky hands. "I have nothing to give but thanks in the meantime; yes, and Baba's love. See how eager he is to go to you. Take him again. As long as I live, I shall never forget what you have done for me and mine this day. This is priceless."

She touched the bright curl with tender finger, wrapped it up, and placed it in the bodice of her gown.

"One could almost forgive the traitors for the sake of this one honest soul," said Sir Randal, gruffly. "Well, ladies, there is nothing for us now but to make the best of our way out of this beastly hole, and if we ever reach the shores of England in safety, we'll know, I hope, to stay there."

"Must we go now?" asked Mrs Elton, anxiously, while at Sir Randal's words Azim betrayed the liveliest satisfaction.

"Yes, ma'am. Azim says every soul of them's in revolt, and that we can't depend on those we have with us here; so as soon as the sun sets we'll set out in the carriage which was to take you to Calcutta."

A few hasty preparations were made, and in the dusk of the evening the carriage, containing the three ladies and the child, drove away from the Flagstaff Tower. It was driven by Azim, who had been accustomed before the birth of the child to drive his mistress in a pony carriage. Kurnaul was the destination agreed upon, as it could be reached by road without crossing any river. Sir Randal and other officers promised to follow as speedily as was practicable on horseback, if possible, and if not, on foot.

Husbands and wives parted that dreadful day with no outward sign of pain; the emotions were pent in their bosoms, paralysed by the horror of circumstances and apprehension for the future. It was a living death for each every hour. The little company of women sat silent in the carriage, holding their breath, as the faithful servant drove through the city, expecting every moment to be their last. But they were fortunate in escaping from the busy thoroughfares, and as they left the din behind them, poor Mrs Elton leaned back in her seat and wearily closed her eyes. With one arm Rachel held her child tightly to her breast, and the other hand clasped that of Lady Vane. Both seemed to find some comfort in that silent touch. Suddenly the stillness was broken by the tramp of feet and the sound of angry voices. One shot was fired, then the carriage came to an abrupt stop, and they heard Azim arguing wildly in the native tongue. But louder and angrier voices drowned his, and presently the carriage door was rudely opened, and a flaring torch held up before the faces of the affrighted women.

"What do you want?" asked Lady Vane, in fluent Hindustanee. "We are only poor fugitive women fleeing from death. Is it money? We have none."

"Yes, I have some, if they will take it and let us go on," said Rachel, quickly, and opening out the packet Azim had given her held out some gold pieces, which caused the dusky faces to light up with a savage glow of delight.

"Come down," said one, peremptorily, and just then Azim appeared at the opposite door, and advised them to alight and give up such things as they had. Fortunately their assailants were only a band of gipsy marauders, such as infest the environs of all Indian cities—consequently their object was rather plunder than murder.

Implicitly trusting the faithful Azim, the ladies at once alighted, and though they stood alone on the edge of a pathless jungle, at the mercy of a score of savage-looking men, they preserved a wonderful degree of calmness. The ring-leader pointed to their ear-rings and rings and other little ornaments—all of which were silently given up. Under pretence of unfastening her brooch, Rachel slipped her wedding-ring into her mouth, and so kept that precious symbol of her brief married life. Lady Vane wore a black bonnet trimmed with jets, which took the eye of the marauders, and she was obliged to give it up.

When they had thus robbed them of every ornament and some of their outer clothing, to the dismay of the fugitives, they jumped into the carriage and drove away back towards Delhi, heedless of the frantic remonstrances of Azim, who ran after them for some distance, upbraiding them with their treachery.

Left alone in the darkening night, without money or food, or sufficient clothing or means of conveyance, the fugitives were indeed in a pitiable plight.



CHAPTER IX.

THE FLIGHT FROM DELHI.

“**W**HAT is to become of us now?” asked Lady Vane in her cool, abrupt fashion. “Perhaps after all it was a mistake to leave the city.”

“Death would only have come to us more swiftly there,” murmured Mrs Elton, faintly, and sitting down on a stone by the wayside, drooped her pale face on her hands.

“Don’t let us lose hope,” said Rachel, cheerily, as she hushed her baby to her breast. “I have great faith in Azim. Here he comes. We will follow his directions. Perhaps we may yet be saved.”

Azim came back with his head dejectedly bent, his face wearing a look of distress and keen anxiety.

“What to be done now, Mem Sahib?” he asked, very humbly.

“We are waiting for you to direct us,” Rachel replied quickly.

“They say certain death to the Feringhee is to be found all along the way to Kurnaul,” he said, rapidly, in Hindustanee. “They are vile, but they speak truth. What is to be done?”

“Will you go on, Rachel, with the child and risk it?” asked Lady Vane, pointedly.

"No—we had better go back so far, and then join the road to Meerut," said Rachel, decidedly. "Dear Mrs Elton, are you equal to any exertion? We must go on somehow. It is impossible to stay here."

"Oh, yes, I can go on, but have you forgotten we have the Jumna to cross before we can touch the road to Meerut?"

"There may be a boat. Had we not better risk it, Azim?"

Azim nodded his approval, and held out his arms for Baba, who, feeling cold and hungry, was beginning to fret.

"There may be boat. If not, we must cross. It will be best. I thought so at first, though Mem Sahibs said Kurnaul."

"Let us go on, then," said Lady Vane, and, giving an arm to Mrs Elton, she signified to Azim to lead the way. Their progress was necessarily slow. The ladies were already worn out with excitement and fatigue, and more than once they had to seek the friendly shelter of the dense trees on either side of the rough road to escape the observation of persons they met. In the darkness it was, of course, impossible to distinguish friend from foe. At these times, when crouching behind trees holding their breath in terror, it was strange how still the poor child kept, never uttering a sound. It, indeed, appeared as if he were in some degree conscious of their imminent peril. Shortly the moon shone out with a vivid and steady light, and revealed to them the glittering windings of the Jumna, which lay between them and the road they had decided to take. Azim, addressing himself to Lady Vane, because she perfectly understood his own tongue, explained that further up there was a shallower and narrower part of the river which it might be possible for them to ford. So they kept on again in silence, following the faithful servant, who was their only hope. If he proved treacherous, nothing but death could be in store. Even

had Rachel distrusted him, she believed that the clinging of the child's soft arms about his neck would appeal to his best feelings, and she was right. Love for his charge, deep anxiety for his safety and that of his mother, were the only feelings in the breast of the Hindoo. Nothing but death itself would release him from the obligations with which love had bound him.

After a time they came to a place where the river took a wider sweep, and which, to the practised eye of the native, indicated that the water must be shallower. Here he paused, and giving the child into the arms of his mistress, signified his intention of trying the ford first himself. The poor ladies crouching in the thicket—for even in that lonely spot they could hear occasionally the sounds of voices and the crack of rifles—watched with agonising suspense the passage across the river. At one part nothing was visible but the turbaned head; but as he was not a very tall man, they were hopeful that they would be able to follow in safety. Directly he found the water growing shallower towards the other side, he turned and came rapidly back to the bank, and holding out his arms for the child, advised the ladies to follow as quickly as possible, as there were certainly some persons approaching, and the chances were that they might be part of the mutineers skirmishing about the byroads in search of fugitives. Without a moment's hesitation the ladies stepped into the water, although, at the cold touch of the stream, they could scarcely repress their exclamations. It was a desperate alternative, yet not one of them shrank from it. Before they were fifty yards out there was a great noise on the road they had just left, and a company of Sepoys, led by one on horseback, swarmed down to the bank, shouting on the fugitives to stop. They never looked back, but held bravely on, though the force of the current in mid-stream was like to sweep them off their feet. A new danger assailed them when some bullets came whizzing past them, fortunately

aimed too high to injure, and they escaped in safety to the other side, and immediately plunged into the jungle. As they proceeded, Rachel noticed that the Hindoo staggered once or twice as he walked ; and as she stepped up to inquire what ailed him, she was horrified to see his clothes stained with blood.

"Are you hurt, Azim?" she inquired, anxiously. "See, give me Baba. Oh, my poor, faithful friend!" She caught the child just in time, for with a groan the Hindoo staggered again and fell to the ground. "He has been shot," said Lady Vane, kneeling down beside him and endeavouring to staunch the wound with her handkerchief, "and we can do nothing for him. God help us, Rachel, what is to become of us all?"

They grouped themselves disconsolately about the prostrate body of their guide and protector, and looked at each other in blank despair. It was the dead of night, and they were alone in the jungle, dripping wet, cold and hungry, with no prospect before them but a lingering death. The glazing eye of the Hindoo warned them that he had received a mortal hurt, and that he could not live to see the morning light. With her fretting child clasped close in her arms Rachel knelt down among the thick underbrush and uttered aloud a few words of earnest prayer. It was indeed a case in which only Divine aid could avail, and somehow, when she ceased speaking, a sense of resignation and peace seemed to creep into each heart. It was a grief of no ordinary kind to Rachel that she was forced to sit inactive and see her faithful servant die. They crouched together in the dense shelter of the jungle, with the white night dews lying thickly around them, shivering, and their teeth chattering, but afraid to move or speak lest they should be betrayed. So the dawn found them, and they sorrowfully turned to go upon their way, leaving the dead body of Azim behind. They could give him no burial, except to lay some branches above him, and Rachel through

choking tears said a few words of the service over him, Baba crying all the time, not understanding why his nurse lay so still and would not dandle him in his arms.

Faint from want of food, they were glad to pick some of the wild fruits as they passed along. They spoke none, for they could not encourage each other; and it was better to keep silence. They had no sort of idea what direction they were taking, nor what prospect was before them. Unless they could speedily come to some place where food could be procured, they must sink by the wayside, and die from exhaustion. When the sun rose, it dried their garments certainly, but blistered their feet, for they had been robbed of their shoes as well as their head-gear. In the distance they saw smoke arising behind some trees, and when they drew nearer, in great fear and trembling, they saw that they were approaching a Hindoo village. They paused without the precincts, and held a consultation as to what they should do.

"If it is a disloyal place, they'll only kill us," said Lady Vane; "and provided they do it quickly, I don't much care. What prospect have we of ultimate safety? Three women alone can never reach Meerut."

"Let me go and risk it," said Mrs Elton, quietly. "If I don't come back, you will know that I am dead, and you can keep away from the place. It does not matter for me; what have I to live for now? You, Mrs Ayre, must live for your poor, dear child, and you, dear Lady Vane, may yet be restored to your husband. Let me go."

Rachel looked at her with astonishment, and her eyes filled with tears. In the European society of Delhi Mrs Elton had been known as a somewhat selfish, complaining invalid, who taxed to the utmost her good-natured husband's consideration and patience. She was indeed the last person from whom heroism or unselfishness was to be expected; but the exigencies of their situation had called the nobler part of her nature into play, and she was not only willing

but eager to sacrifice herself, if it could be any benefit to her companions in misfortune.

"Let us all go," said Lady Vane, quickly. "We cannot permit you to leave us. Let us share the peril together to the end."

But Mrs Elton was firm.

"It will be right for me to go. Something whispers it to me. I have been too long a burden and an anxiety to others. My husband cheerfully laid down his life. Let me have the meagre satisfaction of following his example, since I cannot now atone to him for what I thoughtlessly made him suffer for years. Please God, he will forgive me for it, yonder."

She raised her eyes to Heaven, and then, with a steadfast and beautiful expression on her face, bade them good-bye.

"Wait here, perhaps for an hour, and if I do not return or send a messenger you will know I have come to grief. Good-bye—God keep you, and bring you safely out of these fearful dangers."

With a hurried kiss she left them, and made her way quickly towards the village.

"Truth is indeed stranger than fiction, Rachel," said Lady Vane, musingly, as she watched the retreating figure vanish among the trees. "This awful business has made a woman out of Augusta Elton. I hope I shall profit by it, too. If I ever see Randal again, I'll be a better wife to him. You poor darling, sit down, you look fit to die. There is nothing for us but to wait for a while. We must just guess the time. Oh, Rachel, what do we look like?—guys at a country fair!"

She gave way to a fit of hysterical laughter, which somewhat alarmed Rachel, but it passed away, and they sat in absolute silence, waiting and praying in their inmost hearts for deliverance. Rachel was growing painfully anxious about her little boy. He had had no food for twenty hours, and his fretfulness was now stilled into a strange kind of

apathy which was almost like unconsciousness. Although thankful that he did not unnerve and harass them by loud crying, she almost wished that he would make some sign of life. To lose husband and child Rachel felt would be to take from her all that made life sweet. She did not, indeed, realise yet that she had lost Geoffrey—the whole experiences of the last two days were like the shadows of some fearful dream.

“There’s a foot,” cried Lady Vane, nervously, breaking the deep silence. “God help us, Rachel. Perhaps our end has come.”

Both started up, and beheld approaching a man whose dress proclaimed him to be a fakheer or mendicant devotee, such as are to be found in every Hindoo village. They stood looking at him as he approached, with the most intense questioning, and were somewhat relieved to see that his face, though solid, betrayed neither hatred nor vindictiveness.

When a few yards from them he stopped, and made a hurried sign for them to follow him.

Lady Vane stepped forward, and in his own language asked him if he were friendly. His face brightened a little, and he made answer that he had given the other lady shelter and food, and was prepared to do the same for them, so long as it was safe for him to do so. He explained, as they eagerly followed him, that his village was still disaffected and quite friendly towards the English, though it was a great risk for them to show it. With what joy did these exhausted women follow the good-hearted Hindoo along a byway to his hut, which was situated in a retired grove a little way removed from the other houses; and there they found Mrs Elton partaking of a rude but welcome meal, consisting of chupatties, unleavened cakes of Indian meal, which she washed down with a drink of water, and sweetened with the juice of the tamarind. The fakheer looked compassionately at the child, and from a little recess

brought out a cup of milk set aside for his own midday meal. He bade them eat to their satisfaction, and then rest on the rude bed of rushes in the corner. Promising that they should not be molested unless the proximity of the Sepoys should hasten their departure, he left them in peace. Never had food and shelter appeared so delicious as to these poor fugitives, and relying on the fidelity of the man who had befriended them, they gladly rested all day, sleeping and watching by turns. At sundown they were disturbed by the return of the fakheer, accompanied by another man, who turned out to be a German zemindar or landowner, who had become to all purposes a native of the country. He had not, however, forgotten his Fatherland entirely, and was anxious to befriend the English if possible. He asked the ladies to come to his house, which being an important one in the village, would afford them a more secure shelter than that of the poor but kind-hearted fakheer, and he further raised their spirits by telling them he had sent a message to Meerut which would certainly bring them relief.

For three days the fugitives were hidden in the zemindar's house, often at his own peril, for the village was frequently visited by bands of victorious Sepoys, who would have massacred the ladies without mercy, and their succourer with them. On the evening of the third day a little band of horsemen rode through the village and drew up before the zemindar's house. At their approach the ladies fled as usual to their hiding-place, but when Lady Vane, with her ear to the door, heard an English voice speaking below, she gave a cry of delight—

"It is Randal's voice. Thank God. Thank God!"

So they were rescued from their more imminent peril, and conveyed in safety to Meerut, and thence when opportunity offered down to the coast *en route* for England.

They were among the first of the very few who escaped the earliest horrors of the Mutiny, and were fortunate in

reaching Calcutta on the morning of the day before a homeward bound vessel sailed. But the little company who had shared such perils together had to part at Calcutta, for in the hospital there Rachel's second child prematurely saw the light.



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CHAPTER X.

THE AGONY OF SUSPENSE.

IT had been a bitter spring in England. Never had the treacherous East wind lingered so long. In the first week of June trees and hedgerows presented a strange, blasted appearance as if some blighting breath had passed over them. In the Studleigh woods there was scarcely a violet or primrose to be seen, and the buds of the mayflower withered ere they came to bloom. The fitful sunshine as it peeped out behind the lowering clouds revealed none of the beauty with which they usually clothed park and lawns. Old people and invalids were weary with the sickness of hope deferred. A cloud hung over Nature's face, and upon many hearts the spring of that memorable year laid a burden never more to be removed on earth.

In the grey and chilly morning of one of these gloomy days Christopher Abbot walked across the fields from Pine Edge to Studleigh. There seemed to be a change for the worse in the old yeoman, and his tall figure looked quite bent, and his step had lost its old elastic swing. His face was careworn and anxious, too; he appeared like a man bowed down with care. He looked across his wheat-field as he skirted the edge of it, noting its backward condition,

and even wondering when there would be harvest if the sun refused to do its duty ; but his innermost heart was filled with anxieties in which the farm had no part. As he strode across the park he heard the gong from the house, and, looking at his watch, saw that it was half-past nine. But they breakfasted late always at the Manor. He went up the steps to the front door and gave the bell a vigorous pull. A housemaid crossing the hall saw him and came out at once.

"Good morning, my lass. Is the Squire up?" asked the farmer, in that courteous, kindly way which made him adored by all his own dependants.

"Yes, Mr Abbot. He breakfasts always in his dressing-room. My lady has just gone in to the morning-room."

"If you show me into the business-room I can wait till the Squire has finished breakfast."

"Come in, then, please sir, and I'll let the Squire know you have come."

"Thank you, my girl."

He stepped into the little room opening off the outer hall, and, having closed the door upon him, the girl ran upstairs. She was not many minutes gone, and presently knocked lightly at the room where Christopher Abbot was waiting.

"Please, sir, the Squire says will you come up at once, and not mind him being at breakfast?" she said, and, leaving his hat and stick on the table, he followed her upstairs.

"Good morning, Mr Abbot," said the Squire's genial voice, and he stretched out his hand from the couch, though he made no effort to rise. A little table with the breakfast service on it was drawn up beside him, and the room was so warm that for a moment the farmer felt it overpowering. It was none too warm for the delicate Squire of Studleigh.

"Lazy mortal, am I not ; but there's no use making a pretence of strength when there is none. These East winds slay me, so I am obliged to give in. How are *you*?"

"Quite well, sir, in body, but I'm in agony of mind. There's been no Indian mail for three weeks. This is the day, and when the post brought nothing, I came over to see whether you had any news."

The Squire shook his head.

"I have none. We are men, Abbot, and must face the worst. I fear there can be no doubt that the revolution in India has begun. There's the *Times*, just open it out. There may be news of some kind."

Christopher Abbot eagerly took the paper, tore off its wrapper, and turned to the summary: then a deep groan escaped his lips, and he covered his face with his hands. The Squire sprang up and looked at the paper which had fluttered from the old man's nerveless grasp.

"Outbreak in India.

"Mutiny and massacre at Meerut. Capture of Delhi by the mutineers. Massacre of Europeans."

The headings were sensational and startling enough. Details necessarily of the most meagre description. Nothing but the bare facts were stated, but they were suggestive of a thousand possibilities and horrors.

"Don't give way, Mr Abbot," said the Squire, kindly, and he laid his hand on the old man's shoulder in sympathy. "Don't give up hope all at once. It is not at all likely that all the British have lost their lives. I am certain the next telegrams will be more reassuring. The first are always unnecessarily alarming."

"I confess I haven't much hope, Squire; and when I think of my little girl, I can't bear it. She never had a care at Pine Edge, no preparation for such things as these."

"When she became a soldier's wife she accepted all the hazards, Mr Abbot," said the Squire. "We must not lose heart. See, I am not hopeless, though my brother is as dear to me as your daughter is to you. Our interests are equal, and we must strengthen each other."

A slight sigh escaped William Ayre's lips as he uttered the last words; and Abbot understood what that sigh implied. There were none within these walls save himself who took a kindly and real interest in the young soldier.

"I'm an old man, Mr Ayre, and I have all an old man's impatience," said the farmer impulsively. "Don't think I'm reflecting on anything, sir. It was a proud day for me when I gave Rachel to the Captain. He was worthy of her, and that's a deal for me to say; but you're a father yourself, and you know what a father's feelings are."

"Yes, yes. I am not less concerned than you about my poor dear sister," said the Squire in his delicate, considerate way. "I have a great many cares, Abbot, and I confess they are weighing on me. Look at me. You have not seen me for some weeks. How do you think I am looking?"

"Not well, sir. It would be a sin for me to say aught else," said the farmer, with a catch in his voice.

"I am not well," answered the Squire, languidly, and shaded his eyes for a moment with his hand. Then suddenly he looked straight at the old man, with a faint, melancholy smile. "In fact, Abbot, I am a dying man."

"Oh, I hope not. For God's sake, don't say it's so bad as that!" exclaimed Christopher Abbot, with sudden passion. "It's impossible that we can lose you."

"It is inevitable, Abbot. I've had them all at me, and their verdict is unanimous. If I live through the summer, which is not likely, if the weather continues as it is, the autumn winds will cut me off. It has been a frightful struggle, old friend. Life is sweet to us all, and I wanted to live. But, through the mercy of God, I have learned my lesson, and can say, 'It is well.'"

"Oh, Mr Ayre, this is worse news than the Indian revolt," cried Christopher Abbot, and he was perfectly sincere in his words. "Can nothing be done?"

The Squire shook his head.

"Nothing. They wanted me to go abroad for the spring, and I believe it might have prolonged my life for a few weeks. But I had so much to do, and I was afraid I might never come back to Studleigh."

He turned his eyes towards the wide window, which commanded a magnificent prospect ; one of the loveliest in that lovely shire. Christopher Abbot understood, ay and shared the painful yearning expressed in that long look. William Ayre's hold on life with its many sweet ties had been difficult to loose. The struggle had cost him more than any one dreamed.

"Does her ladyship know?"

"I think she does. I have not spoken directly to her yet. There are things in this life, Abbot, which require all a strong man's strength, but I must gather up my courage soon. Well, we can only wait for further news, which I believe will be more reassuring. Try not to anticipate the worst."

"I *will* try. You are a lesson to me sir, old as I am. I did not think I should have lived to see such a sorrow come upon Studleigh."

"Ay, the old place has seen many changes. There will be a long regency. My son, poor little chap, will not be able to fill my shoes for many years. But Gillot is a wise and faithful friend. The place will be safe in his care. Are you in a hurry this morning?"

"No, I have nothing to do at Pine Edge but wander up and down watching the slow growth of the corn, and tormenting myself about Rachel," said the old man with a dismal smile.

"Sit down, then. We may not have such an opportunity for long. I have other things to speak to you about. I've been setting my house in order—a man's duty in health, but doubly so when health leaves him. I have not forgotten little Clement, Abbot."

"There was no need, sir. All I have will go to Rachel's



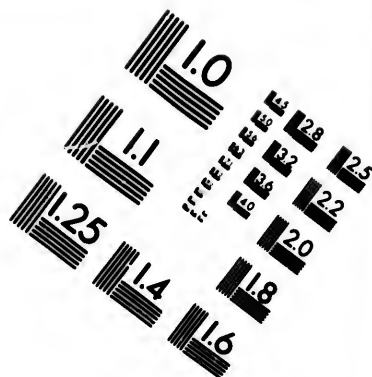
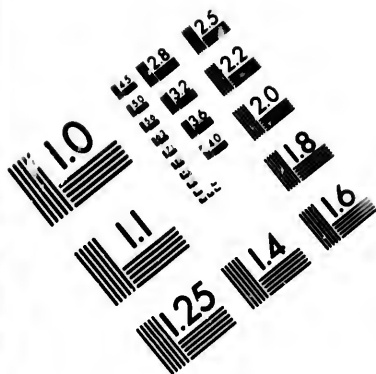
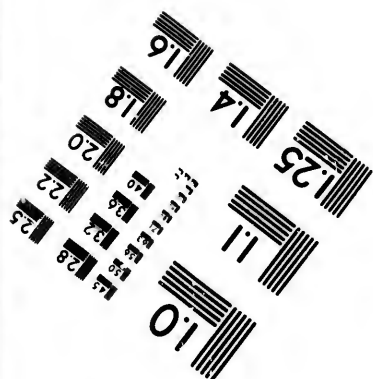
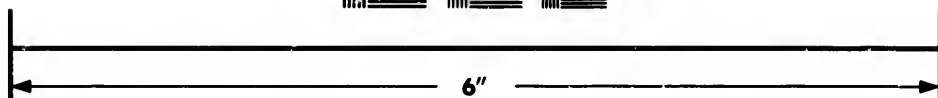
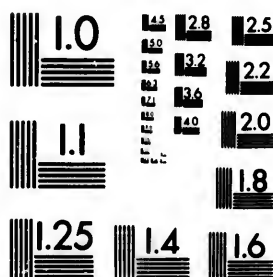


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boy," said the old man, with a quick touch of pride which made the Squire smile.

"I know that; but my brother's son required some recognition from his father's kindred," he said, pointedly. "I have left Stonecroft in trust for him. It will be his when he is one-and-twenty."

Christopher Abbot looked perplexed, and hesitated a moment before he spoke.

"There was no need—though I cannot but say it is generous. But, but——" A sensitive flush mounted to the old man's brow: "Lady Emily might justly feel aggrieved. The Croft is too big a slice to take from one cousin to give to another."

"If my son gives a faithful account of his stewardship of Studleigh he will do very well," replied the Squire. "You are a little hard on my wife, Abbot," he added with a smile. "She is not devoid of human feelings, though she did not approve of the marriage, which has doubly cemented the old friendship between you and me."

"No, no, sir, I did not mean to imply any such thing," said the old man, hastily. "Lady Emily had a perfect right to her opinion, and I never thought the less of her for it."

"Well, I tell you these things so that you may know the confidence I have in you, and, Abbot, it is my desire that you shall take your place as a relative at my funeral, I——"

"Oh, Mr Ayre, I can't listen," cried the old man, starting to his feet. "I won't listen, you can't leave us. You'll see me out yet. I'm seventy-two, and you are not half my age. I can't bear to hear you speak like that——"

"It is true though, Abbot," said the Squire, with his sad, sweet smile. "And that is my desire, which you will not forget. I shall leave my instructions in writing so that they will be carried out. Good-bye just now, and keep up your heart about the exiles in India. I shall write to a friend at the War Office this morning, and get him to send

me the latest and fullest particulars. I hope I'll live to see them both in England yet, and to hold my Anglo-Indian nephew in my arms."

They shook hands in silence, but the old man's eyes were dim as he looked into the noble face of the Squire. He tried to utter something of what was in his heart, but words failed him, and with another fervent grip he hurriedly left the room. As he stepped from the stairs to the hall, the breakfast-room door opened, and Lady Emily appeared leading her little boy by the hand. She looked very lovely in her white morning gown, and the flowers in her belt were not fresher than the delicate bloom on her face. She coloured slightly with surprise at sight of the farmer; and, returning his bow with a slight inclination of her haughty head, withdrew into the room until he had passed out of the hall. Christopher Abbot, however, was too much engrossed with other thoughts to pay any heed to the scant courtesy shown to him by the Squire's wife. When she heard the hall door close, she took the child upstairs to his nurse, and promising that he should see his father in a little, went alone to the Squire's dressing-room.

"I see Abbot has been here, William," she said, in her quiet, cool way. "I hope he did not interfere with your breakfast? Have you eaten anything?"

"No, but I have drunk all the coffee, and taken the half of an egg, so don't scold, Emily," he said, with the serenest of smiles. "How lovely you are? It is as good as a walk out of doors to see your freshness."

She smiled at the pretty compliment, and laid her fair hands with a caressing touch on his head. But her tender moods did not last long.

"What did Abbot want so early, William?" she asked, presently.

"News from India. There it is in the *Times*. I suspect the worst has hardly been told."

"Is there any disturbance?"

She took up the paper quickly and ran her eyes over the paragraphs.

"Delhi in the hands of the mutineers! Why, Geoffrey must have come to grief."

"I confess I am more concerned for his wife and child than for him, Emily. We dare not try to imagine their circumstances."

"But, surely, a few native mutineers can soon be conquered by British soldiers?"

"Yes; but where are the British soldiers, Emily? I don't suppose there are a hundred all told in Delhi at this moment."

"I hope for your sake, dear, that he will be safe," she said, with unusual gentleness.

"I hope so; but it will be an unequal strife. I was writing to Grantly when you came in, asking for more particulars. He will know the latest. Emily, I'm sorry for poor old Abbot. Geoffrey's wife was all he had."

"He need not have been so eager for her to go to India, then," she replied, with a perceptible hardening of her voice. "He must accept the consequences now."

A slight shadow flitted across the Squire's brow.

"Emily, will you allow your prejudice to rule you all your life? Will you never give a sister's hand to Geoffrey's wife?"

"Never."

She answered calmly, and without hesitation, and with no change in face or voice.

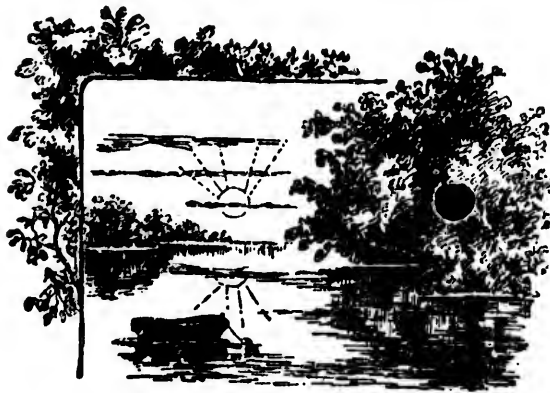
"Not even for my sake?" he pleaded, looking at her with eyes which ought to have conquered.

"What is the good of opening up that vexed question to-day, William?" she asked, with a touch of petulance. "I thought it was buried, and that we should have no more of it. I have my duty to my kindred and my position, William. It must always be wrong to set a bad precedent."

"Emily, I shall not have many more favours to ask. Do

not let the brief span of life which remains to me be embittered by this estrangement," he said, earnestly. "I ask you to write to my sister, as a dying request."

"Oh, you are cruel!" she cried, with heaving bosom and proudly quivering lip, and turning from him she left the room.





CHAPTER XI.

NEWS FROM A FAR COUNTRY.

THE heat of summertide had blessed the waiting land once more, and yet to many, many English hearts the beauty of the sunshine was intolerable in the dark shadow of their own painful suspense. For weeks there had been no news of any kind from the remotest parts of India. A horrible silence, which suggested possibilities more awful than they dared contemplate, followed immediately upon the first news of the outbreak. The time came when men could have prayed that that veil of silence had never been lifted, since it hid sufferings far exceeding what the most gloomy mind could have anticipated. On a fine autumn evening Sir Randal and Lady Vane alighted at Ayreleigh Station, and hired a conveyance to take them to Studleigh. In order to relieve the suspense of those who loved Geoffrey Ayre and his wife they had travelled straight from Portsmouth, preferring to bring their information with them. It did not involve any great sacrifice, since they had no near kindred of their own impatient to see them, still it was a kindly act.

"Tell him to drive us first to Pine Edge, Randal," said Lady Vane, as she leaned out of the carriage. I cannot get that fine old man out of my head. It is more trying for him than for the Ayres, because he is so lonely."

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Sir Randal nodded, and to Pine Edge they were accordingly first driven. Never had the picturesque old place looked more lovely than in the sweet hush of the autumn night, and as Lady Vane thought of the poor young widow, sick, perhaps, to death, in a foreign hospital, her eyes filled with tears.

The old man, who for weeks had not been able to rest night nor day, was wandering about the garden, and seeing the approaching carriage hastened forward to meet it. His ruddy face paled at sight of Lady Vane, and he gave a quick start and an eager look beyond her, his eyes mutely seeking another face. She shook her head, with a slight sad smile as she leaned out of the carriage with both hands outstretched.

"No, I have not brought Rachel, Mr Abbot—only news of her. She was only able to come with us as far as Calcutta."

"Was she hurt?" he asked, with a direct simplicity which made Lady Vane's tears well afresh, while Sir Randal vigorously coughed as he too shook hands with the tenant of Pine Edge.

"Oh, no, only the excitement and the fatigue of our flight were too much for her. She had a little daughter born on the morning we sailed. I saw her. She sent her love to you, and she will be home to you as soon as she can travel."

"Home to me! The Captain——?" said the old man, and came to an abrupt pause, though his eyes had still that eager, pathetic questioning in their depths.

"The Captain fell, like the brave British soldier he was, fighting the enemy to the last."

Christopher Abbot turned away and took a few steps across the lawn.

Then Sir Randal spoke—"Yes, and he sent half a dozen or more of these black fiends to perdition with his good sword before he fell. It was a hero's death, sir."

"Yes, yes, but my poor girl! Who is with her? Oh my lady, is she all alone in that far away heathen place in her hour of trouble?"

"No, no; had she been alone I should scarcely have left her, after what we have been to each other during the last few years, Mr Abbot," said Lady Vane quickly. "She has Mrs Elton with her. She may have mentioned her name in her letter to you. The poor Major was killed assisting us to escape. She is a kind, motherly woman, and she will accompany Rachel to England whenever she is permitted to leave the hospital."

"How do you happen to be here, Sir Randal? Is the mutiny at an end? There has been no news from the East for some weeks."

"At an end!" Sir Randal gloomily tugged his grey whiskers, and his face wore its sternest, bitterest look. "It's only beginning, sir—only beginning. God knows when it will end, or how. We've lost everything, but are thankful to have escaped with our lives. There was no use staying in India to see the whole thing going to ruin and be slaughtered ourselves. It's a ghastly business, but only what I've been expecting for years. I only want to know what these idiots think of themselves now," he added, with a vague jerk of his thumb, which only his wife understood.

What Sir Randal called the apathy of the British Government had long been a sore point with him, and one which he never failed to adorn with the strongest language.

"Well, well, talking won't mend it," said Lady Vane, good-naturedly. "We heard at Portsmouth to-day that the poor fellows on their way home from the Crimea have been shipped for India. It is no easy thing to be a soldier in these troublous times."

"We are going on to Studleigh now with our news. Are they all well?"

"No, my lady, the Squire, God bless him, is a dying man."

"What!"

Both looked inexpressibly shocked.

"It is true. He has been ailing all spring, and though the warm weather revived him a little, he has gone back to where he was. Not that you'd think it to look at him, he is so bright and happy. He was here only the day before yesterday trying to cheer the old man up; but he knows, and we all know to our sorrow, that his days are numbered."

"I question then, Randal, if our visit may not hasten the end," said Lady Vane, hesitatingly. "The news of his brother's death will be a fearful shock to him."

"I don't think it," said Christopher Abbot, slowly. "It seems to me that when folks are coming near to the other world they get glimpses of the future. When the Captain and my little girl went away, he said to me he thought he'd never see them again, and he said the other morning he had a feeling that he'd be seeing Geoff, as he calls him, sooner than we thought. I knew he meant in Heaven; but I couldn't say a word. I'm an old man, Sir Randal, and I can't control my feelings as I used. I seem to have broken down—to be like a little child since Rachel went away."

"Upon my word, it makes one lose taste of life to hear so much bad news," said Sir Randal. "I can't understand it. Why, there never was a more useful man on the face of the earth than William Ayre; and now he's got to die in his prime. There's no sort of sense or justice in it."

"It is hid from us in the meantime, at least," said Lady Vane, gently. "Well, good evening, Mr Abbot. If we remain a day or two at Studleigh we shall see you again. If not, you may believe that your dear daughter is being well cared for. The doctor assured me that there was no apprehension of danger for her, and the child appeared very lively. They will make music for you yet in the old house."

"Ay, ay, I hope so," said the old man, a trifle sadly. "Good evening, my lady; and I thank you for all your kindness to my girl in India. Often, often she has said that you have filled a mother's place to her."

"If I did so, she has been a daughter to me, Mr Abbot. If you knew the estimation in which she was held in Delhi, even you would be pleased. Come, then, Randal—let us go."

A few minutes later they were being driven rapidly up the avenue to Studleigh, and to their astonishment the Squire himself appeared on the steps to welcome them. He was certainly very thin, but his cheeks were flushed, and his eyes too bright for perfect health. He was evidently greatly surprised; and there was undisguised eagerness in his manner as he gave them his hearty greeting—"Where have you come from? We thought you were besieged in Delhi," he said, quickly. "What news have you for us?"

"Not good, my dear fellow, not good," answered Sir Randal, and Lady Vane hurried into the house, and caught up the little heir as he toddled across the hall. She was glad when Lady Emily, hearing voices, came out of the hall, and in the bustle 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 these 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 was a fair, fragile-looking creature, lovely as an angel, but with a wise grave expression far beyond his years. He appeared to be drinking in every word.

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

"Yes, my darling."

"What with—was he shot at or cutted?" 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 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 October 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 take 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 eye fixed on the well-laden table.

"There's enough for 'em to eat, my lass, if sick hear

can eat," he said abruptly. "But there's something awaiting. It's the flowers! Why, what have we all been thinking on? Get out the old 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 set 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 she stepped out at the other side, and with a swift 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 child, welcome home."

Rachel rested her two hands on his shoulders and looked into his face with an inexpressible 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 fore-foot? Come here and salute 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 out 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 to Rachel so to bear her cross. At the table once little Clement suddenly looked round piteously, as if a sense of loss 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 very 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 questionings about the chickens and the calves and the ponies he would see on the morrow. Then she went downstairs, 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 for ever.

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 these 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 his chair, and said, with her 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 about 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,

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and taking her own old chair on the opposite side of the hearth, sat for a time in silence.

"There is the 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. But I must tell my story. We were very anxious all winter in Delhi, because there was a great deal to make us anxious. The British officers could not understand some things they noticed among the Sepoys, but it was not till early spring that they began to be openly arrogant, and even disobedient. Sometimes they were not punished as severely as they ought to have been for insubordination, just because our officers wanted to be gentle and kind. You see the Sepoys imagined they had grievances. We only realised after the outbreak how complete was the disaffection, and how perfectly organised the whole plan of revolt. It is perfectly marvellous the secret cunning of the Mohammedans."

"What Sir Randal Vane seems to be most indignant at is the dearth of British soldiers in India."

"Yes, there are too few. Representations were sent again and again during the last year, but they were unheeded. We tried to excuse them, their resources being so taxed at the Crimea. Oh, daddy, it is a fearful thing to be a soldier's wife."

"Ay, my poor girl, you have had your troubles since that day you stood a bride in Studleigh Church. But I don't think you regret it."

"Regret it? Oh, no! I would go through it again. I want to tell you again, daddy, that never had any woman a husband like mine. If I were to speak for hours I could never tell you what he was. I thank God that I have such a blessed memory of my children's father—a memory I can teach them to revere and love."

"It is a matter for thankfulness, Rachel, to you, as it is to me, that you are able to take your sorrow in such a light."

"There is no other light I could take it in and live, father," Rachel answered, with a shiver. "It will not take long to tell, and I will hurry on. When matters got very strained in the city, Geoffrey began to be very anxious, I could see, about me. I was not well. Of course the fearful uncertainty we lived in unnerved me. He was very anxious that I should leave Delhi with the Eltons, who were going home. I could not leave him, but I made arrangements for them to take Clement with them. The native nurse, of whom I told you, was to go with them. That was on the Sunday evening. On Monday morning the Eltons' carriage was to leave, but on Monday we were thankful to escape in it to the Flagstaff Tower, and poor Major Elton was killed as he rode beside us."

"Was the Captain with you then?"

"Oh, no, Geoffrey was where duty called him, defending the city gates against the mutineers. It was there he fell—and later in the day, Azim, my faithful servant, brought me his medals and a lock of his hair. He had prowled about among the fighting all day long to find his master. The

fidelity of that poor Hindoo, father, redeems, in my eyes, the whole nation from its vileness. Later on he laid down his life for us, and there is no greater love than that."

Slowly and with some difficulty Rachel told the whole story of their perilous adventures and ultimate escape, the old man listening with strained ears and breathless interest, scarcely able to realise that it was his own child who had passed through such strange and fearful experiences.

"I have told you everything, daddy, because I never want to speak of it again. Some day I shall have to tell Clement how his father died, but till then I think it will be better for us to be silent about it," said Rachel, and he saw how very pale her face was, and how the pain lines were deep about her sweet mouth.

"Very well, my darling, in God's good time memory will not be so painful," he said, soothingly.

"But I don't want to forget," Rachel answered, almost sharply. "My dearest is so inseparably bound up with every one of these fearful memories that I must keep them in my heart to the—very end. They will become familiar by and by, and not so bitter. But, father, I can't answer questions about it. When the neighbours come, as I know they will, will you tell them not to ask? I—I—could not bear it."

"I will. I'll shut their mouths, if I have to shut the door on 'em," said the old man, with a fierceness which made Rachel smile.

"While we are talking, father, we may as well arrange how we are to be situated. I am not quite penniless," she said, pathetically. "There is Geoffrey's pension and his portion from the estate. It is not much, but it will educate his children, and I am not afraid to leave myself with you."

"I should think not. If you say another word I'll be angry with you, upon my word I will. Isn't Pine Edge and all that's in it yours, and if not yours, whose is it?" demanded

the old man, peremptorily. "Don't say another word about that, or we'll maybe quarrel over it."

"No, father, we won't do that," Rachel answered, readily. "And I'll just slip into the old way and try to make you happy, and if you see me some days very quiet you won't mind me. There will be times, I know, when even your great love and the sight of the bairnies will hardly make up."

"I know, I know ; you may trust your old father, Rachel. And what about Studleigh ? After the Squire slips away, I suppose there won't be many comings and goings then."

"No," said Rachel, quite quietly, but with a slight pressure of the lips. "You are right. Lady Emily will not be more anxious to repudiate me than I shall be to keep myself and my children away from her."

There was no bitterness in Rachel's quiet voice, but her father saw that she was touched to the quick. It was not her pride alone ; her sensitiveness had not recovered from the pointed aversion and ignoring to which she had been subjected at the time of her marriage.

Christopher Abbot shook his head, for his heart was troubled. Looking into the future he saw vexation and sorrow and bitter estrangement growing wider and wider between Studleigh and Pine Edge.



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CHAPTER XIII.

A LAST INTERVIEW AT STUDLEIGH.

RACHEL slept soundly that night in the wide, old-fashioned room she had occupied in her girlish days. The nursery adjoined, and there little Clement slept in his cot close by his nurse's bed.

These arrangements had been considered and provided for by the old man himself, as solicitous as a woman for his dear daughter's comfort. It was a joy of no ordinary kind, though slightly tinged with sadness, to Christopher Abbot thus to welcome Rachel home. He could not sleep, and once in the grey dawn he crept along the corridor to the door of the room which held his treasure. He listened there, expecting to hear the sound of sobbing, but when there was no sound he looked through the half-open door, and saw Rachel asleep, with the child's dark head on her breast. Her face looked young and lovely in its peaceful repose, and Christopher Abbot crept back to his own bed, relieved and thankful, and slept till the sun awoke him. It was his custom to see that the men were set about their work, before he took his own breakfast, and when he came sauntering up the garden path a few minutes before eight a shrill laugh greeted him, and a white figure, with golden locks flying in the morning wind, came running to meet him, eagerly shouting, "Grandpa !"

That sweet, eager voice sent a strange thrill to the old man's heart, and when presently, remembering his manners, the little fellow stood still in the path before him, and made the grave military salute, grandpa's delight knew no bounds.

"Where are the cows and the hens and the little chicks?" he asked, slipping his hand with the utmost confidence into the old man's. "Take me to them."

"Not yet, General, we must go and see mamma, and have our breakfast first," said the old man, and from that day little Clement was "General" and nothing more to his grandfather.

In the dining-room Rachel was making the tea—a slim figure in a white gown with bands of black ribbon, a lovely and graceful woman whose very presence beautified and brightened the house.

"Good morning, father. The rogue has found you, I see. Yes, thank you ; I rested well. I have had no such sleep, I think, since I went away from Pine Edge. I missed the mosquitoes," she said, with her pleasant smile. "Ask Clement about the mosquitoes, and he'll give you a graphic account of their depredations."

"Oh, ma, there's a carriage," cried Clement, who was standing in the sunshine by the wide-open window. "It's a white horse. Oh, ma, will it be dada?"

"It's from Studleigh, Rachel ; it will be a message from the Squire. I'll see," said the farmer, and stepped hurriedly over the low window ledge.

"Morning, sir," said the man on the box, touching his hat. "The Squire's compliments, and if Mrs Ayre is not too tired, would she come over to Studleigh, and bring the little boy?"

"She'll do that, Simmons, if you can wait a few minutes. How is the Squire this morning?"

"Had a bad night," Rosanna said, "and her ladyship's been up since four o'clock," said the man, with a graver look. "Excuse me, sir, but is that the Captain's son?"

"Yes ; isn't he a fine little fellow?" asked the farmer, delightedly.

"He's a splendid little chap—like his mother, Mr Abbot, if you'll excuse me sayin' it, but he's got the Captain's hair. I hope Mrs Ayre is well."

"Quite well. She will be ready in a few minutes, Simmons ; just wait. Come, General, and get ready to escort your mother."

It was natural that Rachel should feel a little nervous and excited over her approaching visit. She only drank a cup of tea, shaking her head when urged by her father to eat something more substantial. She did not wait to change her dress, but throwing a dark cloak about her, put on her widow's bonnet, and stepped out to the carriage. She had a kind word of greeting for Simmons, who had served as stable-boy at Pine Edge before he entered the Squire's service, and had many kindly memories of his old employers.

So, in the sweet and sunny morning, Rachel was driven along the green lanes to the great gates of Studleigh. She talked to the boy as they drove to keep down her own agitation, telling him to be very quiet and gentle with his poor uncle, who was so sick and weary, and whom dada had loved so dearly. She tried, but could find nothing to say to him about his aunt ; nor did she mention the little cousin, not feeling sure whether Lady Emily would permit any such relationship.

The child's eyes opened wide in wonderment when the carriage stopped at the wide doorway of the grand old house, and Rachel could see that he was awed into silence. The great house was very still, and a strange feeling of loneliness came upon Rachel as she stood a moment within the hall, hesitatingly waiting for some one to tell her what to do. She half expected that Lady Emily herself, softened by sorrow, might come to bid her welcome, but, presently, it being the servants' breakfast hour,

Rosanna, her ladyship's maid, who had seen the carriage arrive, came running downstairs.

"Good morning, Mrs Ayre," she said, pleasantly, yet with a touch of familiarity which Rachel was perhaps too quick to resent; then she took little Clement in her arms, but he, resenting the liberty also, struggled down, and holding fast by his mother's skirts, looked defiantly at the maid's pretty face.

"Be good enough to tell Mr Ayre I have come," Rachel said, quickly, but her colour rose a little, for she felt her position keenly, and knew that she owed it entirely to Lady Emily.

"Just come upstairs, please," Rosanna answered, a trifle more deferentially. "The Squire is expecting you."

Rachel stepped back to the table, laid down her cloak, and taking her boy by the hand followed the girl upstairs. In his dressing-room the Squire received his brother's wife alone, and Rachel took Lady Emily's absence as an indication that she still declined to receive her as a member of the family. The sick man was lying on his couch, very thin and worn and wasted, but with a deep peace on his fine face, a look which Rachel had seen before on the faces of those who had given up the things of time. His smile was very sweet as he extended both his hands, saying, tenderly, "It is good of you to come, my poor sister."

The voice was so like Geoffrey's that it broke Rachel's composure down. With a quick sob she advanced and knelt down by William Ayre's side, the child looking on in a great wonderment, his big grey eyes wide to the rims.

It was a few minutes before Rachel recovered herself, then she drew back with a quivering smile.

"Forgive me, it was Geoffrey's voice. I could not help it. I am not very strong yet, I fear. Come, Clement, and salute your uncle, papa's dear brother he taught you to pray for every night."

William Ayre's eyes filled, as the child, obedient to his

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mother, came forward with his large bright eyes fixed full on his uncle's face.

"So this is Geoff's boy, a beautiful child, who will be a comfort and a joy to his mother. Rachel, I have thanked God many times that Geoffrey had the wife he loved with him in India. You do not regret it either, I think, in spite of your many sorrows."

"I regret it! I would not give my memories, William, for other women's best possessions," Rachel answered proudly; and the Squire loved to see that touch of pride.

"I wasn't mistaken in you. I sent for you, Rachel, because I had many things to say to you, and some things to give to you, among them Geoffrey's letters to me from Delhi. They will be precious to you. There are some sentences in them which will comfort you all your life. He adored you, Rachel; it is not given to many women to call forth such reverent and perfect love, nor to deserve it."

Rachel's face flushed, but her eye shone. Her heart was hungry for such crumbs of comfort in her desolation. It was sweet to be assured, so undeniably, that she had been so much to her soldier-husband.

"But tell me about the little girl," the Squire said, presently, with a smile.

"Oh, there is nothing to tell. She is just a white-faced baby who sleeps and eats," Rachel answered. "I have called her Evelyn."

"I thank you, and I pray that she may grow up like her whose name she bears. I can wish for you or her nothing better here, Rachel. You, who remember my mother, know that."

"I thought Geoffrey would like it," Rachel answered, "especially as this is Clement Abbot. Perhaps I was a little selfish in that."

"Not at all. He is a fine little fellow. Perhaps, who knows, some day he will be Squire of Studleigh," said the Squire, with a sigh. "My son, I fear, has a poor heritage of

health from his father. I believe I was wrong to marry. There is another thing I wish to say, Rachel, concerning your boy, and you must not say a word in demur. I have bequeathed Stonecroft to him absolutely. It will remain in trust for him until he is of age. Hush, not a word. I will not listen. It was my duty, apart from my privilege. No, I will not listen! It is done, and is quite unalterable."

Rachel rose to her feet.

"Your wife, Mr Ayre," she said with difficulty. "She will have the right to feel aggrieved. Pardon me for saying candidly that I should prefer that she had no cause for added bitterness against me."

He gathered from her manner more than from her words that she very deeply felt what she was saying, and a look of pain came upon his face. It is no exaggeration to say that his wife's continued and studied ignoring of Geoffrey's wife was a trial to the Squire, which weakened both body and mind.

"She knows of it, Rachel. Perhaps—who knows, the hands of the children may disperse this strange and needless bitterness. I pray God it may be so, on my dying bed."

The sound of a quick, short step on the corridor fell on their ears, then the door was hastily opened, and the little heir ran in, laughing, up to his father's side, and clambered on his couch.

"Willie, this is your cousin Clement, Uncle Geoff's little boy," said the Squire, with a grave, kind smile. "Kiss him and say you are glad to see him, and promise me that you will always love him and be kind to him."

But the heir declined to bind himself, and the two regarded each other with that unblushing and delicious candour characteristic of their years. Even at that moment the contrast between them was very marked. Although the little heir was two years older than his cousin, he was scarcely taller, and his figure was very slender; his face too

pure and delicate for health. Little Clement was a great, strong hardy fellow, on whose sound constitution the trying climate of the East had evidently had little effect.

"Suppose you take your little cousin down to mamma, Willie," said the Squire, presently, but Rachel intervened.

"If it is pride, forgive me," she said, quickly. "But it will be better, perhaps, that we should not intrude upon Lady Emily. If she has a desire to see Captain Ayre's son, Pine Edge is not very far away."

Once more a quick, impatient sigh escaped the Squire's lips.

"I regret to hear you speak thus, Rachel, and yet I cannot blame you. Promise me that you will at least meet my wife half way, when she seeks to be friendly with you," he said, eagerly. "Do not be too hard upon her, Rachel. You know—or perhaps you do not know—how she has been reared, hedged about from infancy by pride and exclusiveness which had no limit. Promise me that you will not bear malice for the sake of our beloved one whom I shall see so soon."

Rachel's lips quivered.

"I promise that I will do what I can to conciliate Lady Emily, for Geoffrey's sake and for your sake, who have been so generous and brotherly in your treatment of me," she said, impulsively. "One of the first lessons I shall teach my children will be reverence for their Uncle William."

"Teach them to have a kindly memory of one who, with all his faults, tried honestly to do his duty," the Squire answered, with a faint, sad smile.

As he looked at the graceful woman in white, with all the pride softened away from her beautiful face, a sudden impulse moved him to send for his own wife, and, for the sake of the children, ask them to be friends. But he felt himself too weak to risk the scene, and Rachel, though not divining his thought, saw that his slight strength was spent, and made a movement to go.

"We have wearied you, I fear," she said, quickly. "We shall go now, and come again when you are stronger."

"That will not be here. It is only a matter of hours," he said quietly. "Do not hurry away. I have not asked any questions about these awful days in India. We got all particulars from the Vanes. You know how kind they were in coming straight to relieve our anxiety."

"Yes, my father told me. There is no truer friend on earth than Lady Vane, Mr Ayre."

"She thinks just so of you. You have made a conquest of them both. Well, what are you going to make of this little man—a soldier, eh?"

Rachel smiled.

"There was a time when I thought, with passionate satisfaction, of a day to come when Clement's sword should avenge his father's death; but that has passed. My slight sorrow has paled into nothingness beside the agonies of Cawnpore. I hope my son will grow up a good man, such a man as his Uncle William."

"Say his father rather; he was a brave, honest soldier, who feared nothing in the world but wrong," answered the Squire. "Must you go? Will you kiss your poor uncle before you go, Clement Abbot Ayre? It is a grand-sounding name, young man; see that you make it an honoured one before you die."

The child, not understanding what was being said, kissed his uncle quickly, and pulling his mother's skirts, bade her come away. Rachel stooped down and kissed the Squire too. He held her hands a moment in his nerveless grasp, and then let her go. No other word was spoken by either.

Before she left the room she took the little heir in her arms, and he put his hands confidently about her neck, and said he loved her. There was something in that gravely-beautiful face which could win every heart but that of the Lady Emily.

As the mother and child went down the great staircase

they met her on the landing. Rachel's face flushed deep crimson, and hurriedly returning the distant inclination of the head, which was her sister-in-law's only greeting, drew down her veil, and made haste from the house.

Lady Emily went straight to her husband's room. He looked round, eagerly.

"Did you come up the front stair? Did you meet poor Rachel and her boy——?"

"I did."

"Did you speak to her? Emily, you did not allow her, after what she has suffered, to pass unnoticed out of the house?"

Lady Emily never spoke, but took her own son on her knee, and began to talk fondly to him. Then the master of Studleigh turned his face to the wall, and the shadow deepened on his face. That unanswered question was the last he asked of his wife, for before sundown that day another Squire of Studleigh entered into his rest.





CHAPTER XIV.

A SURPRISE FOR MR GILLOT.

“**R**OSANNA, where is Mr Will?”

“I think, my lady, he has gone to Pine Edge, at least I saw him cross the park just after lunch.”

“Can you tell me how many times in a day Mr Will crosses the park to Pine Edge, Rosanna?” asked Lady Emily, hotly, losing for a moment, before a servant, her habitual self-control.

“He goes every day, my lady, I know, because Phœbe, that’s Mrs Ayre’s housemaid, told me,” returned Rosanna, with a curious little smile, which at once recalled her mistress to a sense of her own imprudence in stooping to discuss her son’s comings and goings with a dependant.

“Well, I suppose he has a right to visit his cousins if he likes any day, Rosanna. See that you do not gossip with the servants at Pine Edge about what concerns neither you nor them. If I hear of it again, I must dispense with your services, though you have been with me so long.”

It was a sharp reproof, and quite uncalled for, seeing that Lady Emily had questioned of her own accord.

Rosanna bit her lip, and her angry colour rose. Of late the servants at Studleigh had found their imperious mistress

very hard and unreasonable to deal with, and it is not too much to say that only love for the young Squire, as Will Ayre was already called, though only a boy in his teens, made their service at all tolerable. Lady Emily made a stern regent. Many, many a lingering and passionate regret the people who had loved William Ayre now gave to his revered memory. It was half-past three on an April afternoon—a soft, grey afternoon, when the spring's radiant face was veiled in a tender pensiveness, more lovely, perhaps, than her gayer moods. Never had the smooth lawns and parks worn a more vivid green; never had there been a greater wealth of bud and bloom on wood and meadow. It was, indeed, a lovely spring. Lady Emily stood at the open hall door and looked out upon the beautiful prospect before her with eyes which had not much interest or pleasure in their depths. She was thinking of something else, a something which brought out all that was hardest and least winning in her face. The years had dealt very gently with Lady Emily Eyre. There was not a line on her smooth brow, nor about the proud, cold mouth; the delicate bloom had not faded, nor the keen, lovely eye lost anything of its brightness. She looked very young to have a tall son in his fifteenth year. She was still the acknowledged beauty of the county. Young *debutantes* had come and gone, but none had borne away the palm from that queenly woman. But she lacked that gracious, tender womanliness which is infinitely more priceless than beauty of form or face. All admired, many respected, but few, very few, loved the widowed lady of Studleigh Manor.

She stood in silent reverie for some time, and then passing into the hall rang the bell which stood on the table.

"Tell Simmons to bring the phaeton and be ready to drive me to Ayreleigh in fifteen minutes," was the order given.

Then Rosanna ran to attend upon her mistress, and dressed her for the drive. She took the reins herself, and

Simmons, very stolid and precise, sat with folded arms behind. The distance to Ayreleigh was four miles, which included the long approach to the Manor.

Ayreleigh was the county town, a quaint, sleepy hollow, with a wide, square market-place, from which all the streets emerged. Her ladyship's cream ponies were well known in Ayreleigh, which she often visited, with her son riding by her carriage when he was at home from Eton. The ponies clattered over the causeway that still afternoon, and seemed to awaken countless echoes through the sleepy old town. The clerks in the office of Mr Gillot, the attorney, heard and recognised the din, and guessed that she was coming to see their governor. Of late her ladyship's visits to Mr Gillot's office had been very frequent. He was ready himself at the door to receive her—a tall, stately-looking old man, with a face of exceptional shrewdness, and a fine courtly manner, which had stood him in good stead during his professional life. But though he was so suave and smooth spoken, yet in matters of conscience, and even of opinion, Abel Gillot could be immovable as a rock. The family secrets and the family affairs of the Manor had been in the keeping of the Gillots for generations, and the present Mr Gillot had been absolutely trusted by the late Squire. It is well to say at once that Mr Gillot did not like the Lady Emily, and never hailed her visits to his office with pleasure. But there was nothing of this inner thought betrayed in his courteous and polished manner as he received and ushered her into his private room.

"Can you give me half an hour undisturbed, Mr Gillot?" she asked, when they were alone in the room. "I wish to speak about a matter of considerable importance."

"I am entirely at your ladyship's service," he replied, courteously, "I am not busy, in fact. I was just meditating taking my wife for a drive, when I heard the familiar roll of your carriage wheels."

"I shall not keep you very long from Mrs Gillot," Lady Emily answered, with a slight smile. "I wish to ask when the lease of Pine Edge expires."

The attorney gave a slight start, and looked at her keenly.

"We have never been accustomed to think of expiry or renewal of lease in connection with Pine Edge," he answered at once. "But I believe, correctly speaking, the late Mr Abbot's lease should expire next Lady Day."

Lady Emily put back her veil, and turned her clear eye full on the lawyer's face.

"I have decided not to renew it, Mr Gillot."

For once in his life the lawyer was unable to control his feelings, and he uttered a hasty exclamation.

"Not renew it! Surely your ladyship is speaking at random. You cannot be in earnest."

"I am not accustomed, I think, to speak at random," she answered, with haughtiness. "I have given this matter my grave consideration, and have come to a decision which is unalterable."

The attorney took a turn across the office floor before he again spoke.

"This is, indeed, a matter of grave and painful importance," he said, at length. "May I ask what are your ladyship's reasons for this unexpected decision?"

"I do not know that I am called upon at all to give reasons," she answered, quickly. "But you must agree with me that since Mr Abbot died there has been no one to look after the place, and that one of the most valuable portions of the estate is being neglected, to my son's serious loss."

The lawyer could have laughed outright, but his face maintained its grave and serious look. He knew, ay too well, that a deeper reason underlay the flimsy and commonplace expression of her anxiety regarding the neglect of the estate.

"I think your ladyship is needlessly concerned. Barnard was telling me only yesterday that Pine Edge had never looked so well, and that young Mr Clement will soon be ready to take all responsibility. I cannot believe that your ladyship is in earnest."

"I am in earnest. I was never more so," she retorted, with unusual passion. "I repeat that I do not intend to renew the lease of Pine Edge to the present tenants."

"Does Mr William concur in this decision?" asked the lawyer, keenly.

"My son knows nothing about it. Why should he? He is only a schoolboy, utterly ignorant of such things. It is in his interest I am acting. You forget, Mr Gillot, that Mr Ayre left me absolute control of affairs until my son should attain his majority."

"I have not forgotten, my lady," returned the attorney, gravely, but did not add, as he felt tempted to do, that the Squire's disposition of affairs had caused him a great deal of needless work and worry. There was a slight pause. Mr Gillot felt embarrassed, and waited for his client to proceed. He knew that the relations between Pine Edge and Studleigh were most strained, but he could not presume to allude to them. He waited therefore for Lady Emily to give him further instructions.

"You can communicate my wishes to Barnard, and he can make the necessary arrangements," she said at length.

"Am I to understand then that notice to quit is to be conveyed in the usual way to Mrs Geoffrey Ayre?" he asked, pointedly.

"You can lay before her my views on the subject. Tell her the place is suffering through lack of proper supervision."

"Pardon, my lady, but to say so would be to shirk the real issue. Pine Edge was never better cared for," interrupted the attorney, candidly. "Mrs Ayre's own bailiff is

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a man of exceptional ability and trustworthiness. I regret to disappoint your ladyship, but it is impossible I can obey you in this—quite impossible.”

Lady Emily bit her lip. Her temper of late years had lost much of its placidity. She was less able to brook contradiction. But her strong common sense warned her that nothing would be gained by an open rupture with Mr Gillot. He had enjoyed her husband’s implicit confidence, and she could not, even if she wished, dispense with his service and advice. She was bound by the terms of the Squire’s will to retain him as the family solicitor until her son came of age.

“Well, then, there need be no reason given,” she said, calmly. “Simply say that I desire to let Pine Edge to a new tenant.”

Mr Gillot took another turn across the floor. He was very angry—burning with honest indignation against the woman before him, but he betrayed no sign. It was several moments, however, before he could choose the words of his reply. He stood up at the desk before her, and leaning his hand upon it, looked her full in the face—

“Have you considered, Lady Emily, what this decision may cost Mrs Ayre? The place is inseparably associated with her dearest memories. She has known no other home; and I know it was the best consolation to my old friend, Mr Abbot, on his death-bed, that his daughter would be able to bring up her children in Pine Edge. I entreat you, my lady, do not let any slight prejudice or whim induce you to act in haste, which I am certain you would repent.”

“Your sentiments do you credit, Mr Gillot, though they are unusual in a man of business,” she replied, with a slight chilling smile. “Mrs Geoffrey Ayre has no cause to feel aggrieved. What is to hinder her from taking up her abode at Stonecroft, which is also going out of repair

through lack of attention? In fact, it is her duty to do so. The boy himself will be quick to reflect upon her neglect of his inheritance when he comes to it."

"If your ladyship's decision is unalterable, there is not much use discussing the case in any of its bearings; but may I be allowed one suggestion?"

"Certainly. I wish to do nothing rashly—though I feel very strongly on this subject, Mr Gillot. I am quite willing to listen to your opinion."

"My opinion is that Mrs Ayre's son ought to have the choice of the tenancy of Pine Edge, and my advice to you would be to leave things as they are until Mr William is of age," returned the attorney, frankly.

"Mr Gillot, I have reasons for wishing my sister-in-law further away from Studleigh," Lady Emily admitted then, being driven to bay. "One of them is that my son is inclined to spend too much of his time at the farm. It is not desirable, as he is at a most impressionable age, and it must be put a stop to."

Mr Gillot carefully restrained his surprise.

"Lady Emily, forgive the question," he said, impulsively; "but would the Squire not have approved Mr William's intimacy with his cousins?"

"I do not think so. Besides, that is outside of the question altogether. It is what *I* approve, and I must be considered," she replied, in her haughtiest manner.

Mr Gillot took the hint.

"Very well, my lady, your instructions shall be attended to," he said, briefly. "I only stipulate that you will go through the form of consulting Mr William. He is of sufficient age to understand the matter when it is put plainly before him."

Lady Emily rose. She had so far gained her point; but she was not at ease.

"Of course you understand that every consideration is to be shown to Mrs Ayre. She is not to be hurried in any

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way. It is a long time till Lady Day—by that time she will have grown accustomed to the idea. I believe she is a sensible woman, and will in time, at least, admit the wisdom of my decision. Her son is a high-spirited, ambitious boy, I am told. It is not at all likely that he will ever settle down to the narrow life which was enough for his grandfather. The chances are that he will follow his father's profession."

"I could not say. He is quite young yet; but, as you say, a fine, high-spirited, noble boy. Then, shall I communicate at once with Mrs Ayre?"

"It will be better to lose no time," Lady Emily answered, as she drew down her veil.

"I confess I do not like my task. I do not think your ladyship has the least idea of the sacrifice you are asking at Mrs Ayre's hands. You are aware, of course, how long the Abbots have tenanted Pine Edge?"

"About three hundred years, the Squire told me, but as there is not an Abbot left, the whole matter is changed," she answered, quickly. "It is not as if we were refusing the place to an Abbot."

"Well, well, perhaps not. Good afternoon, my lady. You are to have a shower going home, I see. Will you not wait until it passes?"

"No, thank you. Good afternoon. I shall be waiting to hear from you," she replied, and passed out to her carriage.

Mr Gillot stood at the office door and watched the dainty equipage dash across the square and along the narrow High Street until it was lost to sight. Then he re-entered his own room and sat down through force of habit at the hearth, and stretched out his hands towards the grate, though the fire had long burned out. He was very much absorbed. He had not heard anything for long which had so upset him.

"The only chance lies with the young Squire," he

muttered to himself. "And he's an Ayre, every inch of him; he's inherited nothing but his fair skin from his mother's side, thank Heaven. Well, well, it'll be as good as a play to watch this thing to the end, though I wish I had nothing to do with it, that's all."



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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 the sloe. They were standing together on the wooden seat of the swing, with arms intertwined, holding on as best they might to the rope at 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 the 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 for 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 not 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 calm and gracious as she stood by his side in her soft black gown, looking at him with that unspeakable tenderness 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 his 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 never 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 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 hearts 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, tall, straight, and 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 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 trouts, 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 stiffness, 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 all have 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, like 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 to 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 behaviour, 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 to 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 you 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 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 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 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 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 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.

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"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, Clement, 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 out into the world."

"I don't care for such distinctions, and I think she is a horrid old thing," quoth Clement, in his outspoken fashion. "Never mind, mother, you have Evy and me, and we're as jolly as we can be."

Rachel laughed outright.

"My dear, I don't mind in the least, I assure you, and I am very conscious of my blessings. I have made up my mind sitting here, Clement, that you shall go back to Eton with Will."

"Oh, mother, you *are* a brick."

There was no mistaking the heartiness of the ring which accompanied these words, and Rachel could not but be glad in her boy's gladness. And yet she knew very well that at Eton Clement would be made to feel the first sting of the difference between himself and his cousin.

"But what does Evy say to the separation?" she asked presently, looking over to the small maiden standing rather disconsolately by the table.

"I'll have nobody to play with," she announced, simply, and with great gravity.

"Oh, but you'll look after Spottie and the puppies, and feed the rabbits, and all that, you know," said Clement, reassuringly. "And just think, you can ride Pippin *all* the time till I come back."

But these bright visions did not appear to console Evy altogether, for her red lip quivered. She was a singularly sweet-tempered, unselfish child, resembling her mother in disposition, but perhaps it was not to be wondered at that Rachel's heart clung with a more passionate love to the boy, who was his father's living image, and was fired by the same enthusiasm and impulsiveness of mood. Both were very dear to her, and it is just to say that never were two children treated with a more perfect equality.

"I daresay Evy and I will manage to pass the time. I shall try to fill your place, Clem. when you are away," Rachel said, pleasantly; and just then a horse and rider came quickly up the little approach, and Clem ran off eagerly to see who the unusual visitant could be. It was Mr Gillot, the attorney from Ayreleigh, and Clement, ever ready when arrivals were announced, speedily relieved him

of the horse, which he led away to the stables, Evelyn following, as usual, her close companionship in all her brother's sports and interests having intensified her natural love for animals.

Rachel received Mr Gillot at the door, and looked surprised as she felt, to see him so late. He was her legal adviser, as well as the family solicitor to Studleigh—Christopher Abbot having left his daughter's affairs entirely in the hands of his trusted friend. The old man had felt that he could not sleep till he had had an interview with the "Captain's wife," as Rachel was always called, and had ridden over immediately after dinner.

"No, it isn't a friendly call, it's business, and not pleasant business either, Mrs Geoffrey," he said, answering her question almost brusquely. "Are you alone? I want to speak to you for half an hour."

"Certainly, come in. I hope there has been no serious disaster at the Thekla mines, Mr Gillot," she answered with a smile, "because I have just made up my mind that the next dividend should pay my son's fees at Eton."

"I wish it was nothing more than a flooding at the Thekla, or even an absconding mining engineer," said the old man, shaking his head. "I suppose you have not the least idea what I'm after?"

"Not the slightest," Rachel answered, and motioning the attorney to a seat she drew up the blind at the front window to admit the last rays of the setting sun.

"Well, I had a visit this afternoon from Lady Emily."

"Yes?"

Rachel's smile faded: and she waited, apprehensive of some trouble, though she could not put it in shape.

"Did you know, Mrs Geoffrey, that the lease of the farm expires next Ladyday?"

"What farm?"

"This farm—Pine Edge."

"Does it? No. I didn't know. Will there be some

formalities connected with its renewal on account of my father's death?" asked Rachel; and at her direct, unconcerned question Mr Gillot almost groaned. The possibility, that at any time she might be called upon to quit the place had evidently never suggested itself to her mind. It made his task all the harder, but it had to be gone through.

"Lady Emily called on me this afternoon, Mrs Geoffrey, to say that she will not renew it," he said desperately.

"Not renew it! I don't understand you, Mr Gillot. What did Lady Emily mean?"

"What she said, unfortunately. She has made up her mind that you are to quit Pine Edge, Mrs Geoffrey."

Rachel looked at the attorney with wide-open eyes, and the slight colour paled out of her face.

"That I am to quit Pine Edge," she repeated.

"Oh, Mr Gillot, you must have misunderstood her. Lady Emily would never suggest anything so absurd."

"My dear, she not only suggested it—she laid it down as an unalterable decision. You have grievously offended her in some way, and she is a haughty and vindictive woman. Our only chance lies with the young Squire."

Slowly the truth dawned upon Rachel, and the lawyer saw the quick, bright colour leap back to her cheek, and an expression to her face which he had never before seen.

"Lady Emily came to ask you to serve a notice to quit upon me, Mr Gillot," she said, quietly. "Is that right?"

"Quite right."

"Did she give any reason for this extraordinary decision, may I ask?"

"She made a lame excuse about the place being neglected, but I pulled her up sharp on that head. Upon my word I did. I've been wondering at my own temerity ever since."

"Mr Gillot, you were my father's old and true friend, as you have been mine since his death. What do *you* think can be the motive for this?"

"Well, my dear, since you ask me, I will tell you quite plainly—it's jealousy."

A faint, incredulous smile flitted across Rachel's pale face.

"That can hardly be. It is too absurd. How can the great lady of Studleigh Manor be jealous of an obscure woman, who affects and presumes nothing, but only tries to do her duty by her children, Mr Gillot?"

"I am right, my dear; but I will be more explicit. She is jealous of the people's love for you. She hears you spoken of, as every one speaks of you—and well they may—with the highest gratitude and love. She is jealous because her boy likes to be with you, and she is jealous of these two fine children of yours—of that tall, manly, noble son, and that bonnie little girl, who, unless I am much mistaken, will make sad havoc in Ayreleigh yet."

"But all that, supposing it to be true, is no fault of mine, Mr Gillot. There can be no offence where none is intended, and it is most unjust and most unreasonable of Lady Emily to punish me when I have done no wrong."

"Agreed, but the fact remains. There is not much reason in women—that is in some women—begging your pardon," said the old man, bluntly, but Rachel apparently did not hear or heed him. She had turned slightly away from him, and her eyes were looking through the front window, beyond the shadowy solemn pine tops down upon the fertile valley of the Ayre, where the clear river wound its way between its green and lovely banks. Leave Pine Edge, her dear and only home, hallowed by countless memories—hallowed by associations most sacred. Oh, anything, anything but that!

"Mr Gillot"—Rachel's voice sounded very clear and sharp when she spoke again—"can I refuse to go?"

"No, my dear, you can't. Our only chance, as I said before, lies with the young Squire, and even he is in a manner powerless. His mother has absolute

control in the meantime, and I question if in this matter even his entreaties would avail much."

"I shall go to her myself, Mr Gillot. I have not asked many favours from Lady Emily. When she understands what this decision of her's means for me, she will never insist upon it, I feel sure. She would never be so cruel."

Mr Gillot was not sanguine. In fact, looking at the young widow's haughty and slightly defiant mien, he did not think it probable that she would make a successful suppliant. But he did not demur.

"Lady Emily thinks you ought, for your son's sake, to be living at Stonecroft," he said, presently.

"It cannot matter much where we live. I cannot keep my son with me, even if I would. He will be nothing but a soldier, Mr Gillot. His whole thoughts are of battles and sieges and hairbreadth escapes. It would be madness to try and put him past it."

"Well, well, knowing what his brave father was, we can't regret it," said the attorney, cheerfully. "I confess I should be disappointed if anything else were to satisfy him."

"I question, Mr Gillot, whether Lady Emily *has* the right to put the representatives of the Abbots out of Pine Edge," Rachel said again, quickly and decisively. "Do three centuries of tenancy carry no rights with them?"

"No, it's only use and wont, Mrs Geoffrey. So long as rent is paid for land, it's just like a house. My landlord can say to me any day, I want your house for myself, and provided he gives me fair notice, I must walk out at his time without a word."

"It is hard, it is cruelly hard," exclaimed Rachel, bitterly. "You can testify how anxious and unremitting I have been in my care for the place. I have spared no expense where servants are concerned in order that the land might not suffer. I have eyes, Mr Gillot, and I can

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see for myself how the farm is looking, even if I had not any returns in hard cash to show for it. Never, even in my father's best days, did Pine Edge pay him so well as it has paid me."

"My dear, I know it. I told her ladyship all that, but I was speaking to a dead wall. She has made up her mind that you are to go."

"Then there are other things to think of. Look at the house, for instance. The Abbots have made it what it is, and——"

"These arguments won't hold, Mrs Geoffrey," interrupted the attorney, shaking his head. "Everybody knows that Pine Edge is fit for any gentleman to live in, and everybody knows whose money paid for it. But the Abbots did it without being asked, simply for their own pleasure and profit. These are hard truths, my dear, but they are truths. Suppose you go out of the Edge to-morrow, you can't lay claim to a penny as compensation for improvements."

"The money is nothing. It is not a question of money," returned Rachel, passionately. "I have looked forward to spending my life here, Mr Gillot, and hoped to die in my old home when the time came. It will break my heart if I have to leave it. I cannot, I cannot!"

Never had Mr Gillot seen the daughter of his old friend so deeply moved. He had not hitherto understood her. She had appeared to him sometimes to be very cold and reserved, and self-contained. But he knew now how passionate was the heart beneath, how quick and strong the feelings, how close and clinging the attachment, not to human beings alone, but to places which memory hallowed. He was filled with a deep compassion for her, as he looked on her flushed face, and saw the nervous motions of her hands as she moved up and down the room.

"Were I you, Mrs Geoffrey, I would lay the whole matter before the young Squire," he suggested.

"No, because then Lady Emily might justly accuse me of seeking to influence her son, and I love him too well to put him in such a painful position. No, I shall be open and frank with her and shall plead my own cause. I am a proud woman, Mr Gillot, perhaps prouder than Lady Emily herself, but to-morrow I shall bury that pride and go as a suppliant to Studleigh, where I have never been admitted as an equal. Yes, it will cost me something; but it would cost me very much more to leave my dear old home. If she has a woman's heart at all I shall touch it to compassion before I go."



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CHAPTER XVII.

IN VAIN.

THE children felt that night that something most unusual had happened to vex their mother. She was very silent at the supper-table, and, greatly to their surprise, she sent them to bed without reading to them from the Bible, as was her wont. Rachel was scrupulously conscientious, and she felt in too stormy a mood to make reading from the Word profitable or comforting. When she came into Clement's room after he was in bed, he looked up into her proudly set face, with deep anxiety in his eyes—

"Mother, what has old Gillot been saying to you? He has vexed you awfully!" he exclaimed in his impulsive way.

"Yes, dear, he has; at least the message he brought vexed me. Mr Gillot is a wise man and a true friend, Clement, who has been invaluable to me," his mother replied, as she laid her hand on his brow. Usually that gentle hand was cool and soothing in its touch; to-night he felt it hot and unsteady.

"Won't you tell me what it is, mother? I'm big now, and I understand things," he asked, raising himself on his elbow in his earnestness, for all his chivalrous tenderness for his mother was roused at sight of her distress.

"Not to-night, my darling. To-morrow in all probability I shall be obliged to tell you. It is not that I do not trust you, Clement, only that I cannot trust myself. I want to be gentle and charitable and patient, as your uncle William used to be in the midst of many troubles."

Then Clement knew as surely as if he had been told that his Aunt Emily was at the bottom of his mother's new trouble. She bade him lie down and sleep, and so left him with a kiss. Evy slept in a little bed in mother's room, and when Rachel entered it the child was already fast asleep. It was a lovely face, dimpled and dainty and sweet, framed in its tossing dark hair, the long dark lashes lying like a fringe on the flushed cheek. Rachel knelt down, and laying her cheek on the child's hand, where it lay outside the coverlet, gave way for a moment to the bitterness which surged in her breast. Her heart was sore, sore; she was feeling more and more her loneliness, and the difficulties of her position. Never had woman more earnestly striven to do her faithful duty; she had sacrificed her own feelings many times, in order that the name she bore might not become the common talk of the county; she had meekly borne the slights which the Manor had cast upon the farm—in a word, she had suffered uncomplainingly at the hands of Lady Emily, and made no sign. But the crisis had come. The injustice, the cruel unreason of the message sent by her sister-in-law roused her indignation, as well as awakened an agony of sorrow. Her whole being revolted from the prospect of leaving Pine Edge, the dear home to which she was bound by every tie of association and memory. She would not let it go without a struggle. She would humble herself before the proud mistress of Studleigh, and for her children's sake ask to be allowed to remain. But the request would be strangely like a command, because in her heart of hearts Rachel felt that it was a request which she ought never to have been called upon to make.

Next morning at breakfast she strove to be cheerful, but

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the sharp eyes of Clement were not deceived. He saw that his mother was in a highly nervous state, and that she was talking at random. He would have given much to know what was the meaning of it, but he was too well trained to ask a second question, after what he had been told the night before.

"Evy and I are going over this morning to Studleigh, Clement," she said, as she rose from the table.

"Evy and you to Studleigh!" he reiterated, in boundless surprise. "What for? Mayn't I go too, mother?"

"No, dear, but you may walk with me, if you like, to the edge of the park. I will tell you some day, my son, why I took Evy this morning instead of you."

Clement asked no further question, but was ready at the door when his mother and sister came down.

Accustomed as she was to her children's implicit obedience, Rachel could not but wonder at the self-control and consideration shown to her by Clement. It was marvellous in so young a boy; and as she walked behind them by the dewy field-paths towards the stately trees of Studleigh, she reproached herself for her rebellious discontent, knowing that in these two dear children she was boundlessly blessed. The labour and care she had unshrinkingly bestowed upon them since infancy were bearing fruit already. The prayers of the widow were not all unanswered.

So a softer, sweeter expression came upon the beautiful, calm face; better and more tender feelings returned to her heart.

"You can wait here, dear," she said to Clement, when they reached the confines of the park. "We shall not be very long, or if you wish you can go home. You don't mind me leaving you here, dear? I think I'm doing right."

"Oh, no, I don't mind in the least. I'll just have a stroll over to the Copse Road and back. They're to be sowing that bad breadth over again, Mellish said: so I'll look down."

Rachel nodded and smiled, then taking Evy's hand in

hers crossed the little footpath into the broad, beautiful avenue, which had a perfect canopy of waving green boughs overhead. The child by her side chattered on, pointing out the daisies on the smooth turf, and the beautiful stately "candles" on the branching chestnuts, not noticing how very silent and grave her mother grew as they came near to the house. Rachel had not crossed the threshold of Studleigh Manor since the day on which they had buried its beloved master, when her presence had been formally required in the library at the reading of the will.

The outer door was wide open, and within Rachel noticed a new arrangement—a screen and doors of painted Cathedral glass dividing the inner from the outer hall. That had been done since the Squire's death, and though no doubt it added to the comfort of the house, Rachel had a pleasant memory of the spacious hall as it used to be in the Squire's time, with its soft tinted Turkey carpet, brightened here and there by a gay Indian rug, and the tall, graceful branches of the palms, for which Studleigh conservatories were famed.

The bell, which Rachel rung with difficulty, startled the deep sounding echoes through the house, and brought the footman hurrying upstairs, surprised at being called upon to admit visitors so early. His face, at sight of the lady at the door, was quite a study: but, in reply to her request for Lady Emily, he ushered her in with great respect to the library. He was a discreet person, and thought it well to take Mrs Geoffrey's name to his mistress first.

"Say I wish to see Lady Emily on important business, and that I can wait her convenience," Rachel said, as she took her seat, and the man gathered from both words and manner that Mrs Geoffrey did not intend to leave the Manor without seeing its mistress.

Somewhat awed by the gloomy grandeur of the room, Evelyn stood close by her mother's side, with her hand firmly clasped in hers.

They made quite a picture, the fine child in her white serge dress against the dark folds of the widow's mourning garb. But Rachel thought not at all of how they looked. She was conscious of an almost overpowering nervousness—which, however, did not betray itself in look or manner. After a slight interval, the footman returned to the library.

"Her ladyship will see you in the drawing-room, if you please," was the message he brought; and the pair followed him across the beautiful inner hall once more, and into another room, the rich fragrant warmth of which brought a strange sensation of sickness stealing over Rachel.

"Mrs Ayre, my lady," the servant said, and instantly withdrew. Rachel walked straight into the room—erect, stately, self-possessed. Although it was a mild morning, a clear fire burned in the grate, and the air was heavy with the sweet odour from the choice blooms with which every table and cabinet was laden. It seemed a dream of beauty to the wondering little girl clinging close to her mother's skirts, but Rachel saw none of it. Her attention was concentrated on the figure by the hearth—that graceful, supple figure in white, with the bunch of sweet violets in her girdle. A white gown was Lady Emily's favourite attire, and she wore it with a matchless becomingness and grace. She rose slowly, turned her beautiful face to her sister-in-law, and recognised her by a gracious bow.

"Good-morning. Will you be seated?" she said, courteously, but coldly, as she might have spoken to the merest stranger. Rachel regarded her for some brief moments in wondering silence. Her manner was superb. It betrayed no embarrassment, it was the perfectness of repose.

"I have to apologise for thus intruding, Lady Emily," Rachel began, in a clear, unfaltering tone. "The urgency of my business is my excuse. Mr Gillot paid me a visit last evening, shortly after you had been to his office."

"Yes."

The monosyllable fell with a fine indifference from the

patrician's lips. "Do be seated. If not, pray excuse me sitting. Won't your daughter—I presume it is your daughter—come near to the fire?"

Rachel gave her head an impatient shake.

"Evelyn, sit down there, dear," she said to the child, then looked again at her sister-in law's face.

"Will you tell me with your own lips, Lady Emily, wherein I have so direly offended you that you seek to punish me so severely?" she asked, quietly.

Lady Emily elevated her straight brows in mild irony.

"You use dramatic language. There has been no offence, therefore the question of punishment is absurd. The case stands thus—I believe that the farm would be better in more competent hands. Pardon, but a lady is naturally expected to be ignorant of the details of farm management. In my son's interests, I think it well that the place should be let to a thoroughly practical man."

"That is not your true reason, Lady Emily," Rachel answered, still quietly. "I have come this morning to ask what it is."

Lady Emily slightly winced under the candid, unhesitating words, and the straight, penetrating glance which accompanied it.

"If I had another reason, I am not bound to give it, I suppose," she answered, languidly. "But since you ask me, I *will* say that I think you have shamefully neglected Stonecroft, your son's portion, during all these years."

"You speak without knowledge, Lady Emily," Rachel answered, gently still, for she saw the woman was ill at ease, and she pitied her with a great pity. "Stonecroft has been conscientiously cared for, and my son will have no reason to complain of his mother's regency when he comes to his own. I have not asked many kindnesses at your hands, Lady Emily, nor have I presumed at all upon our relationship. But I do ask you this morning to do me a favour for which I shall never cease to be grateful. I

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wish to spend my life in Pine Edge. I hope to die in it. If you will allow me to remain I shall endeavour to meet your wishes at every point. I am as anxious for the welfare of the place as you can be. The Abbots have been so long in the farm that they have forgotten that they are only tenants."

"A great error, an evil in fact," supplemented Lady Emily, drily. "What do you intend to make of your son, Mrs Ayre?"

"My son will be nothing but a soldier. He goes to Eton immediately, and afterwards, I suppose, to Sandhurst," Rachel answered. "It is not for my son's sake I ask the favour. It is entirely a kindness to myself. I love the place. I have known no other home. I should be miserably unhappy away from it."

Lady Emily looked for the first time fully and critically at the little girl sitting meekly on the ottoman, with her brown hands clasped on her knee, awed into stillness by something in the atmosphere of the room. She was a fair creature, a child whom mansion or palace might be proud to own. A shadow crossed Lady Emily's face. There were times when she longed passionately for another child, a daughter who would be more to her than a son. Mr Gillot was right. She grudged her sister-in-law her double blessing.

"You are ambitious for your son, Mrs Geoffrey," she said, with a faint, cold smile.

"I have to consider what his father would have wished for him had he lived," Rachel answered, briefly. "But we are away from the point. Will you allow me to remain at Pine Edge, Lady Emily? I brought my little girl to help me to plead," she said, with a slight, sad smile towards the child. "Evy, will you ask Lady Emily to allow us to remain at Pine Edge?"

But the child never spoke. Her mother saw her draw herself away a little, as if she felt the coldness of the gaze fixed upon her.

"I am quite willing, if you wish it, to pay something for the privilege of remaining," Rachel went on again in her direct, candid fashion. "If money can buy me this satisfaction—and it is no ordinary satisfaction—I shall not say a word against an increased rent."

"It is not a question of money. I have considered the matter in all its bearings. I have interests and desires to be considered also," Lady Emily replied. "I assure you I have not arrived at this decision hastily. It has been most carefully considered, and I think that it will be better for many reasons that the farm should have a new tenant."

Rachel's face flushed and her eyes filled with tears.

"Is this an unalterable decision?" she asked, and at the altered voice Lady Emily winced again. She was not made of stone. She had harboured a ceaseless and causeless jealousy of the sweet woman before her, but she felt in her heart of hearts that she was guilty of a great injustice.

"When I have made up my mind and passed my word I do not care to recall it," she said, in tones which her accusing conscience made harsh and cold.

"I have one more suggestion to make, Lady Emily. It is impossible you can know how precious that place is to me, how hallowed it is by memory. I feel that it will sadden my life if I have to leave it. Will you sell it to me?"

Lady Emily opened her eyes in wide wonder.

"Do you know what you are speaking of, Mrs Geoffrey? Have you the slightest idea of the value of the farm?"

"Yes. I know its value to the uttermost farthing. It is worth six thousand pounds. I am willing to pay seven thousand for it."

"You must be a rich woman to speak so lightly of thousands."

"I am not poor. Will you consider this offer since you will not consider me as a remaining tenant. I am in earnest, and I know that Pine Edge is not in the entail."

"I could not sell the place. You forget it is my son's, and I could not advise him to divide his patrimony," was the guarded answer.

Rachel turned away, and held out her hand to her little girl.

"Come, Evy."

Her voice sounded strange in the little child's ears, and she made haste to clasp her little hands about her mother's cold fingers. Then she looked once very steadily in the face of Emily Ayre.

"I have never done you a wrong, Lady Emily, as God is my witness, even in thought. I accept your decision, and I shall trouble you no more. I pray that the day may never come when you shall suffer as you have made me suffer to-day, ay, and other days, which you and I remember. God shall judge between us. Farewell!"





CHAPTER XVIII.

"KIND HEARTS ARE MORE THAN CORONETS."

THE young Squire had been for his morning canter, and rode up the avenue as Rachel and her little girl left the house. He thought both figures familiar, but could not believe at the first glance that his eyes did not deceive him. They turned across the Park before he reached them, but he dismounted in a moment—left his horse to enjoy a bite of the tender young grass, and strode through the still trees. His mother, from the drawing-room window, saw this action, and stood still to watch. She had good eyes, and the distance was not great; she could therefore discover quite clearly the expression of each face.

"Aunt Rachel, have you really been at the house? Did you see mamma?" he asked, eagerly. "I am so sorry I was out."

Rachel detected the note of anxiety in the boy's kind voice, and knew that he was not at rest concerning that early call and its object. She put up her veil, and gave him her hand in kindest greeting.

Will, with a sudden, graceful impulse, bent his head and touched it with his lips.

"It did not matter, dear Will, it was your mother I wished to see."

"And you saw her, I hope," he said, with the same eagerness. "I am sure she would be glad to welcome you to Studleigh at last."

For answer Rachel burst into tears. Her nerves were overstrung; the strain upon them in the last hour had been very great.

"Dear Aunt Rachel, what has happened?"

Genuine distress was in Will's face as he asked the question.

"Do tell me. It is fearful to see you vexed like that. What is it?"

"Your mother will tell you, Will—I cannot speak about it," Rachel answered, hurriedly. "It would have been better had you gone on and not spoken this morning. I am sorry if I have grieved you."

"I don't want to seem curious, Aunt Rachel, but I *wish* you would tell me what is the matter. Mamma thinks of things so differently that——"

The boy paused there, and his sensitive colour rose. Rachel loved him for that fine, loyal touch. She saw that he would not judge where he could not understand.

"Let me walk with you to the farm, Aunt Rachel. I can get a groom in a moment to take the horse, and we can talk as we go," he said, quickly.

"No, dear, it will be better not. Clem is waiting for us at the stile. Go to mother, Will, and ask her to tell you my errand this morning. She will tell you frankly, I feel sure. I do not need to ask you, dear boy, to remember that your first duty and consideration must be towards her. God bless you."

She laid her two hands on his slender shoulders and kissed him on the brow. Lady Emily saw that caress, and not hearing the unselfish words which accompanied it, felt her causeless anger burn anew against that inoffensive woman. She knew in her deep heart that Rachel Ayre possessed a potent charm which she lacked—a charm

which drew every heart, young and old, to her, and bound them to her in the bonds of a reverent love. She grudged her that sweet possession, and inwardly blamed and condemned her for seeking by some underhand means to wean away *her* son's affection from his mother and his home.

Rachel spoke gently but decisively, and clasping Evy's hand in hers walked on.

"It rained last night, Will, and Clem says the brook will be splendid for fishing. Won't you come to the pool this afternoon?" Evy asked.

"I'll see. I'll be over anyhow, Aunt Rachel, after I have spoken to mamma," Will answered, and with a touch to his cap walked away. A groom had already taken his horse, so that he strode directly into the house and straight to the drawing-room in his riding boots, and whip in hand.

"Mamma, what did Aunt Rachel want, and why is she so awfully vexed?" he burst out the moment he was within the door.

"Did she not tell you?"

"No. She said you would. What is it?"

"A very simple thing, and certainly not worth the fuss. We have decided not to renew the lease of Pine Edge to her, and she elects to feel frightfully aggrieved."

Lady Emily answered carelessly; but she narrowly watched her son's face, secretly afraid of his outspoken indignation.

"Not renew it! What does that mean; that Aunt Rachel must leave the place——?"

"Yes, of course, there is no hardship. Her home ought to be at Stonecroft during Clement's minority. I told her so quite frankly; but your aunt is a very extraordinary woman, Will; quite too highly strung and dramatic for a practical person like me. Of course, you will take her part."

"If Aunt Rachel wishes to remain at the farm I can't see why anybody should wish to put her away," said Will, quietly.

"You are only a schoolboy, and cannot be expected to take everything into consideration. In the meantime you have made these people your pet hobby, to which everything must be sacrificed. It is well you have a wise mother to look after your interests."

Will looked grave and perplexed.

"You said 'we' had decided not to renew the lease. Who is 'we'? Has Gillot anything to do with it?"

"Really, Will, two courses of catechism of a morning is too much," his mother retorted, with unusual sharpness. "If you are so particular about pronouns, I am the only person responsible for this decision, and you must know that I cannot alter it."

"But, mother, it can't be right. Why, the Abbots have been there so long. Have we any *right* to put them out!" cried Will, hotly; and never had his mother seen him both so manly and so handsome. "Aunt Rachel feels it terribly. I believe it will break her heart. Besides, it will be awfully dull with strangers at the Edge. It's so jolly having Clem and Evy there, and to be able to run over any time. Mother, I can't help it if you are angry. I do love them all, and I think it will be a shame to put them out unless they want to go."

"I can't discuss the matter with you, Will; you are devoid of reason or common-sense where these people are concerned," she said turning from him with a gesture of scorn.

The boy's angry colour rose at the cutting words. He was like his father in many things, and though his anger was rare, it burned strong and fierce when it *was* roused. He turned upon his heel, closed the drawing-room door, and, giving a curt order to a passing servant to have his horse sent round again, he left the house. Five minutes later his mother saw him canter down the avenue, and enter in up the Copse Road, and smiled bitterly to herself, thinking he had gone to the farm.

But Will had a further ride than the farm in view that April morning. Mr Gillot was standing at his office window after his morning letters had been looked at, thinking, it must be told, of the very matter that had been under discussion at the Manor that morning. He felt no surprise when, hearing the sharp click of hoofs, he looked into the High Street, and saw the young Squire. He smiled slightly when he drew rein at the door, and signed to an ostler at the County Hotel door to take his horse. A moment more and he was shown into Mr Gillot's room.

"Good-morning, Mr Gillot. Am I too early? I want to speak to you about the farm, my aunt's farm, I mean," he said, as he shook hands.

"None too early, Mr William. I am glad to see you," answered the attorney, as he offered a chair. But Will preferred to stand, and leaning against the old-fashioned bureau, with his riding-switch somewhat impatiently tapping his boot, he looked straight into the old man's face.

"Mr Gillot, my mother wishes Mrs Ayre to leave Pine Edge. I wish her to stay. Have I the power as well as the will?" he asked, candidly.

"Only so far as this. If you express a strong wish to Lady Emily, she may reconsider her decision, but as matters were left by the Squire, you cannot do anything of that sort against her wishes."

Will looked deeply disappointed.

"Who told you of it, Mr Will?"

"My mother. Mrs Ayre was at the Manor this morning."

"Was she, indeed; and did you hear the result of the interview?" asked the attorney, with eager interest.

"It had no result. My mother is still determined that she shall leave the place. I cannot understand it, Mr Gillot. It seems so unreasonable and unkind. I wish I could say to Mrs Ayre, you can remain as long as you live," said the young Squire, passionately.

"But you can't, Mr Will, for five and a half years at

least. I would advise you not to trouble any more about it. After the first wrench is over, Mrs Ayre will be very happy and comfortable at Stonecroft. It is a most beautiful place."

"Yes. But suppose I was being turned out of Studleigh and sent to it I should not think it very beautiful. It's quite the same thing," said Will, with a cloud on his fair face. "Well, good-morning, Mr Gillot. There's no use saying any more about it, as you say. I'm very much obliged to you. I'll make it up to my aunt some other way."

"I'm sure of it. You are your father's son, Mr Will, and you needn't wish for any higher praise."

The attorney looked after the tall, slender figure with affectionate pride as it strode across the Square to the Hotel; but when he saw the brilliant flush which the mere exertion of mounting brought to the delicate cheek, he shook his head.

"I doubt, I doubt it's the captain's boy who will be Squire of Studleigh," he muttered, "and that would be dire retribution on Lady Emily's head."

Will Ayre rode rapidly through the green lanes, and when he came into the Copse Road turned up the hill to the farm. It was now noon, and the sun shone out brilliantly, making the country look its fairest. Never had the picturesque house on the Edge looked more beautiful than it did in that tender sunlight, which brought out all the soft greyness of the old walls, and the vivid greenness of the young ivy shoots which clothed the gables. Clement was standing against the white post of the avenue gate whittling a stick, and his face was as gloomy as it could be. When he saw his cousin he flushed angrily and turned away his head; but Will cried out to him—"Don't go away, Clem. I want to speak to you badly. You know very well, old chap, it is not my fault."

"I believe it isn't," Clem admitted, in a savage under-

tone. "But, all the same, it's a beastly shame; a sin, I say, and I don't care who hears me say it."

"I don't understand it, and I can't say anything, because you see it's my mother," said Will, with a touch of pathos which went at once to Clement's impulsive heart. "If I could help it I would. Do you think Aunt Rachel will see me."

"Yes, I think so. I don't mean to blame you, Will, but it's awfully hard. It makes a fellow feel queer, especially when it's so hard on the mother," said Clem. "Yes, it's a beastly shame."

Will walked soberly by Lancelot's side with the bridle on his arm. He felt very vexed, and the worst of it all was he had to restrain himself entirely on account of his mother. Somehow that morning Will felt very old and full of trouble.

Clem took Lancelot's bridle, while Will went into the house for one word with his aunt. She was at her desk in the dining-room writing a letter.

"I've been to Mr Gillot, auntie, to see if I could do anything, and I can't. I'm awfully sorry," he said, and the distress in his face added another sting to Rachel's grief.

"Never mind, dear. It is all right," she said, with her calm, sweet smile. "I am not fretting. God gives a wonderful power of accepting the inevitable, when we truly ask Him for it. I thank you for all your sweet kindness, Will; you remind me of your father more and more. I can give you no higher praise."

Will's face flashed. For the second time in one morning he heard the same words.

"If papa had lived, Aunt Rachel, how happy we should all have been."

"Yes, but we need not be very unhappy even now, Will," she said, brightly. "I am going to be very much interested now in Stonecroft, and you must come soon and see us in our new home."

"It is a long time till next Lady Day, Aunt Rachel," Will said with a smile.

"Yes, but I shall not remain till the last term, Will. It would only prolong the regret. I am writing now about Clem, and whenever he goes to Eton, Evy and I will betake ourselves to Stonecroft. John Mellish can look after things just as well in my absence as when I am here."

Will never spoke. Rachel felt for him deeply, but the matter was too delicate to be much spoken of.

"Isn't it next Wednesday you go?" she asked, as she addressed her letter.

"Yes, on Wednesday."

"It may be Thursday before I send Clem. Don't mind anything he says; he is quite put out, of course, about leaving the Edge, but he will soon forget, and I shall see that the children miss nothing at Stonecroft. It will be a great upheaval, almost an earthquake, getting everything uprooted from the old place."

"I can't bear it, Aunt Rachel. I never was so miserable in all my life," Will cried with quivering lips and heaving breast, and ran out of the house.

"I wish I was a man, Clem," he said, as he mounted Lancelot again. "I'll make up for it, old fellow, when I'm a man. Yes, I'll make up for it to Aunt Rachel and you and Evy."

"Oh, I know you're a brick," Clem said, heartily, and they shook hands with a firm, brotherly grip. The lads understood each other. They were cousins in love as well as in name. Lady Emily was strolling on the terrace when her son rode back to the house. She came to meet him, and laying her hand on Lancelot's glossy neck made him stand still, while she looked the boy keenly in the face.

"Well," she said, with a smile, "you have consoled well with your aunt."

"I was not three minutes at the Edge, mamma. I rode into Ayreleigh to ask Mr Gillot if I could give Aunt Rachel

permission to stay," he answered, his blue eyes meeting hers with a frank and fearless gaze.

"Most dutiful and respectful towards me, certainly," she said, coldly. "Well?"

"I have no power, but were I a man, mamma, this thing should not be; it is not right," he said, and a strange thrill went to the proud woman's heart; he looked and spoke so like his father.

"Then I went to the Edge just to say to Aunt Rachel that I am sorry. Clem is to go to Eton next Thursday, and Aunt Rachel and Evy are going to leave the farm at once. She says it is needless to prolong the regret of giving up the old place, so that when I come back at midsummer there will be nobody in the farm."

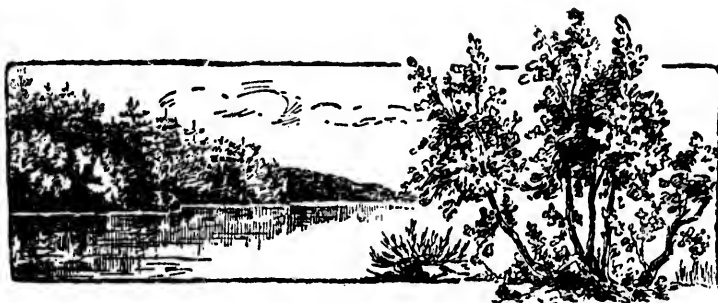
So saying he rode slowly away.

Lady Emily had achieved her heart's desire. In a few weeks the woman she envied and yet despised would be only a memory in the place.

Not always, however, is gratified desire an unmixed good.



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CHAPTER XIX.

A NEW AMBITION.

THE next few years were in a sense uneventful for the persons with whom this history is concerned ; that is, they contained no stirring incidents nor exciting experiences, yet they were important years for the younger generation, since their passage gradually worked the change from childhood to youth, and when we see them again youth had given place to early manhood and womanhood, and the time had come for them to take their places in the world's battle and prove themselves true heroes.

William Ayre had attained his majority abroad, during the winter months which the state of his health compelled him to spend in warmer climes. There had been no rejoicings, although messages had come and gone between him and the people, who adored him with that loving adoration which they had lavished on his father. In the genial April following on his majority he returned to his own, and forthwith set himself to find out in what way he could best be a wise, faithful, and beneficent Squire of Studleigh.

It was the mother's turn now simply to look on and keep silence, because Will, though courteous and considerate,

had his own ideas (singularly matured for his years) regarding estate management and the duties of a landlord, and from the first gave indication that he intended to put these ideas into practice. The cast of his mind, needless to say, was far removed from the strict and narrow conservatism which his mother had vainly striven to teach him. While entertaining a profound reverence for many old institutions which associations and memory hallowed, the young Squire had no scruple about introducing any new improvement on his estate, and carrying the spirit of progress into every relation of life. It was the dread of his mother's life lest he should set aside the traditions of his house by allying himself with a political party whose policy struck blows at hereditary laws, and the strict exclusiveness of class. But so far young Will gave no sign of a lively interest in politics, and seemed to find his hands full enough.

On a fine August morning, after breakfast, Lady Emily was sitting at the open drawing-room window before a little table, on which lay her morning correspondence. One letter seemed to interest her intensely, for she read and re-read it, and finally sat still with it in her hand looking absently across the park. Evidently it had given rise to pleasant thoughts, for her lips wore a well-satisfied smile. The letter in her hand was a closely-written sheet, delicately scented, and headed by a coronet. It was from her school-friend, Lady Adela Brydges, who had become the Marchioness of Winterdyne in the autumn following her first season in London, and the same month in which Lady Emily had married William Ayre. They had kept up but a slight correspondence since, but the letter just received was warm and cordial, and contained a suggestion well-pleasing indeed to Lady Emily. It ran thus:—

“I hear you have returned from Algiers, and that your boy is perfectly restored to health. Winterdyne has been hearing splendid accounts of him from the Eardleys, of whom you saw so much abroad. He is anxious, for Mr

Ayre's sake, to see the young Squire. You know what an almost romantic affection my husband had for yours in their Oxford days. I have not forgotten our old friendship either, and I write to ask if you and your son will pay us a visit at the end of this month or early next. We are to be very gay celebrating our little Sybil's eighteenth birthday. My son attains his majority next March. Do they not make us feel old? Sybil is her father's darling, and she is a lovely child. What more natural than that your child and mine should "forgather," as they say in Scotland? Let us give them the chance; of course, without a whisper to either. I know Winterdyne would be pleased, and if your son is at all like his father, I should give him Sybil without a murmur, and be glad to see her so well married, in the best sense of that trite phrase. Now, I will take no excuse. I know you have been living in strict retirement, but you have a duty now to your son. Since Winterdyne heard so much of the young Squire from the Eardleys, he has not let a day pass without speaking of you. Do gratify us—for old times' sake. By the by, it will interest you to know that your nephew and our Harry have been chums at Sandhurst, and are now waiting the result of their final exam. Brave young soldiers they will both make; but, ah! the mother-heart quails, and could even pray that they may never need to be more than fireside soldiers. It is beautiful and brave, I think, of Mrs Geoffrey Ayre to be so interested and pleased with her son's ambition, after her terrible experiences. I fear I am less unselfish."

Lady Adela penned these words out of the simple fulness of her heart, not dreaming how bitter a sting they contained for the woman for whose eye they were intended. It took the edge from the keen satisfaction given by perusal of the first page. In her passionate pride she told herself that that plebeian boy, in whose veins ran only yeoman blood, had no right to consort with such exclusive and aristocratic people as the Winterdynes.

In her own mind she bitterly resented it, as another instance of Mrs Geoffrey's self-assertion and presumption. But what could she do? At Stonecroft they were beyond her jurisdiction. She had not the shadow of an excuse for interfering or even passing a verdict on the woman's conduct.

"What has happened this morning to make you look so superlatively grave, mother?" asked Will's voice in the doorway. "If such a thing were not beyond the bounds of possibility I should say you had got an account exceeding your gloomiest expectations."

"Come here, Will. Where are you going? Have you been for your ride?"

"No, just going," he answered, and sauntered into the room, a tall, slim figure, well proportioned, but too slender to be manly; the pale, fair face winning and even striking in its way, because of its delicate refinement. He took off his riding cap as he advanced to his mother, and the bright golden hair lay in soft waves on the white brow where every blue vein was visible. A handsome fellow in his way was young Will, but as she looked at him the mother's heart ached. There was something lacking, that indefinable suggestion of physical power, held in reserve, which is the glorious heritage of young manhood. The Squire was well, but would never be strong, never be that ideal country Squire whose limbs know no weariness, and whose endurance has no limit.

"Can you spare me a moment, Will? I have an important letter this morning from a very old friend of whom you have heard me speak—Adela, Marchioness of Winterdyne."

"Yes, of course, I know of her. Mrs Eardley and Amy spoke of her a great deal in Algiers. What does she say?"

"Sends an invitation for us to Winterdyne for next month. I am very anxious to accept it."

"Are you, mother?"

Will looked genuinely surprised as he asked the question. His mother had so long held herself aloof from society of every kind that invitations now came but rarely to Studleigh, and these were invariably refused.

"Yes, Lady Adela is my very old and dear friend. She asks us to come in time for the celebration of her daughter's birthday on the fifth of September."

"I've heard Clem speak of them," said Will, carelessly. "He is very intimate with Lord Raybourne—Harry, as he familiarly calls him. I believe Lady Sybil is a lovely girl."

"Lady Winterdyne mentions your cousin in her letter as having some slight acquaintance with Lord Raybourne. Of course it is impossible that they can be intimate, though no doubt your cousins have led you and others to believe it. Will you go with me, then, at the end of the month?"

"If you wish it, mother. I am very glad to think you will enjoy a little society again. I have long thought we live too quietly here," answered Will.

"If you thought so you ought to have spoken. *You* are master of Studleigh now," his mother said a little stiffly.

"Yes, but it is your comfort and your wishes I have to study, mother," Will answered, affectionately, and the gravity in her face melted into a lovely smile. There were moments when she was all a mother should be, tender, watchful, considerate, regardless of self. These moments, though rare, had bound the cords of her boy's heart to her in indissoluble bonds.

"It will be glorious to see you take your place in the world again," he said, looking on her beautiful face with all a son's pride. "Do you know, mother, nobody would even imagine that I could have the presumption to be your son. You look so young."

"You are a foolish boy, Will, and think too much of your middle-aged mother," she answered, chidingly, and yet with a deepening satisfaction on her face. It was the very

wine of life to her to hear such words from the lips of the boy for whom she would have laid down her life, who was the only being on earth in whom her whole hope and ambition were centred.

"I wonder should I tell you what hopes I was building on this visit when you came in," she said impulsively. "The day must come, Will, when I shall abdicate in favour of a younger and fairer mistress of Studleigh. I wonder how far distant that day is."

Will never spoke, but she wondered to see the flush rise to his face till it dyed it red.

"There is time enough, mother, unless you are tired housekeeping for me. I am in no hurry to make a change," he answered, lightly.

"It is always well to keep such possibilities in view; then there is no disappointment, but a calm preparedness for the inevitable," she answered, smiling still. "I am not one of those mothers who elect to feel themselves aggrieved when another woman supplants her in her son's heart. When the time comes I shall abdicate gracefully, I promise you."

"I question, mother, if in our case that day ever comes," Will answered, gravely, and with a touch of sadness.

"Why not?" she cried, jealously. "Why should you differ from other men? I hope to live to see a gracious, queenly woman your wife, and a troop of happy children in Studleigh."

But Will still only shook his head.

"We cannot tell what may come out of this visit, Will. You have seen so few attractive girls. When you are thrown in the way of a young and lovely creature like Sybil Rayne, who knows but the issue may be of the happiest? *That* would satisfy my highest ambition for you, Will. The Winterdynes belong to one of our best families."

Still Will only shook his head.

"Don't build castles in the air for me, mother, or set up

ambitions which will never be fulfilled. I doubt you will need to be content with a bachelor Squire of Studleigh."

"Why? Will you never marry?"

"I cannot say. But unless my opinions on certain subjects should undergo some radical change, it is not likely."

"Have you pledged yourself to celibacy?"

"Not solemnly; but I believe it would be wise for me not to marry. But this is too serious a discussion for a summer morning, with a west wind blowing, which is the very elixir of life. I must go."

"Where do you ride this morning?"

"To Stonecroft," he answered, and was quick to note the instant change on his mother's face.

"The second time in a week you have spent a day there. I have room to be jealous, Will."

"Jealous of whom, mother? I have seen so little of Clem for years; and if report speaks truly, he may soon be far enough from us all."

"What report?"

"There is rumour of disturbance at the Cape, and Clem is eager to be off to active service."

"The best thing for him. It is only by his own effort he can rise to any position."

"Oh, I don't think so. There's no end of people interested in him. You have no idea, mother, what kind of a fellow Clem is. He conquers everybody; he has such a grand, strong, masterful way, and yet he is as tender as a woman. Then he is as handsome as Adonis."

"He has a most generous champion in you," said Lady Emily, drily.

"He doesn't need any champion, I assure you. Never was any fellow more capable of standing on his own legs than Clement Ayre," responded Will, shortly. "Mother, when we go to Winterdyne, will you pay Aunt Rachel a visit at Stonecroft? You know it is in the next parish. I wish you would, for my sake."

Lady Emily shook her head.

"I shall make no promises, Will. Your Aunt Rachel has won you completely, and can turn you round her little finger, that is quite evident. But I do not see with your eyes, and I cannot quite forget the past."

"Mother, it seems to me that you exaggerate something in the past. It never appears to me to be a dreadful thing that Uncle Geoff should have fallen in love with Aunt Rachel. She is so beautiful and so good. If you only knew her, mother, I am sure you would change your opinion. I think her one of the most perfect women I have ever seen ; perfect in every relation of her life." His enthusiasm for the aunt he so dearly loved was not well-timed. It fell like molten lead in his mother's ears, and awakened anew in her breast the bitterness of the past.

"It is to her advantage to act this perfection before you, Will," she answered, in her most icy manner. "My experience of the woman your Uncle Geoffrey was unfortunate enough to marry has been that she is a designing, presumptuous, and self-assertive person, perfectly able to hold her own ground. I knew her before there was any talk of her marriage, and formed an opinion then which I have never had occasion to change. It is better when we do not discuss these relatives, Will, but I assure you your open disregard of my feelings and wishes regarding your intimacy with them has occasioned me the deepest mortification and disappointment."



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CHAPTER XX.

A HAPPY HOUSEHOLD.

"**M**OTHER, I'm perfectly wild with joy."

"You look it, Clem. Remember your years and your dignity, boy, and behave with some decorum."

"He can't, mother, just let him alone," Evy put in with a laugh, as the stalwart young soldier swung himself from the ground to a drooping branch of a hoary old oak which sheltered the north gable of the house at Stonecroft.

"Coming up, Evy? 't's jolly and sheltered. Just give me your hand, and I'll swing you up in a trice."

"No, thank you, mother and I will admire you from a respectful distance. It is quite evident that you need active service."

"And I'll have it too, soon, I hope," cried Clem, as he dropped to the ground again.

"I wonder what news for Harry this morning. I hope he hasn't got a disappointment."

"He will come and tell us, surely," said Rachel Ayre, as she leaned against the trunk of the old oak, and looked across the sunny old garden to where the river leaped and rippled in the golden glow of the morning.

‘Come here, Evy, till I talk sense to you,’ said Clem, ceasingly, and throwing his arm around his sister, he made her saunter across the lawn, and the mother, looking on, thanked God in her own heart for these two, who had never, since they were old enough to understand her gentle guiding, occasioned her a moment’s anxiety or pain. They were a goodly pair—the tall, splendidly-built young soldier, with firm, square shoulders, and open, honest, handsome face, and the fair, lovely girl, with face as sweet as an opening rose, and ripples of soft hair, which gleamed in the sun, like living gold.

They were very unlike each other; none would have imagined them brother and sister, but they were fondly attached to each other, with a love passing that which usually binds brother and sister together. Yes, in her children Geoffrey Ayre’s widow was rich indeed, and the tranquil happiness of her life, chastened only by memories which time had mellowed, had kept her face so young and sweet that, save for her hair, now nearly white, she might almost have passed for their elder sister. Their relations to each other were very perfect. The young soldier’s passionate love for his beautiful mother had in it a touch of a lover’s adoration. She had given them a beautiful childhood, full of blessed memories, and now, when they stood on the threshold of life, ready for its duties and responsibilities, she felt no misgivings except the natural anxieties which must fill a mother’s heart at such a time. She saw in the boy the restless, eager spirit of his father—the energy and indomitable will which are such valuable qualities in young manhood, but tempered by a high sense of duty and an unselfishness of disposition, to foster which had been her greatest care. Well they repaid her toil; and, as she looked with a natural and exquisite pride upon them, she asked that God would continue to guide them in the future as in the past.

“Mother, impress upon Evy that she must be more

respectful to Lieutenant Ayre than she has hitherto been to the Sandhurst cadet," he cried, looking over his shoulder, and the two words, "Lieutenant Ayre," awakened a strange thrill in Rachel's heart. As Lieutenant Ayre her beloved had wooed her, and the undying memories of that far-off time brought such a mist before her eyes, that she was impelled for a moment to turn her head away.

"Mother, I never heard anybody talk more utter nonsense than our Clem," Evy made answer. "I wish you could learn some lessons of self-control and good manners from Will."

"Ay, poor Will."

Clem's voice lost its bantering tone, and the laughter died out of his eyes. The relationship between the two cousins was a peculiar one—Clem's affections being mingled with a vast compassion, which Lady Emily would have indignantly resented had she known of its existence.

"You must let me go, Clem, because I have letters to write for mother, and it is just half an hour till the bag leaves. You will never do a bit of good in this world, Clem, you are so incorrigibly idle and teasing."

"Oh, this is too much, after I have just come out of that wretched exam, with flying colours. Wait till Harry comes, my lady, and you'll eat humble pie."

Evy was off, but not before Clem saw the bright, beautiful blush on her face, which sent him back to his mother with a very queer expression in his eyes.

"Mother, a penny for your thoughts: mine are worth a guinea. Will you buy?"

"No, I demand them as my right," Rachel answered, with a smile.

"Well, can you guess a great secret, and then keep it? It's about Evy——"

"What about her?"

"It will surprise you very much."

"Perhaps not."

"I'll bet on it. Oh, but you don't bet," laughed Clem.
"Well, I'll tell you what, I've just discovered, mother, Raybourne's friendliness for me is a huge fraud."

"How do you make that out?"

"Because it's Evy he comes to see, I verily believe. Oh, the deceiver! Won't I pitch into him next time he comes. You don't look one bit surprised."

"I'm not. I'm Evy's mother, Clem."

"A motherly old hen, who watches her chicks well," said Clem, affectionately. "Do you approve of Harry, then?"

"I approve of him very much, Clem; but I am in some doubt how to act. Do you think Lord and Lady Winterdyne would think an obscure little girl like our Evy a fit match for the future Marquis."

"I don't see why. They are very friendly, and they must see well enough what is going on," said Clem, soberly. "Mother, it would be abominable if it came to anything, and then they were disagreeable. Do you think there is any chance of it."

"I cannot say. Friendship is one thing, alliance by marriage another. I have sometimes regretted your intimacy with Raybourne, especially since he began to come so much here. Evy is just at an impressionable age, and she has seen so little of the world that naturally she is flattered by the attentions of your delightful chum."

"Now, mother, it's too bad trying to put the responsibility on me," said Clem, gravely, but with a twinkle in his eye. "And don't pretend that Evy has no hand in it. Why, she's pretty enough to turn the heads of ten lords, though I must say she is outspoken enough to startle anybody. Don't look grieved and concerned, mother. I want everybody to feel as jolly as I do this morning."

"Your success has another side, Clem. It means that I may make ready to let you go."

"Why, yes. Wouldn't you despise me, now, if I didn't long for active service? You wouldn't like me to be a lout content to smoke a pipe and read a novel under the oak all day long?"

"I wouldn't have you one bit different, my son," Rachel admitted, with a sudden gleam of pride in her gentle eyes.

"Thank you, mother. I'm not all I should be, but I try to remember what you would like me to be. I wonder if it's a sin to hope that the disturbance at the Cape may go on, and that Harry and I may be lucky enough to be sent out? It will be frightfully slow if we are just stationed at some wretched military quarters, and made to play at soldiering till we are grey."

Rachel could not but laugh at the young man's expression of deep disgust.

"Well, it is part of a soldier's duty to accept whatever comes in the best possible spirit," she answered. "Why, here is Will."

"So it is. Will's a decent chap, mother. He'll rejoice unfeignedly over my good luck," said Clem, and took a long stride across the lawn to meet his cousin as he rode up the approach.

"Morning, Will. Congratulate me, old fellow. Yes, it's all right, and—Lieutenant Ayre at your service."

He stood up straight and gave the graceful military salute which he had learned, first in babyhood in the verandah of an Indian bungalow. It seemed strange to Rachel, looking back, to think that nearly four-and-twenty years had elapsed since these sacred, never-to-be-forgotten days.

"I'm so awfully glad, Clem. But I knew it was all right. We are not a bit surprised, are we, Aunt Rachel?"

"Perhaps not, dear boy. I have just been trying to curb this unruly spirit," said Rachel, as she advanced to welcome him. He is burning for glory, Will. Who knows, he may have a surfeit of it before he is much older."

"He is the stuff heroes are made of," said Will, admiringly, and how has Raybourne done? Have you heard?"

"Not yet, but I think he's all right," answered Clem. "I'll be awfully disappointed if he isn't, because he knows his work better than I do. Shall I tell Evy Will has come?"

Rachel nodded, and Clem departed into the house. "I am glad you have come, Will. I have been feeling the need of some one to understand how *I* feel," Rachel said, turning to her nephew with brimming eyes. Is it not strange how I rely upon you? I feel to you just as I felt towards your father, dear. You are more like my brother than my nephew."

"Dear Aunt Rachel, I am thankful that I am of any use or comfort to you," Will answered quickly and gratefully, and pressed the soft hand which rested in his.

"Yes, I know. Clem sees only the sunny side of the picture. He thinks only of the glory and the excitement of war. *I* have known its horrors. Women view these things differently, of course; it is their nature to shrink from whatever causes sorrow or suffering. My feelings are strangely mingled, Will. I am proud of my boy; glad he will be an ornament to the profession his father so loved, and yet——"

"Dear Aunt Rachel, don't vex yourself needlessly. It may be years before there is another war, and the awful experience you had can at least never be repeated."

"God forbid that it should," replied Rachel, with a shudder.

"But I must not cloud this bright day with my sad fore-

bodings and sadder memories. How glad it makes me to see you look so well, Will. I think you are much better."

"I feel quite well, just like a different man, auntie, and though I may seem ungrateful for my own blessings, I would give much to be in Clem's shoes."

"You have other work to do, and you are doing it nobly. You are a worthy son of a worthy father, Will. I hear that on every hand."

"I try to do what I think he would have done had he lived, Aunt Rachel. I have always wished to tell you of some papers of his I read after I came home from Algiers. Mr Gillot gave them to me. He had them in charge since my father died. They contained a great many plans and directions about the estate, and a letter to me to be read when I came of age. I can never hope to be so good a man as he was, Aunt Rachel."

"Oh, you will be, you are now, Will," she answered, with a reassuring smile. "I hope your mother is quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you. Oh, we are asked to Winterdyne for next month, Aunt Rachel."

"Indeed, and will Lady Emily go? She has long given up society."

"Yes; but she is most anxious to accept this invitation, so in a few weeks I shall not have to ride so far to see you."

"That will be pleasant," Rachel answered, but said no more. "They are to have a large house party at Winterdyne," she said, after a slight pause. "I am anticipating the great pleasure of seeing my old friends Sir Randal and Lady Vane. She is godmother to Sybil, and Lady Winterdyne has induced them to come for the celebration, then they are to come to me for a few days later on."

"They must be very old now."

"Yes—but Lady Vane is as energetic as ever. You will enjoy meeting them. They loved your father dearly."

Why, Will, more visitors ; Lady Winterdyne and her son : Clem's anxiety will be relieved at last."

With that perfect self-possession which marked her inbred refinement, Rachel advanced to meet her distinguished guests. Lady Winterdyne was driving her son in a rustic cart, but she gave him the reins, and held out both her hands to Mrs Ayre.

"Have we to congratulate each other, dear Mrs Ayre? Harry has done well, and he would give me no peace till I drove him over. Is Lieutenant Ayre in the house?"

"Yes ; I congratulate you, Lady Winterdyne, and you, Lord Raybourne," said Rachel, heartily. "May I present my nephew, William Ayre of Studleigh, or have you already met him?"

"No, how delightful this is. I wrote to your mother yesterday, Mr Ayre. How I wish Lord Winterdyne had been with me. Why, where has Harry gone?"

"Into the house, I fancy. Clem is teasing his sister in the drawing-room. Will you come in for a few minutes, Lady Winterdyne?"

"Yes, certainly. Did you say your mother had received my letter, Mr Ayre?"

"Yes, and we hope to have the pleasure of accepting your kind invitation, Lady Winterdyne."

"Ah, that is as it should be. We hear so much of you from the Eardleys. Pray don't trouble, Mrs Ayre, my ponies are models of good behaviour. What a sweet woman your aunt is, Mr Ayre. I love her very much."

"She is, I think her one among a thousand."

"And your cousins, too, they are charming. Evy is as lovely as an angel. We shall have gay doings next month, in which all you young people, I hope, will have a share. Surely your mother does not often come to Stonecroft?"

"No, Lady Winterdyne," Will answered, with a look of pain, which somewhat puzzled the kindly, gracious woman by his side. The Winterdynes did not spend much of their

time at the family seat, and the Ayres of Studleigh had long lived so absolutely out of the world that their affairs were only talked of in their own neighbourhood. Lady Winterdyne had therefore never heard anything of the strained relations between the two families. But ere the autumn closed, her eyes were opened.





CHAPTER XXI.

IN BITTERNESS OF SOUL.

LADY ADELA BRYDGES had been a somewhat giddy, frivolous girl in her first season when she married a middle-aged Marquis of Winterdyne. It was a marriage which astonished not a few, and there were many predictions that it would not prove a success—predictions which, however, were never fulfilled, for as the years went on, the two, who had married for love, became dearer to each other. Lord Winterdyne was a man of singularly noble character, with high aims above all the prejudices which sometimes mar the character of those in high places. His nature was rather reserved than open. Many called him proud and haughty, but in his family circle and among his intimate friends he was greatly beloved. He was a keen politician, and one eminently fitted to be a leader of men. His judgment was matured and reliable, and his opinions carried weight even among his opponents. He was a man on whom his party absolutely relied, and to whom his compeers looked for guidance and example. His wife was his companion and helpmeet in all things, and with her happy spirit and light-hearted ways lent the necessary brightness to his home. She received Lady Emily Ayre with affectionate cordiality, and the

Marquis greeted the son of his old friend with marked pleasure. There were three children at Winterdyne, two sons and one daughter—the blue-eyed, saucy Sybil, on whom Lady Emily's ambition for her boy was centred. The Ayres drove the distance from Studleigh, and arrived shortly before dinner, so that it was not until they went down to the drawing-room, a few minutes before eight, that they were introduced to the young people. Lord Raybourne and Will were already acquainted. Lady Emily looked at him with but a passing interest, her whole attention being given to Sybil, a bright-faced, happy-hearted girl, with no nonsense or affectation about her.

"I am indeed delighted to meet once more one of whom my wife has talked so often," said Lord Winterdyne, in his somewhat dignified way. "Come, Sybil, and greet your mother's old friend."

Sybil looked with open admiration at the queenly figure as she lifted up her face to give the kiss of greeting. Lady Emily's unwonted tears rose at the young girl's graceful action, and she turned somewhat hurriedly to her son. "I fear you will find that I have somewhat forgotten the usages of polite society, my dear," she said, with that grace which none could make more winning. "Come, Will, and do duty for your mother."

"Oh, Mr Ayre and I have met before at Stonecroft, Lady Ayre," cried Sybil, gaily. "I don't think we feel at all strange to each other."

"I thought of asking Mrs Geoffrey Ayre to dine with us to-night, Emily," said Lady Winterdyne, entering at the moment. "But again I thought we should have a great deal to say to each other. Where is Norman? He is an incorrigible boy, always late."

"I saw him, mamma, about an hour ago from my dressing-room window wading into the lake after some sort of water-plant which has come into flower out of season,"

said Sybil. "I am afraid he will have forgotten all about dinner."

"He often does," said the mother, with an indulgent smile. "My Benjamin is a curious boy, Emily. I don't know from whom he inherits the tastes of a naturalist, but he has a museum in the old picture gallery which would amuse you. He is so utterly happy among his toads and fishes that we are glad to leave him in peace."

At the dinner-table that night Will was amazed at his mother. She looked so beautiful and so gracious, and her conversation was so brilliant and fascinating that all were enchanted with her. She was in her element, and felt surprised to find how pleasant it was to meet once more with congenial and delightful society.

"I begin to think, Adela, that I have made a mistake living in retirement so long," said Lady Emily, when she was alone with her friend in the drawing-room after dinner.

The young people were out on the terrace, they saw Sybil's white gown glancing among the trees, and the bright scarlet of Raybourne's coat.

"How do you mean?" asked Lady Winterdyne, as she leaned back in her lounging-chair and sipped her coffee.

"I know to-night how much I have missed. What a delightful life you must have."

"I am very happy. Winterdyne is devoted to me, and my children are as good as gold. The only cloud on my sky at present is that Harry will talk on as if war were the most desirable event in the world. He and Clement Ayre are absolutely agreed on the subject of their profession."

"Is it not rather a disappointment to you and Lord Winterdyne that your eldest son should have chosen the army?"

"It was at first, but we soon saw it was no use trying to force his inclinations. Why, Harry has played at soldiers, and drilled Sybil and Norman, since his babyhood. I really don't know, Emily, who is to fill the father's shoes. Norman

bids fair to be a naturalist and a scholar, and there is not a politician in the family. Our only hope must be in the son-in-law to be ; and about whom we are in a doubtful state of uncertainty."

"Your daughter has had no suitors, then?" asked Lady Emily, with interest.

"Oh, suitors in plenty ; but she seems to favour none. I believe she is fancy free. I admire your son very much. His manners are perfect."

"He has been the best of sons to me, Adela," Lady Emily replied, with strange emotion. "It would make the last years of my widowed life boundlessly happy if what you spoke of should take place."

"I should be pleased. Frankly speaking, Sybil is so full of nonsense, just as I was at her age, that it would be well that she should marry a man of firm character and stability. That, I am sure, your son possesses, in conjunction with a singularly amiable disposition. Yes, it would be very desirable, but we cannot control the destinies of our children, even if it were desirable that we should."

Lady Emily looked very grave, and slightly shook her head.

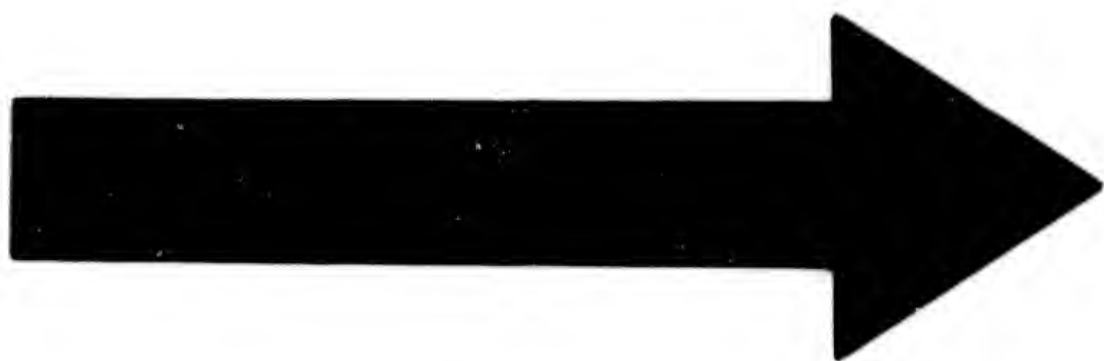
"I sometimes think it might be better for some young people if they were compelled to submit to the wise decisions of their elders."

Then suddenly she sat forward and looked her friend full in the face.

"Adela, tell me, are you really intimate with the family at Stonecroft?"

"Yes, the young people are inseparable—Clement and Harry being such friends. Why do you look at me so, Emily? Is there anything objectionable in such an intimacy?"

"Nothing objectionable, of course," Lady Emily answered, significantly. "But I am surprised, very much surprised—that is all."



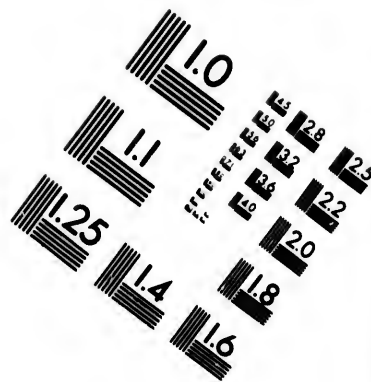
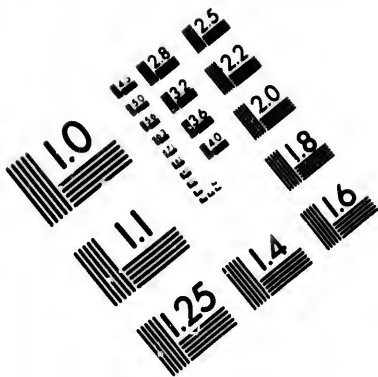
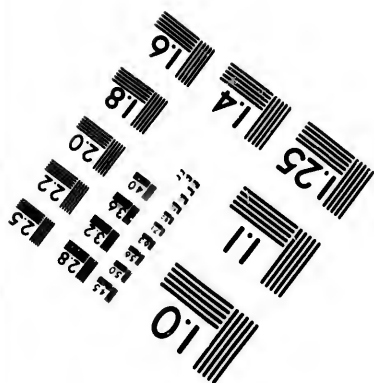
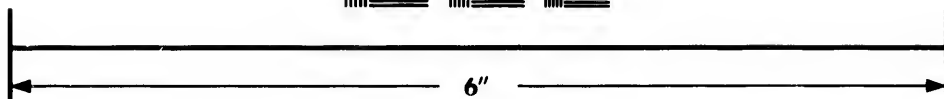
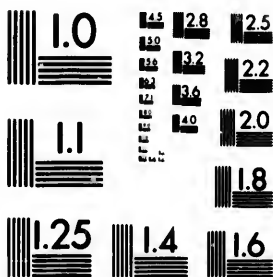


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"Tell me why."

"Tell me first what you think of Mrs Geoffrey, Adela."

"I admire and love her. Winterdyne thinks her perfect. Why do you ask?"

"You know, of course, who she was before she married Captain Ayre."

"A daughter of one of your tenants, was she not? but a very old family, and she is most refined. Yes, I have heard the story, I think, but both you and I, Emily, know that these old distinctions are 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 that 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 lip 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 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 well 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 daresay Mrs Ayre will understand. I remember now that she said nothing at all when I spoke of you 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 Winderdyne 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 schoolboy. 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 with 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 of 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; 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 especially 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 Emily. 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 frank 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.

“**W**HAT 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 to his sister’s bright eye, but under her brother’s steady gaze she drooped 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 dog-cart, 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 Emily wants a rest. Shall 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 at 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 con-



cluded 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, and 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 her 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-made 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 the 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 nor 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 away from anything higher, bids us accept the inevitable with unaltered faces. But let us leave that sore subject for a pleasanter one. Sir Randal and his energetic wife will be here to-night. You will be pleased to meet them again."

"Yes, but Aunt Lucy will take sides with you, Adela, and I shall be nowhere."

"Winterdyne will tell you that it is always the duty of the minority to surrender gracefully. It is a favourite remark of his that were that sensible rule acted on in the house there would not be such a disgraceful waste of valuable time," said Lady Adela, with one of her winning smiles. "Emily, I am going to make you amiable and lovely in disposition, as so beautiful a woman ought to be; and I always have my own way."

It was a fine winter morning. A hard frost held the earth in a band of iron, and had frozen all waters except swift-running rivers and the noisiest of brooks. The keen air was exhilarating and delightful, and brought the rich glow to the faces of the young people as they drove rapidly over the hill to Stonecroft. When they arrived at that comfortable family house they found no one at home but Mrs Ayre, who received them in that fine, unaffected,

genuine way which won all hearts so readily. There was something very pretty in Sybil's manner towards her, a caressing deference, which to a close observer might have seemed something like an appeal. They were warm friends, both possessing that perfect naturalness which is an irresistible charm.

"All alone, Mrs Ayre ; and where is Clem at this hour of the morning ?" asked Raybourne, making no secret of his disappointment. "It would be like my luck if they should have gone away somewhere to spend the day."

"Oh, no, Clem only took his sister over to the lake," Rachel answered, with a smile.

"Oh, that's all right. I'll go and hunt them up. Are you coming, Sybil ?"

"No, no, Harry, your sister is quite chilled. She must warm her fingers here," protested Mrs Ayre, but Sybil assured her she felt no cold, and seemed so eager for the walk to the lake that Rachel said no more.

The grounds about Stonecroft, though not extensive, could boast of a large and picturesque lake, which had been the 'delight of Clement and Evelyn, summer and winter, since they changed their home. Indeed, the lake had nearly reconciled them to leaving Pine Edge.

"I am sure you like Raybourne and his sister, Will," Rachel said, when she was left alone with her nephew. "They are so simple and kindly, thanks to their mother's fine training."

"I like all the family, Aunt Rachel," said Will, heartily, and yet with a curious gravity. "I had really no idea that you were so intimate with them. Am I not right in supposing that there is a greater attraction here for Harry than his friendship for Clem ?"

"I cannot tell, Will, dear ; sometimes I hope not."

"Why, Aunt Rachel ?"

"Because I would not wish my daughter to suffer as I have suffered," Rachel replied, with unwonted intensity.

"And I know very well my fortuneless Evelyn could be considered no match for Lord Winterdyne's heir."

"You are wrong, Aunt Rachel. Evelyn is fit to rank with the highest and best in the land," Will retorted, and the flush rose high to his brow as he uttered these passionate words. His aunt looked at him with mild surprise, but never for a moment did a suspicion of the truth dawn upon her.

"You and I, out of our love for Evy, think her so, perhaps," she admitted with a smile. "But the world will have another verdict. Of late, Will, I have been visited by strange and sad previsions of coming trouble. I cannot rid myself of them. Oh, my boy, it will be fearfully hard if I have to give up my son, as I had to give up his father. Pray that the sacrifice may not be required of me."

"Do not needlessly distress yourself, Aunt Rachel. There is no immediate prospect of war."

Rachel shook her head.

"The news from the Cape is not very reassuring. It would be amusing if it were not so terribly real to see the eagerness with which Clem and I look the Cape telegrams every morning. It is true that Sir Bartle Frere has written for reinforcements; and I heard from Major Cartwright yesterday that there is a rumour that troops are to go out at once."

Will regarded his aunt with compassionate sympathy, but could think of nothing to say.

"It seems a pity that Clem should be so eager, and yet when I look at him, Aunt Rachel, I do not wonder," said Will, with a slight, sad smile. "It would be impossible for the embodiment of such splendid manhood to be content quietly at home. His fine energies must have scope, and I feel sure we shall have another soldier hero to add to the honours of Studleigh. But he must be careful of himself for all our sakes. Have you ever thought, Aunt Rachel, how very slender a barrier there is between him and the old place?"

He smiled still as he asked the question ; but the tears rose in Rachel's eyes.

"Will, don't suggest that. We cannot bear it ! Studleigh cannot spare you, nor can we. Never, never hint at such a thing again."

"It is true, Aunt Rachel ; though, if it pains you, I will not speak of it," he answered. "I know just how much my life is worth ; nor am I deceived by this spell of good health, though I am thankful for it."

Rachel for a moment could not speak.

"Hush, hush, Will. You have grown morbid about yourself. You have outgrown your weakness, and look nearly as strong as Clem. Is there nobody at Winterdyne," she asked, in gentle banter, "who could tempt you to take home a sweet mistress to the old place?"

Again the red flush rose high to the young man's brow.

"Not at Winterdyne, Aunt Rachel, no, nor perhaps anywhere else. I know that my father regretted his marriage, that he lived to change his mind on certain points. I believe with him that it is not only weak but wrong for a man with a feeble constitution like mine to burden others with it. No, Aunt Rachel, my feeble health will go down to the grave with me, and another race will rise and blossom into a goodly tree. You will live to see Clem's sons and daughters in the old place, Aunt Rachel, and though I am away I shall not be forgotten."

"Oh, Will, you will break my heart."

"Why, Aunt Rachel, you have always been strong to face what must be, and there is no one else to whom I can speak. But you will not fret about me. I am neither morbid, gloomy, nor unhappy ; on the contrary, I mean my life, whether it be long or short, to be very bright."

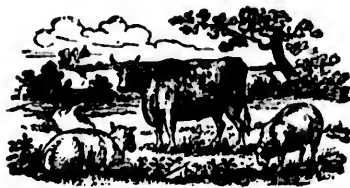
He turned away from her for a moment and stood looking across the little park to the thick belt of dark pines that skirted the shore of the lake. As he looked a curious expression came on his face, a look of absolute pain. There

were moments, unrevealed, when he rebelled against the hardness of his destiny, when his manhood cried out for the joys which blessed the lives of others. Not always could even that unselfish soul keep self in the background. It was only for a moment, then he turned and beckoned to his aunt with a sunny smile on his face.

"Come here, Aunt Rachel, is not this a picture?"

Across the little park came two couples sauntering leisurely, Clem in front, bending from his great height to look with undisguised tenderness into the bright, bonnie face of the Lady Sybil, Raybourne behind, with Evelyn's hand within his arm.

"That is as it should be, is it not?" Will asked, with a quizzical look into his aunt's bewildered face. "It can't be prevented now, and nobody can say but that they look as if made for each other."





CHAPTER XXIII.

SYBIL'S FETE.

LADY WINTERDYNE was an accomplished entertainer. The family mansion in Portman Square was, during the season, distinguished for the magnificence and lavishness of its hospitality. Hitherto the brief visits paid to Winterdyne had been seasons of quiet and retirement. For the first time for many years the spacious reception rooms were thrown open, the lofty ballroom decorated and made ready for the gay throng who were to dance in honour of Sybil's birthday. Every invitation had been promptly accepted, the house itself was full of guests, and the genial hostess was in her element. But in the morning of the auspicious day a slight cloud fell upon that happy household—the Company of the 5th Battalion to which Raybourne and Clement Ayre had been gazetted, was ordered to Natal. Although the news was welcome to the young soldier, he could have wished his marching order had not come to spoil his sister's birthday. As yet, however, the news from the Cape was not of an alarming nature. It was thought at home that Lord Chelmsford's well-drilled regiments would speedily quell Cetewayo and his rude hordes, the numbers of his army

and the nature of his warfare not being understood in England.

It was looked upon, therefore, as rather child's play, which, while it might give the young men a taste of real soldiering, could not possibly have any serious results. Only old Sir Randal shook his head. He knew nothing of the Kafir or the Zulu, but his Indian experiences had made him suspicious of all native revolt, and he often said there was greater folly in underrating than in overrating the risks attending such civil wars. When he saw, however, that the Winterdynes were not disposed to regard the matter seriously, he held his peace, although he felt impatient to see his old friend, Rachel Ayre, and to learn from her own lips whether her past experience had not made her wise and cautious where such matters were concerned.

A beautiful vision was the Lady Sybil when she came down to the ballroom that evening ready to receive her guests. She wore her presentation gown, and, shorn of its train, the white satin and eucharist lilies blended in a lovely mass, with lace like a spider's web, made a fitting and exquisite robe for her young loveliness. A slight pensiveness, born of the parting shadow, only added to her beauty. She was the admired of all as she moved about among them receiving congratulations and exchanging greetings. In a quiet corner Lady Emily watched the arrival of the guests: but her eyes seldom wandered far from the fair face of the child of the house. She was completely won by that sweet grace, and the desire to call her daughter had become a most passionate longing, beside which everything else seemed of small account.

"I cannot think what can be keeping the Ayres, mamma," Sybil said, when an opportunity occurred for a word with her mother. "I hope the news of the marching order, as Harry calls it, has not made dear Mrs Ayre feel too ill to come."

"I hope not, dear. Don't look so disappointed. A

message would have been sent had they not intended coming. Oh, there they are! Look, Lady Emily, how eager Harry and your nephew are to exchange congratulations. Ah well, ah well, they are young, and 'glory waits them,' as we may say. Excuse me for a moment."

Lady Emily was left alone in her retreat, and with an eagerness for which she despised herself leaned forward to see the late arrivals come in. There was more than curiosity in that look—there was an intensity of interest which was almost apprehensive as her eyes caught once more the face of the woman who in so many ways had supplanted her. Many eyes beside those of the Lady Emily looked with deep interest on that graceful figure in its rich and sweeping robe of shimmering satin, at the noble and striking face from which the bloom of youth had scarcely faded, though it was framed in hair like snow. She entered the room on her son's arm, while at her other side walked her young daughter, whose loveliness was of a more rare and stately kind than that of Lady Sybil.

As Lady Emily saw that trio, and marked the cordial and impressive greetings bestowed upon them, ay, by the most exclusive of the guests, a dull, aching pain crept into her heart. Something said her day was over, and that her enemy's day had come. Before they had been five minutes in the room the young people had left their mother's side, and presently Lady Emily saw Raybourne claim Evelyn's hand for the waltz. They glided close past her, and for a moment Evelyn's eyes rested on that fine face set just then in its sternest expression. The faint colour rose in her dark cheek; she appeared to hesitate a moment, and then gave a hurried bow. Raybourne felt her tremble on his arm.

"What is it, Evelyn? Do you feel cold?"

"No, I was rather startled by my aunt's expression," she answered at once. "I had forgotten that I should meet her. Do you think I ought to speak to her?"

"Not unless you wish. I must say her expression is not particularly inviting," Raybourne answered with candour. "She is a little difficult to approach, I confess. Will bears no resemblance to his mother."

"None whatever. I have not seen him yet. Ah, there he is, watching Clem and Lady Sybil. Is it not audacious of Clem to take such calm possession of the lady we are invited to honour?"

"Sybil does not look as if she resented it much, does she?" asked Raybourne, complacently.

"Well, what do you think of the marching order, Miss Evelyn?"

"Clem is wild with delight," Evelyn answered, evasively.

"I didn't ask what Clem thinks. I know just his opinion. It is yours I want."

"I am sorry for poor mamma. She is so brave, too. She tried to hide what it cost her to look cheerful over it," Evelyn answered, keeping her sweet face averted from his.

"Mrs Ayre is a heroine. I have always thought so. But why will you not answer the question I ask?"

"You are not attending to the music, Lord Raybourne. Is not that a lovely waltz, and how exquisitely played. One does not often hear such music in the country."

Raybourne made no answer, but his honest face flushed suddenly, and he bit his lips as if to keep back something which burned for utterance.

"You shall answer me, Evelyn, before you go to-night," he said, daringly. "Yes, it is a good waltz. Clem and I will be dancing to different piping pretty soon, perhaps to His Majesty Cetewayo's war cry."

He saw her pale again, and her sweet mouth trembled; but he dared not hope that it was for *his* going she mourned.

The attention paid by the young lieutenant to Evelyn Ayre was noted by all present, and there were few who did not pronounce them to be well fitted for each other, although many wondered what the Marquis and Lady Adela would say to such an alliance.

"I think, dear, it will be wise if you refuse Lord Raybourne the next dance," Rachel said, gently, during one of the rare opportunities of speaking to her daughter. The sensitive colour rushed to the girl's face and dyed it red.

"Oh, mamma, have I done wrong? I did not mean to vex you," she said, hurriedly.

"No, my darling, nothing wrong; but I think it is being observed that you are so much together."

"This is mine, Miss Evelyn," said Raybourne's voice just beside them, but Rachel laid a finger on his arm and shook her head.

"Evy has had too many waltzes, Lord Raybourne, let her sit quietly by me; or let her go with her brother this time. Who knows how long it may be before they dance together again?"

Evelyn kept her eyes averted from the young man's face, and moved away with Clem with evident relief.

"That was too bad, Mrs Ayre; on my last night too. Have I done anything to offend you?"

"Nothing, Lord Raybourne," Rachel answered with a quick, kindly glance.

"Why the formal title? I want to be Harry always to you," he said, with significance. "Surely you do not object to my dancing with Evelyn!"

"No, Harry, but it is better, in gatherings of this kind, not to attract attention," Rachel answered, quietly.

"I don't mind it at all, if Evelyn doesn't. Can't you see, Mrs Ayre, what it is to me to be as near as possible to her to-night. Have I your permission to speak?"

"On what subject?" she asked, almost nervously.

"Dear Mrs Ayre, it is impossible you cannot know what I mean. Will you allow me to ask Evelyn not to forget me till I come back again?"

Rachel was silent a moment. The sweet seductive strains of the music rose and swelled, the gay throng glided past them, snatches of happy laughter and the echo of

whispered words, reached them in that quiet niche, where they were quite alone.

"I do not know what to say to you, Harry. I have many things to consider. Leave it, at least, till to-morrow. I should like to talk with your mother first."

"Well, I'll try, but remember to-morrow is the last opportunity I shall have. Tell me, at least, that *you* have no objections to me."

She raised her eyes to the honest face looking pleadingly into hers, and her heart warmed to him.

"There is no one to whom I would more willingly give my daughter, Harry, and she is my only one."

"Thank you. I shall try to deserve your trust. I am in torture about Evelyn, Mrs Ayre. I have not the slightest idea how she is disposed towards me."

"Nor have I," Rachel answered, with truth.

"If she will only give me the slightest hope, it will send me across the sea a different man. There is nothing I will not do or dare for her sake. I know what you are feeling to-night about Clem, Mrs Ayre. May I promise you that so far as lies in my power I shall look after him, and keep him from being too reckless? Whatever Evelyn's answer may be, Clem will always be like my brother."

"God bless you, Harry," Rachel answered, in low, full tones ; but could not look at him again, because her eyes were dim. She thought at that moment, with a deep, sweet gratitude, not of the great position, the noble name, which were about to be laid at her child's feet, but only of the true heart and pure life of the young man at her side. She could not but pray that Evelyn would not lightly pass them by.

"There is my mother beckoning to me. Will you excuse me one moment, Mrs Ayre. I shall be back to you presently."

Rachel nodded, not sorry at that moment to be left alone. But presently the rich sweeping of a silken gown behind her

caused her to look suddenly round, and, involuntarily, she rose as she found herself face to face with her sister-in-law. Fortunately a tall bank of green waving plants hid that curious scene, which lasted only for a second, from the crowded throng. Lady Emily spoke first; and when Rachel heard her tones, she missed something of the old, imperious ring.

"Will you not sit down? I have been looking at you all evening, but you have been so occupied that I had no opportunity of speech till now. You would not of your own accord have spoken, I suppose?"

Rachel looked at her steadily, inquiringly, for an instant, and then sat down.

"No, Lady Emily, I should not; but I am very glad, for Will's sake, that you have spoken," was all she said.

Lady Emily smiled somewhat wearily, as she sank upon the lounge opposite Mrs Geoffrey's chair. For the moment her brilliant beauty seemed to have faded, and she looked old and worn and sad.

"That may mean much or little, whatever I choose to infer," she answered. "Have you forgiven me, Mrs Geoffrey, for causing you to leave Pine Edge?"

"Long ago, the bitterness was only for a moment," Rachel answered sincerely, forgetting in her generous unselfishness all the suffering of the past, and willing, nay glad, to meet her proud kinswoman on different ground.

"I have regretted it ever since. It served no purpose to me, though you ought to thank me for it," Lady Emily said, with a faint smile. Rachel did not ask why.

"Your day has come, Mrs Geoffrey, and your triumph in your children will be very complete. It must gratify you to see how much both are admired."

"It does gratify me. I have a mother's natural pride," Rachel answered, though a trifle guardedly. She did not feel sure of her ground. She did not know what to think, or how to speak. She was even conscious of a slight feeling of uneasiness, a return of the old nervousness

which in other days Lady Emily had had the power to stir in her breast.

"Does it not afford you a kind of exquisite satisfaction that *I* should be here to-night to witness your triumph?" Lady Emily asked, leaning slightly forward. Rachel met her gaze with a quiet, sad, wondering look.

"I do not quite understand you, Lady Emily. I have not given the matter very much thought. I am glad that my children are fair to look upon, and that others love them, but, above all, I thank God that they are good."

"Our two sons, yours and mine; look, they stand together, yonder. Does it not give you a secret satisfaction to mark the contrast between them? Do you not think I deserve that my boy's life should be to me such a precarious possession?"

"Oh, Lady Emily, God forbid!"

The tone was so earnest; the quick, dissenting look so direct and sincere, that they carried conviction with them. "What kind of a woman do you think I am?"

"I have judged you from my own standpoint—that is all—a great admission and a humiliating one. But you can afford to be generous; unless my eyes deceive me you will be bound by a double tie to this house. How have you done it; you, who had everything against you? By what consummate art do you win love and praise wherever you go? I would learn a lesson from you."

Again Rachel looked at the proud face in wondering doubt. She could not tell whether the question was put in irony or in simple earnest. She could not fathom the nature of this strange woman, and yet her heart pleaded for her.

"I have no art," she answered, simply. "I do not know whether you ask me these things in scorn, or in a kindlier spirit. I will believe the latter. Can you not believe me when I say I am sincere in my love for your son, who has a heart a king might envy."

"Oh, I know, he is good, too good. I would he were a little more human, a little less like his father, then I might cling to hope," she cried, with a fierceness of passion which made Rachel quail. "I tell you your triumph is more complete than you imagine. There is your son with that fair girl on his arm, whom I would give a world to call my daughter. These two will reign in Studleigh after I and mine are forgotten, Rachel Ayre, and then will my punishment be complete."



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CHAPTER XXIV.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

CLEMENT AYRE had never forgotten his aunt's treatment of them when they lived at the farm. In deference to his mother he had never spoken one word of anger or blame ; but in his inmost heart there dwelt a certain soreness against that haughty and imperious woman who had embittered his mother's life. As Lady Adela had said, his devotion to his mother was of a very rare and perfect kind ; it found its expression in a thousand little delicate attentions, at which some who pride themselves upon being out of leading strings would have contemptuously laughed. Even though the sweet girl he so passionately loved was close by his side, he was not unmindful of his mother, but was quick to note her visible agitation during her conversation with Lady Emily. It irritated him, and took away his enjoyment of the dance. Sybil saw that he was pre-occupied, and wondered that he resigned her so quickly when the dance was over. But when her eyes followed him as he strode away, she was no longer surprised. In a second he was by his mother's side, standing like a shield above her, his dark eyes filled with a certain defiance as they dwelt on his aunt's face.

"The room is very hot, mother. Can I take you out for a little? Lady Winterdyne is in the large conservatory."

Rachel looked up and smiled.

"There is your aunt, Clement. Lady Emily, I present to you my son."

Lady Emily stretched out her jewelled hand, and Clement was obliged to take it, bowing slightly as he did so—so slightly that Lady Emily could not forbear a smile.

"He accepts the introduction on sufferance," she said with a laugh which had a harsh ring in it. "I saw him looking daggers at me over Lady Sybil's golden head. I am glad to see that the boy has the spirit of his father."

Clement reddened slightly. It was not altogether pleasant to have his inmost thought thus revealed.

Rachel rose. She saw that nothing was to be gained by prolonging the conversation, Lady Emily being in such a strange, reckless mood.

But Lady Emily motioned her to be still, and rose herself.

"I will not drive you from your corner. I see an old friend yonder in the alcove. I have not seen him for years. So you are under orders for Natal also, Lieutenant Ayre," she paused to add. "May I express the hope that your military career may be as glorious as your father's, though not, I trust, for many reasons, so short."

Clement bowed. He also was haunted by a vague distrust, a shadowy doubt of Lady Emily's courteous words.

"Good-evening, Mrs Geoffrey. Perhaps we may meet again. If not, remember what I have said," she said, distinctly. I regret the past. I would undo it if I could."

She moved slowly away from them, her silken gown

sweeping majestically behind her. Clement looked after her in a curious wonder.

"What a strange being. I pity poor Will. What did she say to you, mother? I saw you looked vexed."

"Not much, Clement. I am sorrier for her even than for her son. She is a jealous, unhappy woman. She suffers more now than she ever made us suffer. Remember that always, my son, and be kind to her if you have opportunity."

"If she is miserable, it is her own fault," said Clem, bluntly. "I say, mother, isn't this a jolly entertainment?"

"You *are* enjoying it, then?" she asked, with a quick upward glance.

"I am. It will be a fine thing to look back upon when we are toiling under an African sun," said Clement, soberly, and then his eyes wandered again listlessly round the room, till they found what they sought—the fair face of Sybil Rayne. Then a curious shadow of sadness settled down upon his own.

"I wish, mother, that I were something more than a poor lieutenant," he said, suddenly.

"But you will not always be that, Clem."

"No, if hard work can do any good, I'll have something worthy to offer *her*."

He spoke under his breath, but his mother caught every word.

"You love her then, and I am to lose both my children's hearts at once," she said, with a tremulous smile.

"No, no, it can make no difference; you are always our mother," Clem made answer, quickly. "But what do you mean by both? Has Harry said anything?"

"Yes, he has asked me to-night to allow him to speak to Evelyn."

"And you said, yes, of course. Raybourne's a perfect brick; as honest a fellow as ever breathed."

"I did not say no. What do you think Evelyn will say?"

"Ah, I can't tell that. Nobody can answer for her. But it'll be a shame if she sends poor Hal to the Cape a disappointed man. I only wish that I had as good a right to speak, but in my present position it would be presumption."

Rachel was silent. She could not indeed contradict him. A poor lieutenant, with his spurs to win, was as yet scarcely on equal grounds with Lord Winterdyne's daughter, who would be one of the richest heiresses in the county.

"In all but wealth you are her equal, Clement," she said. "But I think you are right not to speak, at least till you come back. The Winterdynes have been our kindest friends since we came to Stonecroft, but we must not abuse that kindness."

"I suppose not," said Clem, rather gloomily, as he pulled his moustache. "All the same, it's hard on a fellow who may come back to find her married to somebody else."

"If so, you will bear it like a man, Clem," was all his mother said.

The young soldier tried to feel resigned and virtuous over his resignation, but all the same a fierce rebellion was gnawing at his heart, and his passionate love urging him to throw prudence to the winds. Rachel could have uttered a word of comfort. She had closely watched Lady Adela all evening, and saw that though she observed the frequency with which Clement and Lady Sybil were together, she made not the slightest attempt to prevent it, which could so easily and gracefully have been done, seeing Lady Sybil was the guest of the evening, and was supposed to bestow her favours equally among all who had come to do her honour and to wish her a happy birthday. But though that seemed a favourable omen, Rachel forbore to notice it to Clement, believing it would be well for all concerned that he should

go without giving expression to his hopes. But young love cannot always be bound by the prudence held up for its admiration and guidance. Poor Clem honestly meant to be true, to keep his hopes and his bitter longings to himself, until at least he should have something worthy to lay at her feet; but before the night was over he had forgotten all his fine resolves. The turn of a golden head, the witching light of a pair of violet eyes, a quick, starting tear, did it all.

At midnight there was a lull in the dancing, and the guests in coats and wraps flocked on the terrace to see a display of fireworks in the Park. It was an intensely dark night, not a star gleamed in the heavy sky; and the air had that peculiar soundlessness in it which we notice in still autumn nights. Clem had made up his mind after his talk with his mother that he would keep far away from Sybil during the rest of the evening, and when he found himself outside, immediately put his good resolution into practice by seeking her out among the throng and keeping as near to her as possible. She noticed his depression, the grave seriousness of his looks, and, womanlike, began to wonder wherein she had grieved him.

"I did not forget the last dance, Mr Ayre," she said, timidly, when they found themselves a little apart from the others. "But you were so long in coming to claim me that I thought *you* had forgotten, so I went up with Will, and I think," she added, with a sly, little smile, "he dances much better than you."

"Very likely. Will is a very polished gentleman beside a rough diamond like me," Clem answered, gruffly.

"I don't know whether you could justly be called a diamond at all when you speak like that," she said quickly, and with flushing cheeks, for she could not understand the strangeness of his manner.

"Perhaps not; it doesn't matter. The worse you think me, the better perhaps in the end for me," he said, more

gruffly" still, and she turned her head quickly away, but not before he saw the quick, bright tear start to her eye, and Clem was not brave enough nor prudent enough to see that and say nothing.

"Can't you see I'm doing it on purpose to hide my own misery?" he asked. "Come, let us go round to the sun-dial. It will be quiet there. Let them miss you. It's the last night I shall have a word with you anyhow; who knows the last time we may ever meet on earth. Would you be sorry, Sybil? No, don't answer me. I've no right to ask, but as I live I can't help it. I love you better than my own soul, and if you should never speak to me again I'll go on loving you till I die."

So in that simple, outspoken way did Clem keep his fine resolution; and the most curious thing of all was that Sybil made no sign of disapproval, nor did she offer to leave his side.

"Forgive my confounded presumption, Sybil, and let me call you Sybil just for once. I didn't know how my soul clave to you till to-night, when I thought what lay before me, and that I might never see you again. Whatever happens, and on whatever blessed fellow you may bestow the treasure of your love, you may believe that nobody will ever love you better than I do, and will till I die."

"Do you want me to marry somebody else? Isn't that a curious kind of love, Clem?"

Something in the wavering tones of her voice made his heart give a great bound, and he bent his head from his tall height till he could look into her face.

"Sybil, what do you mean? It can't be that you care anything for a great lumbering creature like me, that you do more than tolerate me because I am Harry's friend?"

Still Sybil never spoke; but she lifted her sweet face to his, and her eyes answered him. And the next moment

that face was hidden on Clement Ayre's heart, and she felt his strong arms tremble as they clasped her.

"My darling," was all he said. "I can't believe it. I can't believe it. Couldn't you say something; just one little word to convince me that I am neither mad nor dreaming?"

And Sybil said the word, but what it was we will not ask, but leave them there with their great happiness—it will be through many deadly perils and agonies of suspense that they will ever so stand again. And even then there must rest upon them a cloud of sorrow which shall never be wholly lightened this side the grave.

It was natural perhaps that they should forget everything but each other so completely, but it was no wonder that ere long Sybil was missed from among the gay throng; and they began to whisper to each other that "the tall lieutenant"—as somebody had called him that evening—was missing too. And many a smile and nod were exchanged; but they looked a little bewildered when, after a time, the tall lieutenant came sauntering back to the terrace alone, looking as unconcerned as possible. He had taken Sybil into the house by the open French window of the morning-room, and she had escaped unobserved upstairs, not quite unobserved, however, for Lady Emily, seated in one of the alcoves in the hall, caught a glimpse of the flying figure, with flushed, radiant cheeks and shining eyes, and with quick intuition read the girl's happy secret. She was not surprised, scarcely disappointed. The cup of her bitterness was full, indeed, and could not be added to. But she did wonder what Lord Winterdyne, with all his hope and pride in his children, would say to a double alliance with the son and daughter of poor Geoffrey Ayre. From Lady Adela she anticipated no opposition, her views on marriage questions savouring not at all of worldly wisdom.

The brilliant *fête* drew to a close, and in the dark hush of the early morning the guests who had participated in the

princely hospitality of Winterdyne drove away well pleased with their entertainment.

The little party from Stonecroft were among the first to go, though Clement pleaded for a respite. Rachel, however, was tired out, a cloud lay on her spirit; she could not say whether it was born of Lady Emily's strangeness or not. Evelyn also looked worn and sad. With much anxiety Rachel looked at her once or twice, wondering what the issue of the *fête* would be for her. Clement was at times jubilant, then relapsed into utter silence. His mother did not dream, however, that he had spoken irrevocable words to the daughter of the house.

When they reached home, Evelyn went directly upstairs, but Clement detained his mother a moment in the hall.

"Wait a moment, mother, I want to speak to you. I have frightfully disobeyed you, but I am the happiest fellow in the world."

"My son, what do you mean?" Rachel asked, and her wrap fell from her shoulders in the quick excitement of the moment.

"I have spoken to Sybil, mother, and she actually cares for a great awkward chap like me, who has nothing to offer her but an honest love."

"Oh, Clement, I fear it was not wisely done. You did not seek to bind her, I trust, by any promise. There is so much to be considered, as you say. What have you to offer Lord Winterdyne's daughter that they would think worthy her acceptance? I trust, I trust that this rashness will not bring sorrow and disappointment to us all."

"Mother, I don't think it, and I can't help it," cried Clement, earnestly. "Could a fellow go away, loving her as I do, and never utter a word? I couldn't do it, and I'm ready to face the consequences."

He looked it, and in the flashing eye, which was yet subdued by a fine tenderness, his mother read what had given him courage, even as it had given his father courage in these unforgotten days, to risk the world for love.

"Have you nothing but blame for me, mother?" he asked, wistfully, as he regarded her grave face. "If you only knew how I love her, and what it is to me to know that she is not indifferent, you would not be so silent, mother. I will be worthier of her some day. I will not ask her to share an ignoble life."

"God bless you, my son, yes, and the sweet girl who is already as dear to me as my own," Rachel said, falteringly, and yet with a smile which Clement saw was not altogether forced. "Whatever be the issue it will be for good. I leave my children in God's hands."

She kissed him as she left him, but ere she reached her own room the smile had died on her lips. Her heart was very heavy, and she sighed as she laid aside her wraps and took off her rich attire. She unbound her hair, and, throwing on her dressing gown, stepped across the corridor to Evelyn's door. For the first time she found it locked against her.

"Are you asleep, Evy ; may I not come in?"

"Not to-night, please, dear mamma."

There was something in the tone which went to Rachel's heart.

"You are quite well, my darling?"

"Quite well, dear mamma," came the answer as before.

Rachel did not insist on being admitted, although for the moment, perhaps, she felt it hard. Between her daughter and herself, however, there was much in common, and from her own experience Rachel knew that there are some things which must be borne in their first keenness

alone, when even the sympathy of nearest and dearest can only jar. If such an hour had come thus early to Evelyn, then her mother could only, as she had said, leave the child with God. But that night there was no sleep for Rachel Ayre.



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CHAPTER XXV.

THE NEXT DAY.

NEXT morning Clement and his sister breakfasted alone. There was something about Evelyn he could not understand; he surmised, correctly enough, that something of an unusual nature had happened to disturb her, but as she made no allusion to it, he did not ask any questions. They talked of commonplace things, discussed the *fête* and the people who were there, but each knew that the thoughts of the other were otherwise occupied, though Evelyn did not yet know of her brother's engagement to Sybil Rayne. "Mamma was asleep when I looked in, Clem. She looks so worn and white that I am quite sure she cannot have slept any all night. Did Aunt Emily say anything to vex her, do you think? I saw them talking together for quite a long time," said Evelyn, turning aside at length from trivial gossip over the *fête*.

"I don't know what she said, Evy, and that's a fact; but she's a perfect tartar," answered Clem, with his usual candour. "I had the felicity of being introduced to her. What glorious eyes she has; they penetrate your whole being. I should not like to pick a quarrel with our august relative."

"I did not venture near her. She looked so scornfully at me several times that I began to feel wretchedly uncomfortable, to say nothing of my clothes, which, I was firmly convinced, looked limp and mean."

"Nonsense, there were few like you. That black muslin thing and the yellow fly-away ends looked stunning."

Evelyn laughed.

"Oh, Clem, to hear you call my fine combination of Spanish lace and Lyons velvet black muslin; but I appreciate your approval all the same. I think our own mother was the handsomest woman in the room, our aunt not excepted. Her hair is so lovely; and she looks so young."

"I agree with you; but I say, Evy, I don't think you enjoyed the thing. Do you think any of them will be over from Winterdyne to-day? If not——"

"If not what?" asked Evelyn, as she rose from the table.

"I must go there, that's all," and just then a servant appeared saying Mrs Ayre was awake and would like her daughter to come up. Evelyn obeyed the summons at once. Perhaps she was glad to escape from further talk about the family at Winterdyne. Mrs Ayre was having breakfast in bed—a most unusual occurrence with her. She set down her coffee-cup, and turned her eyes with keenest questioning upon her daughter's face.

"Good morning, my love. I am very lazy, this morning. I heard none of the bells; but it was broad day before I fell asleep."

"I felt sure of it, mamma. I looked in as I went down, and you were sleeping so soundly I told Katherine not to disturb you. Have you everything you want?"

"Everything. How are *you* this morning, Evy?"

"Quite well, mamma, thank you. May I draw up the blind? The sunshine is so lovely. Are you not shocked to hear that it is nearly eleven o'clock?"

Rachel was perfectly conscious that Evelyn was avoiding

her gaze, and apparently ill at ease ; but she took no notice of it.

"I hope Clement is down, and that he is very well this morning."

"Oh, yes. We have been gossiping over the *fête* since ten o'clock. Clem is in great spirits. We shall be very dull without him, mother. I cannot bear to think of it."

"Nor can I. I do not realise it yet," the mother answered, slowly.

Evelyn wandered restlessly round the room, and finally stood still at the foot of the bed.

"Will you mind, mamma, if I go out this morning for a long walk?"

"Are you not tired enough, dear?" Rachel asked quietly.

"I am not tired at all. I wish to go out this morning."

"May I not know why?"

A painful flush overspread the girl's sweet face.

"I will tell you if you wish, mamma. Lord Raybourne will be here this morning, and I do not wish to see him."

"Come round here, Evy."

Rachel stretched out her hands to her daughter, and she came slowly round to the side of the bed, and kneeling down hid her face.

"My darling, I have gone through it all, and I understand. Tell me or not, whatever you think best. I know that whatever may happen you are my brave, good, dutiful daughter, who has never cost me a moment's pain."

"I will not, mamma, if I can help it. I think my duty is quite clear. I shall go out this morning, and—and by to-morrow he will have gone away, and when he comes back he will have forgotten."

"And you?"

With what unspeakable tenderness did the mother's hand rest on the bent head as she asked the question.

"Perhaps—then I shall have forgotten too." Evelyn said, and pressed her cheek against her mother's soft palm,

and for a moment there was silence. In that moment Rachel's heart rebelled for her child's suffering, asking, passionately, why it must ever be the weak who are called upon to suffer; and yet, conscious in her inmost soul that not even Clement, in all the pride of his manhood's strength, could be so strong to suffer and to endure for duty's sake as the gentle girl by her side.

"Did he speak to you last night, Evelyn? If you would rather I did not ask these questions, my dearest, tell me, but perhaps it may do you good."

"It will; it does. It is always good to speak to you, mother. He did say something," she added, slowly, and with difficulty. "I could not misunderstand him, though it was a great surprise. Mother, you *do* believe that I did not know; that I have never done anything to encourage Lord Raybourne; that I have not laid my plans, as they said, to catch him."

"Evelyn, what do you mean?" asked the mother, looking inexpressibly shocked.

"I heard them, some ladies, I did not know them, talking in one of the conservatories. They said all that, mamma, and a great deal more I cannot repeat. Oh, mother, how can people be so wicked, so cruel, when we have never harmed them?"

"My child, it is a hard, cruel world, and we have to harden ourselves against its evil-speaking, else we should fret ourselves into our graves. Do not let this idle speaking vex or grieve you for a moment, but believe what I do assure you, that you have ever been a model of maidenly propriety. These untrue and uncharitable words will only recoil on the heads of those who uttered them; they cannot possibly hurt you. Evelyn, tell me frankly, has Lord Raybourne asked you to be his wife?"

"No, mother, because I would not listen. I gave him no opportunity."

"Was it because of what you heard?"

"No, mother."

For a few moments Evelyn said no more.

"I made up my mind, long ago, mamma," she continued at length, "that day you told me the story of your life, that I should never marry into a family which considered itself above my own."

Rachel mournfully smiled.

"My darling, your case is entirely different. Your father belonged to an older family than the Raynes. I do not think you could hold to your decision unless there was a more potent reason behind."

"Then, am I quite wrong, mamma?"

"No, Evelyn, I think you were wise not to let Lord Raybourne speak—that you will be wise to keep out of his way, at least until he comes back. Then, if he is still of the same mind, the matter may be seriously considered. You are both so young, you can afford to wait a few months or years."

Rachel looked at her young daughter keenly as she rose from her knees. She would have liked to probe deeper, to ask how far her affections were involved, how great or how slight a sacrifice she was making. But there was something in the girl's still, proud reticence which kept back any further questioning.

"I shall go then, mother, and send Clem up to you. I may not come in till afternoon. If I walk as far as the Rectory, I can lunch with Mrs Peploe."

"Very well, my love, and meanwhile I suppose I am to deal with the braw wooer," she said, with a slight smile. "Well, you may leave the case in my hands. Has Clem told you that Sybil has promised to be his wife?"

"No. If that is so, it is another weighty reason in favour of my decision. I cannot be sorry, mother, nor pretend I am. Sybil is so sweet, and Clem such a splendid fellow, What a different world would it be if there were no

world's opinion, none of these miserable distinctions and conventionalities to be considered."

Rachel Ayre passionately re-echoed these words in her heart, as, a little later, she watched Evelyn set out upon her walk. The girl's step seemed to have lost its buoyancy. Her movements were listless, as if she had lost interest in life. For a moment the anxious mother felt a slight bitterness in her heart against the man who had robbed the child of her peace of mind. And yet she chided herself for her own unreason, since it was Evelyn's own winsome charm which had won him.

It was a fine, clear autumn morning, a silvery brightness shone through the pensive veil of the sky, the still air seemed weighted with the rich autumnal odours; already the trees were tinged with sober browns and gaudy yellows, against which the glossy greenness of the pines and hollies showed in fine relief. The fields were stripped of their harvest riches, and flower had given place to fruit, even on late-bearing bushes, so that there was subdued colouring everywhere, unrelieved by anything more vivid than the yellow of the beech leaves.

Stonecroft stood in a richly-wooded district, and the walk to the rectory at Brierly village could be taken entirely through the woods. As was natural, Evelyn chose that pleasant way. She was in no hurry. She was not expected at Brierly, and in that deep solitude, amid Nature's pensive beauty, it would seem less hard to face what was to her a real sacrifice, for with keen suddenness she had awakened to the knowledge that her heart was given, with all its love, to her brother's friend. It was to be expected that a daughter reared by Rachel Ayre would not grow up to regard marriage as the aim of a woman's existence; and Evelyn had given the matter less thought than is common with girls of her age.

Her perfect naturalness, her acceptance of Lord Raybourne's attentions in a spirit of comradeship, because he

was her brother's most intimate friend, had not well prepared her for this shock and the decision for which it immediately called. She had tried to analyse her feelings, to convince herself that it could be no sacrifice to her to refuse Raybourne's love, if she could keep his friendship, but all that was left to her after she had so resigned herself was an aching heart. The thoughtless, malicious words, which have so many counterparts in this uncharitable world, had left a sting in her sensitive nature which would long rankle. Doubtless it would have gratified the gossip-mongers could they have witnessed Evelyn Ayre's humiliation and the bitter tears they had caused her to shed.

It was very pleasant that September morning in the autumnal woods. Something of the spirit of peace pervading these dim solitudes crept over Evelyn, and somehow the silent sympathy of Nature seemed to make her sacrifice less hard. She sat down by-and-by on the low mossy parapet of a quaint, old bridge spanning a wide, brawling brook, and dreamily watched the clear water dancing over the rough pebbles : its noisy song soothing her into a kind of dreamy restfulness. She was tired out, physically and mentally, and it was a perfect rest to be alone in the depths of the woods, away from every human eye. She sat a long time in that silent, dreamful mood, feeling herself strangely far off from life and all its fulness of joy and care ; but at length the sound of approaching steps broke the spell, and she rose to go upon her way. She felt no nervousness nor curiosity even at being disturbed in her solitude, because the way through the wood was a right-of-way from one village to another, and especially in summer weather was always preferred by pedestrians. When the long stride crushing the brushwood came nearer, she suddenly looked round with heightened colour, and a strange fluttering at her heart, and the next moment the lover against whom she was trying to steel herself was by her side, his honest eyes

full of reproach, although they brightened into tenderness as they dwelt upon her changing face.

"Lord Raybourne, it was not kind to follow me," she said, in tones which her great effort made very cold and stern.

"Was it kind of you to try and avoid me, Evelyn? It was of no use. I should have seen you if I had to wait the whole day. Mrs Ayre sent me to bring you back. Will you turn with me now?"

"Mamma sent you, Lord Raybourne," Evelyn repeated, in the low accents of boundless surprise.

"She did, and my mother seconded. The whole family is at Stonecroft, Evelyn," he answered, with a curious twinkle in his eye. "Don't disappoint them."

She turned her face away, maiden-like, to hide the light of love which filled her eyes.

"I will only ask you to go back on one condition, Evelyn; that I may take you to my mother as her daughter, who will take Sybil's place. She knows my errand, and is waiting to receive you."

Still Evelyn neither spoke nor turned to meet his gaze. Then a great fear took possession of the honest fellow pleading for her love.

"Evelyn, have I made the greatest of all mistakes? Have I overlooked the chief obstacle, that you don't care for me at all? Tell me so honestly. I can take my refusal like a man, but don't play with me, for I am in earnest, and I want you to be in earnest too."

Then Evelyn turned slowly to him, and the loveliest of smiles illumined her grave face.

"It is a shame to come and upset all my beautiful composure after the struggle I have had to attain it."

It was a sweet admission, and what could the honest soldier do but take her to his breast and pour his heart out in passionate endearment.

So that eventful day witnessed a double betrothal, and

surely Rachel Ayre had just reason to be proud and grateful, if ever woman had, for her children and her friends. If there was any slight disappointment in the minds of Lord Winterdyne and his wife, they did not suffer it to be seen. Believing as both did that love is the most essential element in happy marriage, they felt no desire to stand in the way of their children's happiness, or to set aside their choice.

Soon, very soon, they were to feel unspeakably thankful that they had sent their boy forth to the hazards of war with nothing but high hopes and abiding happiness in his heart.





CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO COUPLES.

“**I**T was most truly kind of you to leave your guests and come here this morning,” Rachel repeated to Lady Winterdyne, when Clement had taken Sybil away down by the lake, where we will not seek to follow them. Lord Winterdyne smiled a somewhat grim smile.

“My dear Mrs Ayre, we had positively no alternative,” he said, drily. “I said to my wife this morning that surely we had been lax in some department of our parental rule when our children could command such prompt obedience from us.”

Rachel smiled also, but almost immediately her face grew graver.

“I think no engagement should be allowed in either case; that the matter should at least be left open until the soldiers’ return from the Cape.”

“No engagement, indeed!” reiterated Lord Winterdyne, good humouredly. “And at this very moment two pairs of lovers are swearing eternal fealty, and perhaps fixing the day. We may as well give in peacefully, Mrs Ayre. Just look at my wife’s eyes. I believe this is a pet plan of

hers come to fulfilment, and she can't hide her satisfaction."

"In my son's case especially," continued Rachel. "We cannot pretend to think that he has anything worthy to offer Lord Winterdyne's daughter. I am not without hopes that the day may come when we shall not be ashamed of his name."

"To hear Sir Randal Vane one would believe that Captain Ayre's son might aspire to the hand of a Princess," laughed Lady Winterdyne. "Dear Mrs Ayre, let us not lay any restrictions upon the young people. Remember how short a time they have together now, and what uncertainty attends the future. You may believe that Lord Winterdyne and I are entirely satisfied, otherwise we should never have encouraged their intimacy."

It was impossible for Rachel to continue oppressed by any sense of dissatisfaction, and she permitted her real happiness and pride to show themselves.

"Then you told the Vanes, Lady Winterdyne?" she said, inquiringly.

"Yes, and Lady Emily Ayre also. She goes home to-day."

"Did she express surprise or displeasure, may I ask?"

"Neither. She made no comment whatever. I confess I do not understand your sister-in-law. She is entirely changed. I wonder if there is always a certain disappointment in renewing early friendships. Perhaps the change lies with me."

"She has had a long widowhood, Lady Winterdyne, and her husband was so absolutely devoted to her that she must miss him intolerably," said Rachel, gently.

"Yes, but I know many widows who mourn their husbands as sincerely as it is possible for Lady Emily to do, and yet who think they have a duty to others as long as they are in the world," maintained Lady Winterdyne,

frankly. "I do not think she knows her duty to her son, who is a splendid fellow, if he were brought out a little more. He is very shy and reserved."

"With strangers, but the good Squire lives again in his boy," answered Rachel, with real emotion. "I wish he were not so like him in physical weakness. It sometimes makes me fear lest a second sorrow, worse than the first, should shadow Lady Emily's later years."

Lord Winterdyne looked at her curiously. Evidently it had never occurred to her that by Will Ayre's death a great inheritance would come to her own son. Few women would have been able so absolutely to sink all selfish interest, he thought, and she rose higher in his estimation, though he did not speak.

"She has had a great disappointment just now, Mrs Ayre. There had been some talk between us of a marriage between Sybil and her son."

"Is it possible that Will can care for your daughter?" asked Rachel, in quick anxiety. "I thought he had not met her until now."

"Nor had he, and he cares nothing for her. No sooner did he come to Winterdyne than I saw how futile it was for us to plan for our children. It is Harry, not Sybil, who has dealt him his bitter disappointment."

Rachel looked bewildered, but Lady Winterdyne nodded, as she reiterated her assertion.

"Will has more than a cousinly affection for your daughter, Mrs Ayre; and I think he is not the kind of man to transfer it so lightly. Ah, there are the truants! Is there anything to be gathered from Evelyn's face? Look at her, Harry, and tell me, if you have not outgrown your old intuitions."

There was nothing to be gathered from Evelyn's calm, serene face, which had not even a heightened colour to betray her.

But Raybourne's proud elation would not hide, and as

they passed by the window he drew her hand within his arm with that delightful air of possession which is the outstanding attribute of a newly-made lover. It was a trying ordeal Evelyn had to face, but she bore herself with an exquisite grace which won all hearts anew. Rachel was disappointed in her, however; she missed something of that elation which the happy crown of her love affair had the right to evoke. She was too calm and serious; tears seemed nearer to her eyes than the sunshine of happy laughter. When Raybourne proposed that Clement should return to Winterdyne in his place, no one demurred. The time was so short and so precious, and the separation might be so long and so bitter, that they had need to make the most of the few hours left.

Often during that day Rachel's thoughts reverted somewhat painfully to Lady Winterdyne's speech about Will Ayre. She had felt inclined at first to set it down as imagination, but when she sat down calmly in her solitude to think of it, she feared it was too true. She remembered countless little signs she had passed unheeded at the time, but which all pointed to Will's love for his cousin. Her heart filled anew with compassion for him. Although, certainly, he possessed many of the world's good gifts, much was denied him. He was a singularly lonely man, who appeared to be destined to an existence unblest by ties of love or family life. And yet Rachel felt that it was better that Evelyn's choice had not fallen on her cousin.

When the party returned to Winterdyne luncheon was waiting for them, and the luggage for Studleigh ready to depart.

"Well, good people, there are exceptional circumstances, or our conduct would not be tolerated," said Lady Winterdyne, gaily, as she hurried to her place at the table. "We have settled the fate of our two elder children, and only Norman remains to be disposed of. Long may he con-

tinue devoted to his skeletons and fossils. Clement, you must sit on my right hand, and comport yourself with the dignity befitting your new responsibilities."

Her happy humour broke the ice, and restored the best of feeling to the company. As Clement passed by his cousin's chair Will put back his hand and gripped it like a vice.

"All right, old man," Clem answered, a little unsteadily, and a curious moisture for a moment dimmed his eyes. Fortunately he was sitting directly opposite to Sybil, and could thus look at her unapproached. It was a very happy, merry meal. Sir Randal and Lady Vane were full of nonsense, and unmercifully teased the young pair. It was not noticed how very silent Lady Emily was during the meal. Proud woman though she was, she was no hypocrite, and would not utter congratulations which would be as hollow as they were forced.

She did not make the slightest allusion to the state of affairs, even when Lady Winterdyne came to her dressing-room when she was preparing for her journey.

"I shall come and see you when the soldiers have gone. We shall be dull enough, and glad of anything to break the monotony," Lady Winterdyne said. "I was saying to Winterdyne this morning I thought we should go and spend Christmas in Rome if we could persuade Mrs Ayre and Evelyn to accompany us."

"As Lord Raybourne is only a volunteer, I wonder he does not draw back at the eleventh hour," Lady Emily said, as she stooped to fasten her shoe-lace.

"Oh, he would not think of it *now*," Lady Winterdyne repeated, with emphasis. "That would be too like a school-girl, especially after Colonel Mostyn's kindness. He must go and take his chance. When shall we see you again at Winterdyne?"

"I do not know. I have enjoyed my visit very much—

only it has convinced me that when one has been long excluded from society it is best not to seek readmission. I am forgotten in twenty years, Adela ; in twenty more, as I said the other day, there will be a new *regime* at Studleigh."

"Emily, I wish I could convince you of your sinfulness in taking such a gloomy view of life."

"If I am gloomy, God knows I have much to make me so," she retorted, passionately. "You who have never had a wish disappointed or a desire unfulfilled, even now, cannot sympathise with the sorrows of a woman who has never entertained a hope which has not been blasted, nor fixed her affections on an object which was not wrested from her."

The momentary brightness which change of scene and company had infused into that gloomy mind had passed away, and Lady Winterdyne began to find that, instead of doing good, she had but added to the care and disappointment of her old friend. She felt conscious, though she reproached herself for it, of a strange sense of relief when the carriage rolled away. It was as if a cloud had lifted from the house.

"What were you saying to your cousin to make him look at you so oddly in the hall?" Lady Emily asked her son as they drove away.

"Not much, mother," Will replied, with an evasiveness very unlike his usual quiet frankness.

"I can scarcely believe it. He looked as if you had astonished him very much ; and if that were possible, moved his heart."

"It was something only concerning him and me, mother," he answered gently. "It will be better if you do not insist."

"And if I do insist on knowing?"

"Then I must tell you. I was only reminding him what

a precious and important life he carries in his hand, and asking him to be careful of it. He is brave and daring to foolhardiness, just as Sir Randal says Uncle Geoff was before him."

"Your aunt should be a proud woman to-day, Will. Surely her highest ambition will be satisfied now?"

"I do not think that she had that kind of ambition, mother; but she must be satisfied, especially when the Winterdynes have behaved so splendidly."

"You don't grudge your cousin his bride, then? She made no impression on you at all?"

"None, in the way you mean, though I admire and like her," Will replied, and again the dark, dusky red mounted to his cheek.

"Nor Raybourne his, I presume?" she said, merely out of curiosity.

"No, that is, not now. I have made up my mind that I must live a lonely life, save for you, and, believe me, mother, I want no other."

"Do you mean to say that that dark, proud girl, so like her mother, that I could not bear to speak to her, has won *you*, Will; that if it had been possible you would have made her mistress of Studleigh?"

Will turned to his mother with a gesture of dissent and a look of inexpressible weariness. "Mother, why drag these things into discussion? You wring admissions from me and then make yourself miserable over them. Let us try to be happier and more contented with each other, and try to believe that I have scarcely a wish beyond your care and comfort."

"I want an answer to my question," she reiterated, with that exasperating persistence which had grown upon her of late.

"Then I do love my cousin Evelyn as a man loves but once in life, as my father loved you; but, even had there

been no Raybourne seeking to win her, I should have kept in the background. I should never have asked her to be my wife."

"You could scarcely expect her to look favourably upon you with such a brilliant settlement within her reach," Lady Emily said, with bitter sarcasm. "I like the boy: he has his father's frank, outspoken, independent way, but his sister takes after her mother's family; she has that strange, still, reticent way peculiar to the Abbots. I hope she may agree with Lady Winterdyne, but I doubt it."

"Mother, I think it will be well if we do not speak of my cousins; if, in our conversation, we agree to ignore their existence," said Will, with slight sternness. "I hoped better things of this visit. Yes, I hoped that the mists of years would be cleared away, but it was a mistaken hope."

"Rachel Ayre has too grievously supplanted me in my son's affection to be forgiven," Lady Emily said, as she sank back in her seat. "But she can afford to despise and laugh at me now."

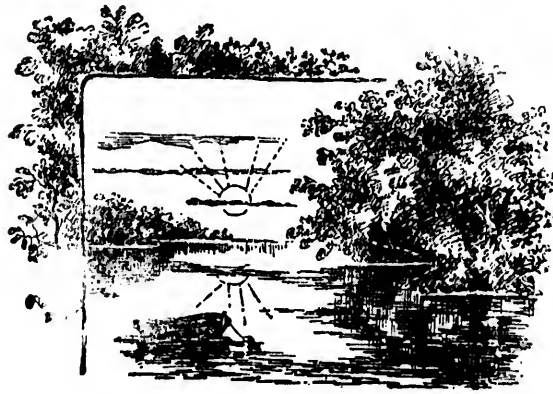
Will Ayre looked through the open window of the carriage on the sunny autumn landscape with a dark cloud on his face.

"Why should you be so watchful over your cousin's welfare?" she pursued. "Suppose the worst, and that he lost his life in the war, it could not matter much to you."

"Perhaps not. I was thinking of the place, mother. We know Clement, and what manner of master he would make. Of the distant heirs we know nothing," Will answered in as matter-of-fact a tone as if he had been discussing some neighbour in whom they had but a trivial interest. His mother answered nothing, but her face grew ashen grey as she listened, and she pressed her handkerchief to her pale lips to still their trembling.

She was to be pitied.

The certainty that his life would be short had been so long with Will that, like other familiar things, it had ceased to concern him much. He forgot for the moment that what seemed in truth only a slight hardship to him, since he could never have a full and perfect earthly existence, was the setting of the sun in his mother's life.





CHAPTER XXVII.

ON ACTIVE SERVICE.

NEXT morning there were sad hearts left at Winterdyne and Stonecroft when the young soldiers went away. Lord Winterdyne and Norman accompanied them to Portsmouth, and watched the transport ship leave. It carried a regiment of five hundred men, with officers and servants, and was the first instalment of the reinforcements for which the Commissioner of Natal had asked. The parting, though sorrowful, was not haunted by much serious misgiving, the outbreak at the Cape not being considered in the light of a serious war. It is difficult for those at home to realise that, when we have carried civilisation and peaceful pursuits into our colonies, we have also not failed to teach the natives of each new country the art of war. Clement Ayre was in wild, exultant spirits, as well he might be with such prospects as he had in view. The love of a high-born, well-dowered and gentle girl, and opportunity almost within his reach of proving himself worthy of her, were calculated to rouse his highest enthusiasm. As Raybourne and he paced the deck of the troopship day after day, as she sped towards the port where her arrival was so ardently looked for, Clement's talk was more of the dangers and the battles he hoped to share with his comrades than of the

dear ones he had left behind. Harry, on the contrary, seldom spoke of them, but showed in his absent, preoccupied demeanour that his thoughts were more of home.

"I don't understand you, Harry," Clem said to him one day, as they lounged together with their pipes under the awning on the deck. "If I didn't know what stuff you were made off, I should say you were inclined to show the white feather. Do you regret having volunteered to go where glory waits you?"

Raybourne laughed.

"It isn't that, but I tell you what it is, Clem, I feel a trifle queer about the whole business. I believe it's going to be a serious affair for me. I can't tell why."

Clement laughed loud and long. "You've got the blues, Hal, and are home-sick. I confess I feel a bit that way myself, only I don't give way to it. Cheer up, man—ten to one we are back in England for Easter."

"I hope so. This voyaging is a confoundedly slow business anyhow," said Raybourne, raising himself and looking somewhat wearily across the wide expanse of the ocean shimmering in the hot glare of the sun. "Do you know what I wish? that I had married before we left."

Clem looked at him in open-eyed wonder.

"You want to knock things off without delay, and no mistake," he said, comically. "It's a pity you didn't think of it; who knows but that Evy might have consented? You never know what girls *will* do. But why do you wish that, old fellow; don't you see we can both do the deed together in old Peploe's church. We mustn't part company on such an eventful occasion."

"No, certainly not—old Peploe"—said Raybourne, abstractedly. "Oh, no, certainly not."

Clement took his pipe from his mouth, and reaching out his long right arm gave his friend a vigorous shake.

"I say, Harry, are you well enough? What *do* you

mean? Shall I get Hetheridge to prescribe a dose of paregoric?"

"I was just thinking that it would have made it all right for Evelyn, supposing Peploe had only read the service over us that morning we left for Plymouth," Raybourne went on. "You see she would be Lady Raybourne, with her own jointure, which nobody could touch."

Clement put out his pipe, and laid it down on the deck. There was a queer lump in his throat and a sort of sickness in his heart, which prevented him speaking for a moment.

"I'll punch your head, Harry; upon my word I will," he said, at length. "It is paregoric you want, and castor-oil, and—and—the whole medicine chest poured into you. I'm positive it's your liver; but I'll go and ask Hetheridge this minute."

"You needn't bother; you know as well as I do that I'm all right," said Harry, lazily, as he folded his arms above his head. "There's nothing out of the way in what I am saying. It may be a very remote contingency, but still it *might* happen, Clem, that one, perhaps both of us, might leave our bones to whiten in Zululand. Yes, I wish I had done it. I suppose a fellow couldn't be married by proxy."

Clem never spoke, but got up and walked away. He felt genuinely uncomfortable, miserable even; there was something in all this which sounded too real and serious. He had not a fear for himself; but as he pictured what it would be if he had to return alone, he felt as if a cold stream were pouring over him.

"If you feel like that, Harry, I wish you'd go back in this old tub on her return voyage," he said, when he sauntered back again. "I really wish you would, old fellow. You've made me awfully uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry for that, though I don't see that I said anything out of the way. Come back alone in this thing, did you say? Not if I know it. You needn't think that it's the assegais I'm afraid of. It isn't that. But I wish I had

thought of Evelyn sooner. You see we were both just letting things drift along, weren't we, until this marching order brought us all to our senses?"

"I wish you wouldn't bother about Evelyn, Harry," said Clem, speaking in earnest, too. "In that way, I mean. Even supposing, even supposing—no, hang it, I won't suppose anything, except that we shall go home triumphantly with medals on our breasts. But what I meant to say was that Evelyn will be very well off, supposing she never married anybody. My mother is not exactly a poor woman; and, of course, if I fall, the place goes to Evy."

"Perhaps there would have been a selfishness; yes, it would have been selfish to ask her to take my name. You see, after a while, she might want to marry some one else, and that would be awkward, wouldn't it? Yes, it was better to leave her free."

It was a long time before Clement Ayre got rid of the uncomfortable feeling these words produced in his mind. Even after the excitement of the march to the seat of war they often recurred to him, with this same vague feeling of dread.

In twenty-one days the *Tamar* touched at the Cape of Good Hope, and three days later sailed into Durban Harbour, amid the enthusiastic acclamations of the people, to whom the arrival of substantial aid from England, earnest of more to come, was like the very shining of the sun. They lived in a state of fearful dread and uncertainty, knowing against what fearful odds the brave little British army had to fight, and fearful lest the dawn of any new day might witness the triumphal descent of a horde of victorious savages upon the hated and helpless Europeans.

The march to the Zulu border was begun at once. It was beset with difficulties, for heavy rains had set in, resulting in the flooding of the rivers and swamps, which rendered progress, especially of the transport waggons, very slow and tedious. That march was a strange revelation,

not only to our two young soldiers, but to all who had hitherto regarded the war in Zululand as merely child's play. It was a wild and difficult country to traverse, devoid of roads, except the occasional deep tracks made by the traders' waggons. High mountains, intersected by deep ravines, in which the undergrowth was so thick that it provided splendid hiding for the enemy, while the bush itself, seemingly impenetrable to the unaccustomed eye, lent itself as a natural fortress to the children of the wilderness, who had been reared in its midst.

Towards sunset, on a hot, stifling day, Clement Ayre and his friend were riding a little in advance of their company, in the direction of the broad river Tugela, which separated the hostile country of the Zulus from Natal, which they threatened to invade and annihilate. It had been a very hot day, and now heavy masses of copper-coloured cloud hung on the horizon when the blood-red sun was slowly sinking out of sight. During the past four-and-twenty hours no sign of the enemy had been seen, not even a stray Zulu lurking in the bush, consequently the order of vigilance had been slightly relaxed, and the troops were allowed to move slowly, and in what order they pleased. It had been a long and toilsome march, and the soldiers were very weary, and looking forward with some degree of impatience to being allowed to light their camp fires and rest for the night.

The Colonel in command, however, decided that the river must first be crossed. The two friends were riding a little in advance, as I said, and on the brow of a gentle hill they paused and looked back. It was a picturesque sight, the large, well-equipped regiment in their bright uniform, the glittering trappings of the cavalry, and the long straggling line of the transport waggons with their teams of patient oxen. The landscape itself, seen from that slight eminence, was not without its wild and rugged attractions. The green thickets of the bush, relieved by many strange

flowers of novel shape and gaudy hue, the thorny spikes of the giant cactus, the graceful aloe and mimosa, and the swift-rushing river with its woody banks, all combined to make a picture new and pleasing to their unaccustomed eyes.

"It's rather a pretty country, isn't it, Clem?" said Raybourne, carelessly.

"Beastly country for soldiering, I think," retorted Clem, as his horse sent his foreleg into a broken swampy hole. "Just look at that long string of heavy waggons, and then forward at the ground we've to go over. I tell you what, Harry, if there's no other means of transport for supplies, Cetewayo will easily keep the advantage he has got. It's a serious matter fighting a savage enemy in his own country."

"It's rather exciting, though; one never knows what is to happen next," said Raybourne, with a smile. "It's amusing to see how these black Zulus pop up out of the scrub and then disappear, goodness knows where. I suppose they are their scouts and spies; ugly fellows they are, too."

"You're right. Glyn seems to think that we might have a brush with them to-morrow. The enemy isn't far ahead, and they say he is 20,000 strong."

Once more Raybourne glanced back at the troops toiling wearily on, and a slight shadow crossed his face.

"I don't presume to set up an opinion, Clem, but don't you think we're not just exactly too fit to receive 20,000 in a way we should like? We are only a few hundreds. It would be a good thing for us if we could come up with the other columns before we fight."

"Oh, well, they are not very far away. It wouldn't be difficult to send messengers to the camp at Ekowe, and I heard the Colonel say this morning that Lord Chelmsford could be only about ten miles in advance."

"Don't you remember, Clem, how persistently we were taught concentration in our plans of campaign at Sand-

hurst? A handful of infantry and a few scores of cavalry scattered here and there over a treacherous country like this haven't a chance to boast of. That's what I think."

"Cadets fresh from Sandhurst usually think their newly-gotten wisdom as good as the experience of their elders," said Clem, with a laugh. "I'm quoting Glyn. I said something of the same kind to him yesterday, and he let me down gently. All we have got to do is to shut up, Harry, and do what we are bid. Supposing, now, that you were the commander, what would you do? Let me hear how you would proceed."

"Well, I'd find out immediately, by fair means or foul, exactly where the enemy is, and what he is good or bad for. Then I would gather my whole force together; send a column to watch the river, and prevent any of the enemy crossing; keep another in reserve to harass him in the rear; and march upon him till I forced him to fight in open field."

"You can't force savages into fair warfare; that's where the difficulty lies," said Clem, musingly. "Their cunning teaches them that in their native fastnesses their strength lies. They'll pour out upon us from some confounded ravine, perhaps, some night when we are in camp and disarmed. Besides, they're well armed. Doesn't it seem an awful thing to you, Harry, that the Zulus should have been provided with all the implements of war by ourselves?"

"Is that the case?"

"Yes, I had a long talk with Chard the other day before we left him at Rorke's Drift. It seems that after the diamonds were found in the South, native labour was employed and paid for, at their own request, in guns and rifles. Why, man, the thing carried its own meaning on the face of it. It was awful folly, perfect madness on the part of the Government to allow it—literally signing their own death-warrant."

"It was certainly a want of sense, if it's true."

"It's as true as gospel. How else could they be so well armed? I tell you there was a gun factory at Kimberley, and the Kaffirs began the system of working for firearms and ammunition, and of course it soon spread from the Colony into Zululand. We have no means of knowing what reserve stores they have, but they must be enormous, Chard says, for the trade has been going on for years, under the sanction of the Government."

"I suppose they know how to use them, too?"

"Trust them; they'd soon find that out. But I see we're going to call a halt, and I'm not sorry, for I'm both tired and hungry, and I don't want to see Cetewayo's sweet faces for another twenty hours at least. What are you thinking of to make you look so sober, Harry?"

"Oh, not of much. Isn't it odd, though, Clem, that your first campaign should be so like that Indian business which cost your father his life?"



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CHAPTER XXVIII.

ISANDHLWANA.

EARLY next morning an order was received from the Commander to march on to Isandhlwana, and on the mountain go into camp. The summit had been explored and found suitable for the purpose.

The enemy was supposed to be in the near vicinity, although keeping hidden, his presence not betrayed even by a stray shot. This fact somewhat allayed the anxieties of the invaders, because they thought it proved that the numbers must have been greatly exaggerated. It seemed an impossibility that so vast a force could be so successfully and so completely hidden, even though the wild nature of the country lent itself admirably to such manœuvres. The camp at Isandhlwana was situated on a mountain which commanded an unbroken view of the surrounding country, and whose weakest point for attack was a narrow neck on the western side, crossed by a waggon road. So complete was their ignorance of the enemy's movements, that immediately the camp was struck the column divided, and a part under Colonel Glyn advanced to assist in attacking a place called Matyana's stronghold, where the Zulus were supposed to be entrenched.

The utmost security prevailed in the camp, and the troops

being infected by the apparent unconcern of their officers, were glad to rest and amuse themselves after the toils of the march across the broken and swampy ground on the Zululand side of the river Tugela. About nine o'clock, a scouting party was sent out to scour the adjacent country in search of the enemy, and returned before the dinner hour, reporting nothing in sight. The whole company then settled themselves to wait in a state of readiness, however, expecting an hourly order to advance to the assistance of the Commander, whom they supposed to be engaged with the enemy about twelve miles distant. Clement Ayre, with some other ardent spirits, was chafing at the inaction of the day, and impatient for the order to advance, little dreaming that it was reserved for them to contend against the whole body of the Zulus. The day passed quietly by, and the dull heavy night fell without giving warning of the awful tragedy the dawn of another day was destined to witness.

"I say, Clem, are you asleep?" Raybourne whispered, leaning over his comrade at the dead of night.

Yes, Clem was sound asleep, with his arm under his head, and his face upturned to the lowering sky. Raybourne sat up, and leaning his elbows on his knees, let his head drop on his hands, and gave himself up to thoughts of home. He was strangely wakeful, every sense seemed sharpened to its keenest capacity—he could hear the soft, cautious tread of the furthest outpost as he moved to and fro to keep himself from feeling drowsy. As a rule Raybourne was of a solid, even temperament, not given to excitement or freaks of imagination, yet for many days past his usually calm mind had been filled with strange forebodings, which he could not understand. Although they were on the eve of an engagement with a vast and savage army, he was not visited by fear of personal consequences, nor any wish to draw back. He did feel, however, that this campaign was to have important issues for him; again and again he pas-

sionately regretted having left England without making Evelyn Ayre his wife. His thoughts in that strange, solemn, midnight stillness were wholly of her and of home. Perhaps his was not a very brilliant intellect; perhaps he had disappointed the proud hopes with which his father and mother had welcomed his birth, but he was a good, honest, true-hearted soul, who, at four-and-twenty, could look back upon the white page of an unblemished youth, in which there was nothing of which he, or any belonging to him, had need to be ashamed. How many of the hot and restless hearts slumbering under the midnight stars on that African mountain side could have said as much? After a time he forgot his surroundings, the measured tread of the sentries, and the pawing of the horses, seemed to die away, and he saw only the sweet landscapes of his English home, and the dear faces of those he loved. And then came to Harry Rayne a sudden, swift intuition, which told him that the very nearness to him, the vividness of his vision, signified that they and he should meet on earth no more. It was a strange experience, a vague uncertainty suddenly becoming a certainty in his mind, and the strangest part of it all was that he felt no inclination to rebel, but a deep sense of peace and calmness, just as if all difficulties and anxieties had come to an end. So while an anxious mother was lying awake on her bed at home, the boy for whom she was praying bowed his head and prayed too, the first time, perhaps, in his short, meagre, uneventful life that Raybourne prayed in real earnest, because it was the first and only time he had need of prayer. Then he lay down beside Clement in the tent, and slept till the reveille sounded at daybreak. And almost immediately a mounted messenger rode in hot haste into the camp with the intelligence that the enemy was within a few miles, and advancing on the camp. This rumour was, however, disbelieved, and immediately after breakfast a forward movement was made by an officer and a detachment of native troops to investi-

gate the cause of the alarm. Meanwhile, however, the camp held itself in readiness for attack, and each officer and man was busy seeing that their arms and ammunition were in order.

"I do believe, Clem, that on the whole it was wiser to leave Evelyn free," said Raybourne, as they sat together on a grey boulder.

Clement stared at him in astonishment, mingled with the concern which had never wholly left him since their talk on board the *Tamar*. His mind was so full of the stirring interest of the hour, on the *qui vive* for marching or fighting orders, that he could not understand what he thought Harry's day-dreaming and home-sick fancies. And yet who more manly or more sensible on all points than honest Harry Rayne? Again that keen chill seemed to pierce Clem to the heart.

At that moment, however, the sound of firing in the distance caused them to leap to their feet, and in an instant every thought but the peril and excitement of imminent battle was banished. A detachment of mounted Basutos under Colonel Durnford had gone out to reconnoitre, and, coming unexpectedly on a Zulu regiment, had immediately opened fire; and it then became evident that the whole body of the enemy was present in overwhelming numbers, ready for action. When this message was brought into the impoverished, slender camp on Isandhlwana mountain a feeling of utter dismay filled each heart, and made even the bravest quail.

"You were right, Harry; somebody's blundered here, just as somebody did at Balaclava," said Clement, as they hurriedly obeyed their Colonel's orders to prepare for instant action.

"Well, old boy, our first taste of battle will be a bloody one. If we both fall it will go hard with them at home."

He rubbed his hand across his eyes, and under his moustache his firm lip trembled.

"Clem, I'll be done for. I've known it all along," said Raybourne, quietly. "If you should ever reach England, tell Evy I died with her name on my lips, and that I loved her to the last. But say to her, too, dear fellow, that if the time ever comes when she can marry somebody else, she must not let any memory of me stand between."

"Hush, hush, I can't bear it. I won't go home without you. Our bones can bleach together, as you said on board the *Tamar*. Here are the black fiends pouring forward! God bless you, Hal, good-bye."

They clasped hands a moment, the last clasp, and looked into each other's eyes. The next moment they parted, to meet no more on earth.

It seemed as if for the moment officers and men became demoralised, and no attempt whatever was made to strengthen the camp, or even to concentrate what slender force they possessed to meet the enemy. At length, however, a company was sent to the waggon road to intercept and check the rapidly advancing enemy. The sight which met the eyes of that battalion, as they set themselves in the order of battle, might well have filled them with dismay. The broken and undulating ground beyond the neck of the mountain was literally alive with Zulus, not scattered here and there in patches, but gathered in firm, solid masses, and advancing with a strange, determined steadiness, not in accordance with the usual methods of savage warfare. It might almost have seemed that the order of things was reversed, and that the discipline and careful concentration, thrown to the winds by the British, had been seized and taken advantage of by Cetewayo and his officers. Slowly, but with deadly surety, they crept forward to surround the mountain and hem in the little camp. It was impossible to spare detachments to guard every approach, their efforts being chiefly required before the camp, which a large regiment of Zulus was trying to storm. Raybourne, on account of his intimate friendship with the Colonel who commanded

the company guarding the waggon road, volunteered to go with him, and the last Clement saw of his friend was when he turned round at the bend of the hill, and gave him a parting wave. After that each had enough to do looking after himself.

"I wish, my boy, you would keep back rather," said the Colonel, riding up to Raybourne as they neared the road. "From what I can see our chances here are small. Ride back yet, you may escape by the river. If you want an errand I'll send a despatch by you to Rorke's Drift to warn Bromhead and Chard."

Raybourne shook his head. The excitement of battle was upon him, the thought of retreat hateful. Yet he was grateful for his Colonel's thoughtful consideration, and said so in an earnest word. "Your father would expect me to keep you from certain death at least," was all the Colonel said as he rode away, and in ten minutes more the fight began. From the first it was a forlorn hope; for, although the Zulu firing was ill-directed and ineffective in comparison with that of their opponents, still their immense numbers were bound to carry the day. They came pouring up the narrow neck and across the waggon road, which was already strewn with the dead, and throwing aside their guns and rifles used the familiar and deadly assegai in a fierce hand-to-hand conflict, which, however, could have but one ending. It was not "a fair fight on an open field," but simply wholesale butchery of brave men, who deserved a better fate. The company which had so nobly endeavoured to repulse the enemy's first advance was cut down to a man.

Meanwhile matters were but little better at the camp on the hill. The same lamentable want of cohesion was visible. Even a small force, if formed into an impenetrable mass, might have at least kept the camp until the General or other reinforcements came to their aid. But the companies were scattered about, and fell an easy prey to the victorious enemy. There was something gruesome in the

strange silence with which the dark masses advanced, and in the deadly manner in which they literally hewed their way to the summit of the hill where the camp was situated. It was so different from the usual demonstrative and noisy fighting of savages that it appeared to help their success. But the moment the British gave signs of retreating, and began to flee before them towards the river, their stolidity vanished, their pent-up hatred and vindictiveness found vent in savage yells; and, throwing all military discipline to the winds, the naked hordes rushed on with their horrible assegais out in the air, and dealing death to every white man. Scarcely a soldier of the infantry escaped. It would not have fared much better with the mounted men had they not been quick to take advantage of a slight disjunction in the enemy's lines, which enabled them to gallop across the open space and reach the Tugela river, to the very banks of which they were pursued, some, indeed being killed on the way. The Zulu firing was so badly aimed that they were enabled to ford it, and gain safety on the other side. Then they drew breath, and that melancholy handful stood still a moment and looked at the devastated camp and the hillside reeking with the slain.

"Not a man rose who went to the waggon road with the 24th," said one, as he wiped the bloody sweat from his brow. "They must have been cut down to a man. God knows, somebody is to blame for this morning's work."

"Did any of you see Raybourne?" Clement Ayre asked, in a low voice, which had a ring of hopelessness in it.

"Not since he went off with the 24th. I expect he'll be lying among the rest yonder. Where are you going, Ayre?"

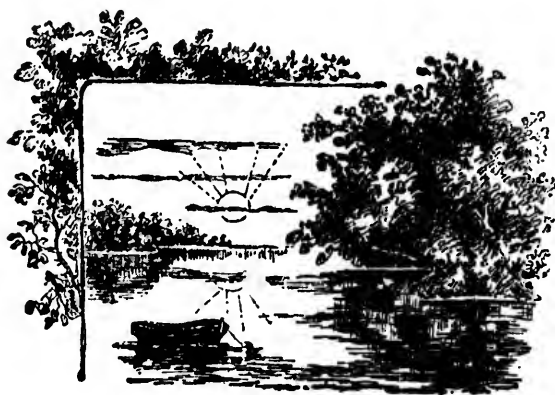
"Off to Rorke's Drift to warn them there. We can't forget that only one camp remains between yon victorious horde and the colony. It must be held at any cost," he answered, and giving spurs to his horse rode rapidly away.

"Brave young fellow that; more forethought than some

of them in higher places," said the man who had first spoken.

"Ay, he comes of a good stock. His father was killed at Delhi in the mutiny keeping the gate against awful odds. I've heard my uncle tell the story. Ayre will be right sorry if that chum of his is killed. Engaged to his sister, they say. But I say, we'd better get out of this!"

Ay, poor Raybourne! In a stately English home, round a happy breakfast table, they spoke his name that morning in accents of love and hopeful pride, not dreaming that even while they were speaking he lay dead, with his face upturned to the leaden sky, and an assegai thrust through his honest heart.



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CHAPTER XXIX.

RORKE'S DRIFT.

WHILE these terrible events were transpiring at Isandhlwana, the little company left in charge of the camp at Rorke's Drift were inapprehensive of any danger. They had charge of the commissariat stores, and had also thirty-five sick in hospital. The camp was situated in the vicinity of a tract of bush which, unfortunately, had not been cut down, and so favoured the approach of the enemy, as it almost completely hid them from sight. Shortly after dinner on that eventful day two men were seen galloping furiously from Zululand, and at the river bank made frantic signs to be taken over. The ferryman hastened to the Zulu side, and was immediately horrified by the news of the disaster at Isandhlwana.

"The camp must be held," said Clement Ayre with that decision which showed the intrepid soldier and the self-reliant man.

"Ride on to Helpmakaar," he added to the private who had accompanied him, "and hurry up reinforcements."

"Will you stay here?" asked the ferryman, looking with admiration at the stalwart young figure, and the square, resolute face.

"Yes, of course. Hurry up, man. Ah, there's Bromhead! Frightful news, old chap. We're totally defeated. Only about a score of us left to tell the tale, and they're marching on to Rorke's Drift. What's to be done? Can we keep them out till help comes?"

"It must be done," Bromhead answered quietly, and Clement saw his right hand involuntarily clench.

"How many men have you?" Clement asked, as he leaped from the boat to the lieutenant's side.

"There's about two hundred of us, if they stay," said Bromhead, significantly.

"Well, Daniells, what is it?" he added, seeing the ferryman wanted to speak.

"Couldn't we moor the punt in the river and fight a few of us from the deck? We might send some of the black fiends to the bottom, and anyway keep them back for a while?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "You are a brave fellow, Daniells, but it can't be done. Haul up the punt, and come up to the entrenchment. How far distant are they, do you suppose?" he added to Clement.

"I may have an hour's advance of them, no more."

"An hour?" Bromhead's head went down on his breast as he took long strides towards the camp. By the time they reached it his plan of action was laid. He suggested that a detachment of horsemen should go out to meet the enemy, in order to delay their advance, and so give time for further strengthening the camp; but his suggestion was declined—the men refused to obey orders, and a hundred of them rode off to Helpmakaar.

A peculiar smile crossed the face of the brave lieutenant, thus left with a very handful to protect the camp.

"We're a hundred and four, all told, now, not including thirty-five in hospital," he said, grimly. "Let's to work."

The intrepid soldier did not lose a moment, but gave his orders with surprising speed and precision. The store

building and the hospital were barricaded, loopholes left for shooting on the enemy. When the other contingent deserted the camp, Lieutenant Chard at once saw that the line of defence they had planned and begun was too elaborate and scattered for the few who could defend it; but he was ready with another suggestion.

"We must make a wall of the biscuit-tins, and strengthen it with mealie bags," he said, with a cool smile, and all hands set to work immediately to carry out his suggestion. There was something intensely pathetic in these slight and feeble preparations, made with such cool determination, but when the first shot was heard in the distance, a strange thrill ran through every heart. The two officers in charge exchanged glances full of significance. Clement Ayre, impulsive and outspoken as usual, put his thoughts into words—

"Do you think it'll stand?" he asked, gravely.

"No, but it'll give us a chance to sell our lives dearly," Bromhead announced, quietly. "And if we can but keep the attention of the enemy until the General comes up we may save Natal."

"He must have heard by this time of Isandhlwana," said Clement, and then they said no more, for when men are face to face with death, though their minds are busier and fuller perhaps than in any previous part of their existence, they do not care to express what they think and feel in words.

"You've jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire, Ayre," said Bromhead, with a faint smile. "On a horse in open ground you had a chance, here you have none; but we'll do our duty."

"Ay, ay, look yonder; are we ready to meet them?"

It was now half-past four, and the wall had only been built two boxes high, forming a sorry sort of redoubt at best, when a band of Zulus were seen advancing at a run upon the camp. Nothing more perfect than the coolness,

more heroic than the instant action of these intrepid men, who held the fate of Natal by a slender thread, was ever known in history. Every man was at his post—every hand steady at the guns ; not a moment, not a chance of advantage, was lost, and the first fire made havoc in the ranks. But they rushed on, maddened by their success, over the fallen bodies of their comrades, and dashed round the hospital to the other side where the redoubt was weakest. There they were met by a handful of the brave garrison, who gave them a taste of the British bayonet, which put their assegais to shame. It was a desperate struggle, in which several were wounded, but each place was filled as it became empty by men who were assisting to defend the hospital in front. For at least eight hours this terrible siege continued, the hospital was burned down, and, somewhat disheartened, the gallant little company retired into the centre of their entrenchments, feeling that unless the besiegers should desist or help arrive they must either surrender or allow themselves to be cut down at their posts.

Early in the siege Clement Ayre received a flesh wound in the left arm, which, though very painful, did not keep him from fighting. He fought, indeed, like a lion. More than once Bromhead looked at him in wonder, admiring his coolness and intrepid daring, which made him expose himself in the very hottest forefront of the battle, and seemed to nerve his arm with extraordinary strength. Towards midnight the firing from without became less frequent and less sustained, and a feeble hope began to flicker in the breasts of those who had held that desperate position. Not a word was spoken, but each ear strained for the next volley ; each heart was secretly conscious of relief as the intervals became more and more prolonged. They felt certain that daybreak at least would bring them the longed-for aid.

Meanwhile the General and his forces were about ten miles in advance of Isandhlwana, believing that they were

marching upon the great body of the enemy, who were supposed to be hidden in the caves of a deep valley called Matyana's Stronghold.

In the course of the day they had a slight brush with a party of Zulus, who kept them in amusement while the king and his great regiments were cutting to pieces the brave little force on Isandhlwana Hill.

Early in the forenoon a note was received from the outposts in the rear, saying that firing had been heard from the direction of the camp they had left, and the General instantly despatched one of his lieutenants to the top of a high hill with a powerful telescope, to see if he could observe anything unusual in the neighbourhood. After about an hour's close observation he returned with the information that he could see nothing but the cattle being driven into camp. By this time not a vestige of the enemy could be seen, and after a hasty conversation, the General ordered the troops to bivouac where they were for the night, and started himself at the head of the mounted infantry for Isandhlwana. Although they were in some uncertainty and anxiety, they had not the slightest prevision of the fearful events of the day, and certainly no idea of the desperate struggle then going on at Rorke's Drift. Within two miles of Isandhlwana they halted, and sent an officer to reconnoitre. He returned shortly with the news that an awful disaster had taken place, and that the enemy held the camp. A despatch was sent off in hot haste to the troops encamped six miles off, and at six o'clock in the evening they came up with the advance. Then steadily, but with the utmost force and precision, nerved with the thirst for revenge on the cruel foe who had destroyed their comrades, they moved forward to retake the camp. It was speedily and splendidly done, and before nightfall the Zulus were completely routed, and abandoned their position. One thought filled the mind of each—the vision of the little camp at Rorke's Drift was before every eye; but it was

impossible, with exhausted men and animals, to proceed to its relief before a needful rest was obtained.

Night fell on a strange and weirdly awful picture. The desolated camp, the dead bodies of the slain, with their pallid faces upturned to the sky, the dead horses and oxen scattered everywhere, and the weary, dispirited soldiers trying to snatch their precious repose among such strange surroundings, and uncertain what an hour might bring forth ; none who took part in that sad bivouac would be likely to forget it.

At dawn of day they were on the alert once more, and hurried on to Rorke's Drift. The feelings of officers and men alike could not be easily described as they pushed forward, scarcely daring to expect anything but the worst. The enemy had all night long kept up a harassing, though irregular, firing on the camp at Rorke's Drift. About day-break it entirely ceased, only, however, to be renewed an hour or two later. About seven o'clock the brave officers met in brief consultation. They were all exhausted, and, unless help came from Helpmakaar, or the General himself should arrive, there would be no hope.

"It's all up with us," said Bromhead, rather gloomily, for it seemed hard, after the desperate fight they had made, that they should be ultimately destroyed. "See yonder, the Zulus again advancing in a body."

"The ammunition is all done, so it'll be hand to hand this time," said Clement Ayre. "Well, we'll sell our lives dearly. We'll let them see how the British can fight."

"You're right about the Zulus, old fellow, but, unless I'm mistaken, yonder's the buff coats of the 24th," said another, gleefully. "Hurrah, we're saved, it's the General himself."

A few minutes later the camp was the scene of lively excitement. The General's face was radiant as he shook hands with the brave soldiers, and his words of praise were generous and sincere.

"You are the first to win the Victoria Cross in this

campaign," he said, heartily. "There is no doubt that you have saved Natal."

He spoke truly. But for that gallant, intrepid defence the enemy must have poured its hordes into the colony, and carried destruction in its train.

It was a brave deed bravely done—another bright page added to the page of British history. In the fearful excitement and strain of the siege none had had time to think of suffering or wounds, but it soon became evident that some were suffering severely. Among these were Clement Ayre, whose wound was occasioning him such keen pain and feverishness that he was ordered into hospital at once.

"Can anybody tell me what became of Raybourne who was attached to Glyn's column?" he asked the surgeon who came to attend him.

"I'll find out. Be still, sir. If you don't keep yourself quiet it'll go hard with you. It's an ugly cut."

"Never mind it. I want to know what became of Raybourne. If he's dead it will be an awful business for his people."

"He isn't the only one, my boy. Keep quiet, I tell you. How can I do anything, while you're wriggling about like that?"

"Is it a dangerous wound?"

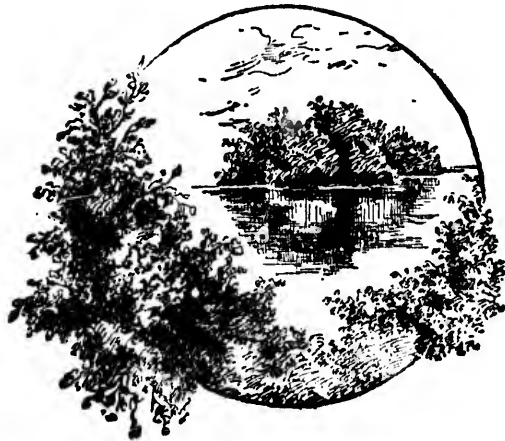
"Not in the meantime, but it'll trouble you a bit, maybe. It should have been attended to sooner. When did you get it?"

"Yesterday, some time just after they set the hospital on fire. I had to help to keep 'em back till they got the sick fellows safely out. It was an exciting business, but I believe I hewed a few of them down."

"Well, that'll do. Drink this now, and I'll inquire after your friend. I'll ask the General, if need be; but if you haven't seen him I doubt it's all up with him, poor fellow."

The surgeon nodded and went off to make his inquiries.

but by the time he had learned the few unsatisfactory particulars his patient was off his head and muttering about things far removed from Rorke's Drift and its deadly peril. The surgeon smiled sadly as he laid a cooling cloth on his head. He was not the only one who in his fever spoke the sweet name of "the girl he left behind him."



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CHAPTER XXX.

THE NEWS AT HOME.

"**T**HERE has been a frightful disaster in Zululand, Will—a total defeat of our troops."

Lady Emily Ayre uttered these words as her son entered the breakfast-room one morning in January.

"Are there any particulars or names?" he asked, with that quick, eager concern he always exhibited when the soldiers or their doings at the Cape were spoken of.

"None, except that the 24th took part, and that about a thousand are killed."

"A thousand," repeated Will, in dismay. "And no names given. What frightful suspense they will endure this morning at Stonecroft and Winterdyne."

He took the paper his mother had laid down, and ran his eye over the brief despatch which had already sent a thrill of agony to many hearts. It was short and unsatisfactory, as the first despatches after an engagement usually are, and served only to suggest to the mind the possibilities involved. But in another day all anxiety would be set at rest.

"Has it taken away your appetite, Will?" Lady Emily asked, observing that he left his plate untouched. "Raybourne and your cousin may have escaped—in fact it is

most likely, they have, as they were too inexperienced to be pushed to the front."

Will smiled at this suggestion.

"Inexperience is not taken into consideration at such a time. I feel very anxious, especially, though I don't know why, on Raybourne's account. It seems to have been a desperate fight; the camp was totally surrounded."

"Well, I'm sure, I see no benefit to be got from carrying on wars in savage countries, and sacrificing so many lives," said Lady Emily. "What is the end and aim of it all?"

"To protect the settlers at the Cape, of course," returned the Squire. "Mother, I cannot rest. I must ride over to Stonecroft this morning, and see whether they have learned any further particulars."

"You can't ride on a bitter cold morning like this. If you will go you must drive. If you like to take the brougham, and leave me at Winterdyne, I will accompany you; but are they home from the East?"

"Yes; they returned last week."

"You always know their movements," said his mother, with a slight hardness in her voice. "It is you who ought to have been in the East, I think. Will you not go even yet to please me?"

There was genuine anxiety in her look as she asked the question. There was not much change in Will to outward seeming, but his mother's nervous eye detected a greater delicacy of outline and a general languor of movement, which filled her with a vague alarm.

"Mother, I don't know if it is always wise to run away from Studleigh in winter. I believe it makes one more susceptible to cold. I have never been better than this winter I have spent at home," he said, cheerfully.

"I have been tormenting myself for some days thinking you are not well, Will," she said, with a solicitude which made her face lovely.

"It is just imagination, mother, dear. I assure you I

am perfectly well. But I will drive this morning to please you, if you will do something to please me."

"What is that?"

"Call at Stonecroft with me before you go up to Winterdyne. You know that by taking a little curve in the road we can drive past the gates."

"What should I do at Stonecroft, Will? It might please you, but I question if it would please anybody else. If Mrs Geoffrey should be in trouble, I am but an indifferent sympathiser, I am afraid."

"You are very hard on yourself, mother. You can be very kind and gentle when you like. Shall I order the brougham to be ready in an hour?"

"How long will it take us to drive to Winterdyne?"

"An hour and a half to Stonecroft, mother; ten minutes more to Winterdyne."

Lady Emily laughed outright. "To Stonecroft be it, then. You always have your own way," she said, pleasantly. "But you must be answerable for the consequences."

Will Ayre long remembered that drive along the bare and wintry roads that January morning as the pleasantest he had ever shared with his mother. There were times when they were very happy together, when she showed to him only her motherly and womanly side; times when even Will, with his high ideal, missed no attribute in his mother which he could wish her to possess.

Although Stonecroft was but a small property, it was approached by a very long, imposing avenue, lined with stately beech trees. A pretty ivy-covered lodge guarded the entrance gates, and when the carriage stopped the woman ran out at once.

"There is no one at home, sir," she said, with a curtsey, recognising the Squire at once.

"No one at home? I thought Mrs Ayre returned last week?"

"So she did, sir, for two nights ; then her and Miss Evy went away to Blundell on a visit to Sir Randal and Lady Vane."

"You don't know when they are to return, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Mrs Ayre was to write when she was coming."

Will looked disappointed, and, thanking the woman, bade the coachman drive on to Winterdyne.

"Your aunt leads a gay life, and she appears to have troops of friends," Lady Emily remarked, as they drove away from the gate.

"If there is bad news, it will reach them as quickly at Blundell as anywhere, I suppose," Will said, absently. "I wonder whether they have any news at Winterdyne?"

A kind of silence fell upon them, and they spoke very little as they drove rapidly along the broad highway to the great gates of Winterdyne. They were wide open, and the unostentatious brougham from Studleigh passed through without being observed. But when they swept round to the front of the fine old house, and saw every window darkened, a thrill of horror seemed to pass to their hearts.

Almost before the carriage stopped, Will alighted and ran up the steps to the hall door.

"What has happened? Is there bad news from the Cape?" he asked the servant, who threw open the door.

"Yes, sir," said the man, in a subdued tone. "We've lost our young lord."

"Lost him! He is not dead?" cried Will Ayre, incredulously.

"Dead, sir. Shot and stabbed by these beastly Zulus. I beg pardon, sir, but we were all so fond of Lord Raybourne, and it's mighty hard upon every one of us, that's all."

The man drew his hand across his eyes, and his voice took a huskier tone.

"When did the news come?" demanded Will, not

noticing that his mother had left the carriage, and was listening to every word.

"Only this morning, sir. Somebody telegraphed to his lordship, and then the papers came with the list."

"Are the family at home?"

"Only his lordship and Lord Norman, sir. Lord Raybourne now, I should say. Her ladyship and Lady Sybil are at Blundell visiting Lady Vane."

"Could we see Lord Winterdyne, do you think?" asked Lady Emily, quickly.

"I—I don't think so, my lady, but I'll inquire. He is very much broken down. It came so unexpected, and it was so cruel."

"It is, indeed, terrible," said Will, huskily.

"Did you say the list was out? Is there no mention of Lieutenant Ayre?"

"No, sir, not that we've heard, anyhow. If you'll come in, please, I'll tell his lordship you are here."

He ushered them into the darkened drawing-room, drew up one of the blinds a little way, and retired to tell his master.

"Mother, is not this frightful? It was always Clement we feared for. Somehow Raybourne, with his easy-going ways and strong common sense, seemed far removed from danger," exclaimed Will, as he restlessly paced to and fro the room. "It will kill Lady Winterdyne."

"You do not know her, Will. She will bear it with more fortitude than her husband. I cannot help thinking most of all of your poor cousin."

"Do you mean Evelyn? God comfort her. I think of her too. It will be a fearful trial to her," Will replied, hoarsely. "Mother, I cannot but wonder at the doings of the Almighty. Why should Raybourne, in all his manly strength, in the very outset of his usefulness, be taken and I left?"

His mother faintly smiled.

"The Almighty pities the loneliness and bitterness of a widowed mother, Will, that is all," she answered, and for a moment he felt himself rebuked. Perhaps in his warm love for his cousins, he had not at all times given to his mother the consideration to which she was entitled. Before he could reply the door was swiftly opened, and Lord Winterdyne entered. They saw that he had received a terrible blow. His hand, as he extended it to Lady Emily, trembled like a leaf, and his face looked grey and worn in the dim light.

"Dear Lord Winterdyne, this is fearful!" Lady Emily said, with a quickness of sympathy which amazed Will. "We had no idea. We ought not to have asked to see you, but the news is so overwhelming. Will Adela have heard this morning?"

"Oh, yes. I am just preparing to go to Blündell. I do not quite realise it yet. It seems so short a time since the boy left us, and he was so strong, so full of life."

Lord Winterdyne sat down as he spoke, and passed his hand wearily across his brow. William Ayre looking on, passionately wished that he had been able to offer up his life instead of the brave young soldier upon whom so many hopes were built. He was full of pity for the grey-haired father, and yet he thought most of all of the fair girl who had so soon lost the lover of her youth.

"It seems cruel to ask you particulars, Lord Winterdyne," he said, in a low voice. "But we know nothing. We had not got the latest morning papers when we left. Is there any news of my cousin?"

"He is wounded, though not seriously. He escaped the first massacre—it was nothing less—and took part in the defence of Rorke's Drift. That will make the world wonder when particulars come to hand. Harry was shot down early in the engagement. It seems he went forward with Glyn trying to intercept the enemy at a narrow pass.

Later particulars may somewhat exonerate those in authority, but in the meantime it must appear to all who read, that our men were simply set up as targets for Zulu gun and assegai."

He spoke with a bitterness which was excusable.

"My heart bleeds for his mother and for that poor girl," he said, beginning to walk to and fro to keep down his rising agitation. "I am thankful that we let no foolish pride or prejudice stand in the way of his heart's desire, and that he sought and won her love before he went away, and yet, perhaps, it would have been better to have left her fancy free."

"No, no," said Will, impulsively. "'Tis better to have loved and lost," he added, with a sad smile.

"Well, well, perhaps so. I am glad to have seen you. It relieves one's mind, and I was feeling terribly alone. I shall be stronger to meet Lady Winterdyne and the poor girls. I expect to reach Blundell about five o'clock. Yes, I shall take your kind messages."

"Good-bye."

"It is hard for you ; but you have other children, Lord Winterdyne," Lady Emily said, as she bade him good-bye. "There will be many others who have lost their all, and you have comfort in his stainless memory ; that is much."

"It is—it is everything. I know that will sustain his mother as nothing else could. I believe I can truly say that I am glad it is my son rather than Clement Ayre. His mother has had many sorrows. Hitherto our life has been singularly free. We must not rebel."

It was a fine spirit in which to accept so great a sorrow. Lady Emily's eyes were wet as she hurried out to the carriage.

"I had no idea, Will, that Lord Winterdyne could be so unselfish," she said, when they drove away. "It is a great deal to say that he would give up his own son rather than Clement, but I daresay he was thinking of Sybil, too."

"Probably. I hope Clem is not seriously wounded. Aunt Rachel does not deserve that she should have any more sorrow."

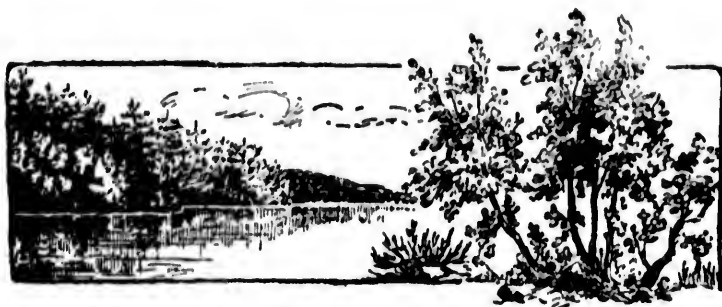
"I hope, I am sure, that his wound may be slight," said Lady Emily, sincerely. "I think, Will, I have lived too much to myself. Why do you shiver like that? Do you feel a chill? Let me have the window closed."

"It was nothing," he answered, quickly. "Mother, you will go over to Stonecroft another day with me when Aunt Rachel comes back."

"We shall see. If it will make you any happier, Will, I mean to try in future to make more friendly relations between Studleigh and Stonecroft."



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CHAPTER XXXI.

A SOLDIER'S TALE.

AGAIN it was the leafy month of June. Again the roses hung in dewy clusters on the boughs ; again summer beauty and summer gladness filled the land. A sad and painful tragedy had marked the closing days of the war, and the nation was yet mourning the untimely death of the gallant Prince Imperial. His was but one among many brave young lives sacrificed among the wild plains of Zululand ; but the circumstances of his death, and the peculiar desolation attached to his mother's bereavement, marked it out for special notice. The war was practically over. Almost every day saw the arrival of vessels with returning troops, and many anxious hearts were relieved of their load of anxiety and care. On the evening of the last day of June, a party of ladies were gathered on the terrace at Winterdyne, and they were evidently in a state of expectation. Lady Winterdyne, in her mourning gown, looked sweet and fragile ; the shock of her son's death had told upon her sorely. Rachel sat by her side, scarcely daring to allow her own happiness to show itself, lest it should grieve the bereaved mother, to whom the home-coming they were awaiting must be a peculiar trial. Our old friend, Lady Vane, white haired, and some-

what feeble, though still energetic and cheerful, sat a little apart, watching the two girls walking arm in arm to and fro on the lawn below. Conversation had flagged a little as the time of arrival drew near—a visible agitation seemed to take possession of each.

Presently the sound of wheels broke the silence. Then Sybil broke from Evelyn's gentle, sisterly clasp and ran into the house. Evelyn looked after her with a slight, sad smile, and then ascending the terrace steps crossed to Lady Winterdyne's chair and there stood still, with her hand on her shoulder. There was something pathetic and significant in that light, tender touch; these two perhaps more than all felt the desolation of Clement's solitary home-coming. Rachel had demurred a little about making the occasion a family gathering at Winterdyne, knowing full well that the mother's heart must ache because of the one who "was not," but she had been gently overruled.

When the open carriage swept round the curve of the avenue Rachel sprang to her feet, trembling in every limb. Yes, there was her boy, sun-browned and vigorous looking, standing up in the carriage waving his cap with his strong right hand, though the other wounded arm was still in a sling. And in another moment she was clasped to his heart, and heard his deep voice, tremulous with emotion, uttering her name in accents of tenderest love.

"My poor Evy," Clem said, as he turned then to kiss his sister, but Evelyn smiled bravely into his face, not wishing to dim the joy of his home-coming by her tears.

Then Clement, with an exquisite grace, knelt on one knee before his comrade's mother, and bent to kiss her hand.

"Dear Lady Winterdyne, if it had been possible I would have given my life for Harry, but the chance was not given me. I have feared this meeting more than I can tell, and when Lord Winterdyne met me, I was more than surprised; it is so good of you all."

"We must not be selfish," she said, with a sad, sweet smile, and bending down she kissed his brow twice.

"My son's kiss as well as your own, Clem," she said, tremulously. "You must try to fill his place. And now we two mothers will spare you to Sybil."

She pointed to the drawing-room, and he sprang up, with the red flush on his face, and disappeared.

"He looks splendid, Mrs Ayre; do you not think so?" she asked.

"Yes; but I am disappointed to see his arm still bandaged."

"Oh, that was a flesh wound. I can give you the particulars," said Lord Winterdyne. "Ah, there is Evelyn away, poor girl, poor girl, it is very hard for her."

The mother's heart overflowed for her child as she saw her steal away towards the thick shrubbery which sloped down to the river bank. Ay, Evelyn had early taken up her cross, and that with a fortitude and unselfishness which amazed them all. There were even some who, observing her calm bearing, said it had only been ambition which moved her to accept the heir of Winterdyne; but those who knew her best could only look upon her grave, beautiful face and tender mouth, and pray that God would give the needed balm. It was known only to Rachel Ayre how she suffered.

"Another wound," she said, with quick apprehension. "We never heard of it. When did it happen?"

"At Ulundi, the final battle. He was quite recovered, and declined to go home, though leave was granted. I suppose he wanted to be in at the death," said Lord Winterdyne, grimly. "And, of course, fighting in the very forefront as usual, he got a cut from an assegai which set the old wound open. I tell you we have reason to be proud of our hero, madam. I am, at least. It is not every soldier who leaps from lieutenant to captain in so short a time."

"Is he captain?" Rachel asked, with a quick flush of motherly pleasure and pride.

"Yes, and won the Victoria Cross as well. Rorke's Drift did that. It was splendidly done. I only wish it had been there my boy fell. He was simply murdered at Isandhlwana, simply murdered. But I must not shadow your joy, dear Mrs Ayre. I must remember what your kinswoman at Studleigh reminded me of that day the news came. I have two children left, and another son to take poor Harry's place. If your son had not come home, you would have been more desolate even than I."

"Did Lady Emily say that?" asked Rachel, in eager interest.

"She did. I believe there is a refining process going on in her heart. I was greatly struck by her sympathetic kindness that day. Her constant anxiety about her own son is not without its uses. It makes her feel for others. Ah, here he comes," said Lord Winterdyne with a smile, as Clement again appeared. "We hardly expected you so soon, sir. What has Sybil to say to her battered hero, eh?"

"A great deal more than he deserves," was Clement's answer, as he came swiftly across to his mother's side. "She has sent me back to you, mother, and would not say another word to me."

"I don't suppose you realise what we women have endured on your account during the last few weeks?" said Lady Winterdyne, shaking her finger at him. "Stand up now, sir, and let us have a proper look at you. Well, you look every inch a soldier! What did Sybil say to the wounded arm, and that scar on your cheek? Did she want to draw back, eh?"

Clement laughed, and that was a pleasant sound in his mother's ears.

"No. I am afraid she is more concerned about these trifles than I have ever been," he answered, lightly.

"Mother, are you not even going to say that I have done my duty?"

He bent his eyes upon her sweet but somewhat care-worn face, upon which the anxieties of the past few months had left their mark.

"I expected that. No doubt of it ever crossed my mind," she answered, and moving her head a little, rested her cheek on his sun-browned hand lying on her shoulder. He felt it wet with her tears. "I am glad my son is so worthy of his father."

"Yes, if he had lived he would have been a proud man this day," said Lady Vane emphatically. "Now, have you anything exciting to tell us? What about the poor prince? His poor mother's lonely grief will silence many grumbings. What a fearful thing it was. Did you know him, Clement?"

"Yes. He was very frank. He made himself one of us; and there is not a soldier in the ranks who did not feel that he had lost a friend."

"What were they doing letting him wander in the very midst of danger without any protection," demanded Sir Randal, gruffly. "Just like their pig-headedness. Half the misery in this world, especially in war times, is the result of the want of common sense."

"Well, he was hardly supposed to be in the midst of danger. The district was supposed to be pretty clear. He was surprised by treachery, and missed his footing when mounting his horse. His companions ran away. There was no excuse for that. I think if I had been there I would have risked my life for him. He was worth it."

Clement spoke quietly, but with emotion.

"I believe you would, my boy," said Sir Randal, looking with delighted approval on the young soldier's manly figure and resolute face.

"He was a brave young fellow. Upon my word,

Winterdyne, it makes one feel that old England's day is not over yet, to hear these young ones speak."

"Where's Evy, mother?" whispered Clement. "How has she been? Poor Raybourne spoke of her that very last morning. He thought of her perpetually."

Lady Adela leaned forward in her chair and lifted her eyes to the young soldier's face.

"Tell us everything, Clement. We can bear it, and we shall feel calmer after it. Tell us all you know."

As he spoke Sybil came through the open window of the library and sat down by her father on the stone parapet of the terrace from the lawn below. Only Evelyn was absent when Clem began to tell his story.

"I can't tell you anything about what happened to him after we parted that morning in the camp at Isandhlwana," he began, "because I never saw him again, and nobody came back from Durnforth's column to tell the tale. About 250 mounted men rode a mile and a half out to intercept the Zulus at the waggon road and keep them from getting near the camp, and they were cut off to a man. It was a melancholy business all round. We had not much chance against 20,000 desperate savages, and from the moment of attack we knew it was all up with us."

"You had no defences, I saw from the papers. Not that I ever expected you would have any," put in Sir Randal. "That's a mere circumstance, but go on. You stood out in the open plain, and let the Zulus run at you. Wasn't that about it?"

"Be quiet, Randal," said his wife, peremptorily. "Never mind him, Clement; you know his opinion of military men and their tactics; never mind him."

"Well, for once, he is not far wrong, Lady Vane," answered Clement, bluntly. "It *did* just amount to that. Poor Harry, the very night before the engagement, said to me he thought we were frightfully scattered, and would have no chance against a concentrated enemy. The fight

at Isandhlwana didn't last more than an hour and a half, and we had to flee in the end. The Buffalo River saved the few who were mounted, for though they pursued us like furies, the Zulus are poor marksmen, and shoot at random. After we got over the river, I rode on to Rorke's Drift, to warn them there. Happily I was in time; we had about an hour to prepare, and at half-past four they rushed on us, but I needn't expatiate on that, you all read the accounts. We kept the camp, and saved Natal, though I did not know the result for weeks. I was fevered in hospital, and they told me after I was pretty bad. I could have got home after I was convalescent, but I wanted to see the end of the war, and I wanted, perhaps, more than all, to find out all I could about poor Raybourne."

"And what did you learn, Clement?" Lady Adela asked with trembling lips.

"I am glad now that I thought of it, because I was able to—to"—the young man's brave voice broke.

The brave heart, which had never quailed in the most desperate peril, was moved to the depths over the memory of his loved comrade's fall.

"After I got better, I went back to my regiment," he went on, after a moment's painful silence. "And the next engagement I was in was the fight at the Zoblane mountains, which was not unlike the Isandhlwana affair, though the results were not serious. Two days later we beat them hollow at Kambula Camp. If you had seen the Zulus in their thousands advancing straight on our fire you would have thought it a grand sight. The artillery won the day—the victory was undoubtedly theirs, and for a few weeks after we saw little of the enemy, who seemed to have got a fright. All the time I kept thinking of Isandhlwana, wondering how I should manage to get there to see if I could get anything to bring home. It was on the 17th of May we were ordered forward to Rorke's Drift, and thence to Isandhlwana, for the purpose of burying our dead,"

"Four months after they fell," put in Sir Randal. "Yes, go on."

Clement paused a moment. Many, many times by the silent, weird glow of the camp fire, and later in the night watches on board the homeward-bound *Pretoria*, he had pondered upon the words with which he should clothe his sorrowful and somewhat gruesome tale.

"We arrived at the ridge overlooking the scene of the battle about nine o'clock one morning, and found that during the interval the grass had grown so tall on the slopes and in the valleys, that for a little while we could distinguish nothing."

"Ay, ay, Nature had the sense of decency human beings lacked," was Sir Randal's comment, while Lady Alice covered her eyes with her hands, and sat very still.

"I don't want to linger on the scene," continued Clement, hurriedly. "We did our work as promptly as we could, and carried away what mementoes we could find. I found Harry just where he fell, by the side of his horse, and I brought home all I thought you would prize."

He took from his breast-pocket a little packet, and kneeling before Lady Winterdyne, opened it upon her knee. The soldier's watch intact, in its hunting case, his breastpin and two rings, together with a lock of his hair, were the treasures Clement had rescued from that far-off burying ground under the fierce African sun. "And two letters which I saw him writing after we bivouacked the night before—one is for Evy," said Clement, huskily. "That is all I have to give, dear Lady Winterdyne. If I could have saved him, I would."

The blessed tears fell fast from the bereaved mother's eyes as she looked upon these mementoes of her boy; but the father rose up from his place and went away into the house. They saw that he was quite overcome.

They asked no more questions, nor did they realise what an awful task Clement had undertaken, that he might be

able to bring a little comfort to those at home. He did not say that the sight of that once blood-red field, with its dead—unburied and decaying dead—was the only thing which had blanched his face and sickened his heart since he entered upon a soldier's chequered life.

When he saw the real comfort these precious relics were to the bereaved hearts at Winterdyne, he did not regret it, but felt glad that the opportunity had come in his way.

"We buried him decently there, he and the Colonel in one grave. It is a lovely spot, Lady Winterdyne, for it is a lovely country, though I never want to see it again. A month later we routed them utterly at Ulundi, and the war came to an end," he said, as he rose to his feet. "It's not much more than six months since we went away, but it looks like twenty years, and I feel like an old man."





CHAPTER XXXII.

A WOUNDED HEART.

I SAY, mother, I can't make Evy out. What does she really think about poor Raybourne?"

Clement asked the question when he came into her room just for a little word before they parted for the night.

"I am not sure, dear, that I can make her out myself. She is very reserved. She has never opened her heart even to me. But, I believe, she has talked more freely to Sybil than to any one. You have won a dear, sweet girl, Clement. I cannot tell you how I love her. She is as dear to me as Evy herself——"

"I think her perfect, mother," was the soldier's quick response. "All the time at Rorke's Drift I thought of her, and I believe the desire to be worthy of her, and have something I need not be ashamed of to show for my love, helped me as nothing else could——"

"Nay, nay, the dauntless courage is yours by inheritance," said the proud mother in gentle rebuke. "I am so very thankful you were able to bring these little mementoes of poor Raybourne,"

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"Mother, that was an awful experience. I shall never forget that scene—the decaying bodies, some of them merely skeletons; the expression of the faces. The whole appalling picture will haunt me till I die. They will never know what it cost me to get these things. I only recognised poor Harry by his clothes and the initials on his sword. He was perfectly unrecognisable otherwise, but I thought if I could cut off a little bit of his hair it would bring before his mother's eyes a picture of natural and peaceful death."

Rachel shivered slightly, her imagination quick to fill in the dismal details of the picture Clement drew.

"You have had many strange experiences since you left us. Tell me, are you still devoted to your profession?"

"Why, of course, I simply *could* be nothing else than a soldier. Mother, the defence of Rorke's Drift was simply grand. You should have seen us with our poor little redoubts of mealie bags and walls of biscuit tins, and the cool, calm, noble energy of Bromhead and Chard. They thought of everything, and just did it as easily and perfectly as if it had been play; though all the time we never expected a man of us to escape. It was worth being born to see it."

"I'm rather glad upon the whole that I didn't see you," the mother answered, with a slight smile. "It was sufficiently terrible to read about. It is hard upon the women who wait at home, Clement."

"Yes, mother, I know."

He stooped down and kissed her, with eyes full of love.

"I want to tell you, too, that I never forgot what you said, that you would pray for me at ten o'clock every night. Wherever I was, or however occupied, I never forgot you at that time. Even that night at Rorke's Drift, I looked my

watch at three minutes to ten, and thought of you and Evy at Stonecroft, and of Sybil here. It is a great deal to us when we are on active service to know that we are thought of with loving anxiety and confidence at home. Mother, I do mean to be a better fellow than I have ever been. When a man is face to face with death as often as I have been lately, it gives him many queer thoughts. I know poor Harry thought of it continually, though he fell so soon. The night before Isandlwana, after he had written his letters, I saw him reading from a little book. It was Evy's French Testament, and I found it in his breast-pocket, with a bullet through the leaves. I should imagine," he added, with a close pressure of his lips, "that Evy would reckon that among her precious things to the very end of her days. By the by, I was rather disappointed not to meet Will at Southampton. I thought he would be sure to meet us."

"He has been ill all the spring," Rachel answered, with saddened expression. "I am very much afraid that, after all, your cousin cannot live, Clement."

"Poor old Will! He deserves to live. Are they at Studleigh just now?"

"No, at Bournemouth. They have been there since early in May. We have not heard for some weeks how he is, and I am afraid it is because he is too ill to write himself."

"I must take a run down to see him. I hope he *will* live. Do you know, mother, he said to me that day they left Winterdyne last year, that I must take care of myself, because I should one day soon be Squire of Studleigh. It gave me quite a turn."

"There was truth in it, though, Clement."

"Well, I hope he will live to be an old man. I don't want the place. I should not know how to take care of it."

"You could not resign the army even to become Squire of Studleigh."

"Never, never."

There was no mistaking the energy and decision of the young soldier's tone.

"It would be perfect martyrdom to me. No, no, Will is the man for Studleigh. He is happy pottering about among his tenants, and planning improvements in his villages. I should be miserable. I wish he had married. He may recover and marry yet."

"I think not. He loves Evelyn, Clement, and I believe, though I have not much ground for it, that her engagement to Raybourne disappointed him so bitterly that he lost all interest in life."

"Dear me, can that be so! It's a queer world, mother, and life seems all vexations and contradictions. There is Will, a far better fellow than I am, yet he has nothing, while I—I have everything."

"Some would reverse the situation, and say that the wealthy master of a great inheritance like Studleigh had everything, while the poor soldier had little worth possessing."

"Nevertheless the poor soldier thanks God for his many mercies, and asks to be made worthy of them," Clement answered, reverently. "And now, good-night, mother, best and dearest; not even Sybil can take your place."

Had not Rachel compensation for the long years of her widowhood, for the travail and anxiety with which she had reared her fatherless children? They were worthy of her teaching—they were proving themselves already heroes in life's hard battle; and her heart was at rest.

After a few quiet and pleasant days at Winterdyne the little family returned home to Stonecroft. Rachel was still



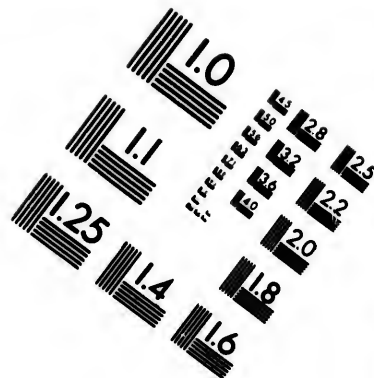
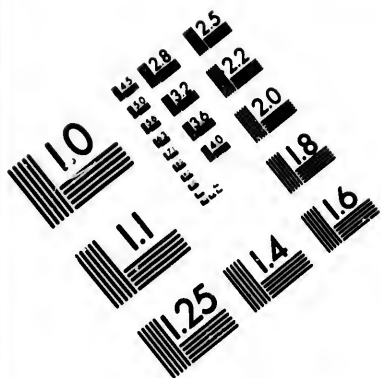
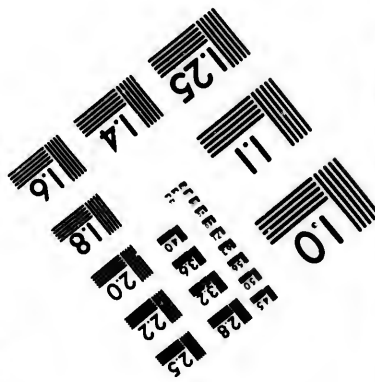
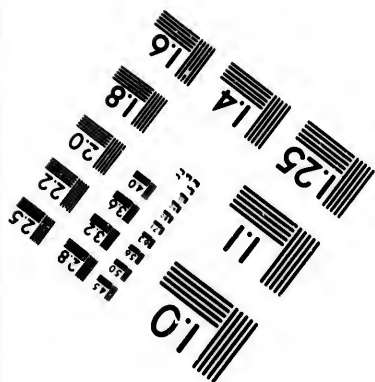
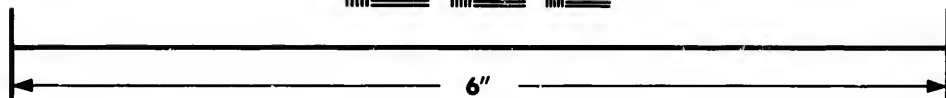
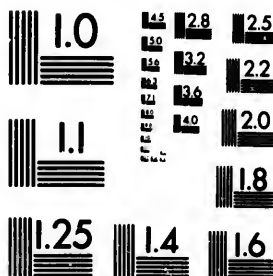


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somewhat concerned about Evelyn; indeed they all wondered somewhat at her calmness of demeanour. Even when Raybourne's name was mentioned, or any little incident occurred to recall the painfulness of his loss, she made no sign. Nobody had ever seen her shed a tear. There was something at once unnatural and alarming in her perfect self-control. She had no comment to make on the story of the battle, and when Clement put in her hands the little testament, with the folded letter within, she took it with a faint, quivering, little smile and carried it away. Nobody ever knew what was in the letter, nor did she ever speak of it even to her mother. For some things Rachel was glad to get her away from Winterdyne. She fancied that Lady Winterdyne thought her callous, and that her love for poor Harry had never been real. Rachel thought otherwise. She was gravely concerned for her child's health. Evelyn betrayed no satisfaction at returning home; she simply acquiesced, and went about her little duties as of yore with quietness and precision. But there was a difference. Only once her mother saw any sign. She came upon her unawares standing at the drawing-room window looking out towards the lake, where the red sunset lay, and her face was so haggard, so ghastly in its anguish, that Rachel's heart almost stood still.

"Evy, my darling, what is it? Why do you look so? You must be suffering fearfully," she cried, in keen alarm.

But instantly Evelyn looked round, calm, serene, self-possessed, even with a faint smile shadowing her lips.

"I was only thinking, mamma. Sometimes when I look away beyond and think how long I may have to live, it seems hard. Don't look so grieved. I don't think of it very often, only sometimes."

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"My darling, you must try and speak to me. You must not lock your sorrow up like that, or it will eat into your heart. Have I been so poor a mother to you, my Evelyn, that you cannot trust me?"

"It is not that, mamma."

Evelyn's breath came in a strange, sobbing cry. "I cannot speak if nobody can understand. I will try not to vex you. I will be more cheerful, mother, dear, though I have been trying hard all the time."

"I see that, but you must not try. It is natural that you should grieve. God does not forbid our tears, Evelyn. Christ himself wept with the poor sisters of Bethany. Let that comfort you, my poor child."

"But, mother, I do not want to cry. I feel so still and silent, as if I never wanted to speak again," said Evelyn, looking up with clear, dry, steadfast eyes. "I never sleep any, mother, and that makes me feel so strangely, as if I lived in an unreal world among shadows. I cannot tell you *how* I feel."

"I notice that you always slip away when Sybil is here. Does it vex you, dear, to see Clement and her together?"

"Oh, no, that would be very selfish, and they think of me, I know," she answered simply. "Mother, if I could only have seen him once more. I did not tell him all I felt. He did not know even when he went away *how* I loved him. I will never live down that sorrow till the very end."

"Hush, darling, you promised to be his wife, and such a promise from you involved all the rest. Do not torment yourself about that. I wish I knew how to comfort you——"

"You do comfort me. It is very naughty of me, mother, to pretend sometimes that I am asleep when you come into my room at night? I just love to feel your presence and

your hand on my head. I know just how you look without opening my eyes, and it comforts me far more than anything you could say."

The mother's eyes filled, and for a moment she felt somewhat rebellious for her child. It seemed hard that that fair life, so full of promise, should appear to be early blighted, that that strong, rich depth of womanly affection should be pent in a heart but newly awakened to its own capacity for affection.

"Why, mamma," said Evelyn, suddenly, "there is a carriage! Who can it be? We are not expecting anybody, are we?"

"No dear, unless it be some of Clem's comrades, but he did not intend to have them for a few weeks yet."

They stepped over to the window, and great was their surprise to see Lady Emily Ayre alight from the carriage. She had a dark veil over her face, and she walked forward to the door in nervous haste, and was immediately admitted. She threw back her veil as she stepped into the drawing-room, and revealed a face so haggard and pale and anguish-lined that for a moment Rachel felt paralysed; only for a moment, however. Then she forgot the grief and humiliation she had suffered at her hands, and remembering only that she was a woman, and in trouble, took a swift step towards her.

"Lady Emily, you are in trouble; you are ill; let me help you."

She took the trembling hands in her gentle clasp. She put her arm round the proud shoulders of the mistress of Studleigh, and led her to a couch.

"Yes, I am in trouble," she said, in quick, hoarse tones. "I am in despair, Mrs Geoffrey; my son is dying."

"Dying. Oh, impossible."

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Rachel still kept the quivering, nervous hands in hers, chafing them softly, with a tender touch.

"It is true. He cannot live, and he cries so incessantly for your daughter, for Evelyn, that I have come to see if she will humour the whim of a dying man, and return with me. You will not keep her back," she added, looking up with swift, inquiring wistfulness to Rachel's face. "I have wronged and misjudged you, but I am not afraid to come to you in my trouble."

"No, no, Evelyn shall go. I will go, too, Lady Emily, if I can be of the least use," she said quickly, yet with unspeakable tenderness.

"He loves her, he thinks of her continually," said Lady Emily, looking at the girl's sweet face with a strange feverishness. "I know of her sorrow, how completely her heart must be bound up just now with other sad interests. But surely her own suffering will make her mindful of the suffering of others. My son has had a heavy cross to bear all his life."

"I will go, Aunt Emily. Do not say another word."

Evelyn stood by Lady Emily's side as she spoke, and touched her shoulder gently, while her eyes were full of tears. The tears rose also in Lady Emily's proud eyes.

"You have good, true, womanly hearts. You can forgive a great deal," she said, brokenly. "But you can afford to be generous. You have your hero restored to you in health and strength. I am about to be robbed of my all. When can you be ready? Will you go with me to-night; now? We returned home only yesterday, and I left him with his nurse, not saying where I was going, lest I should only bring a new disappointment."

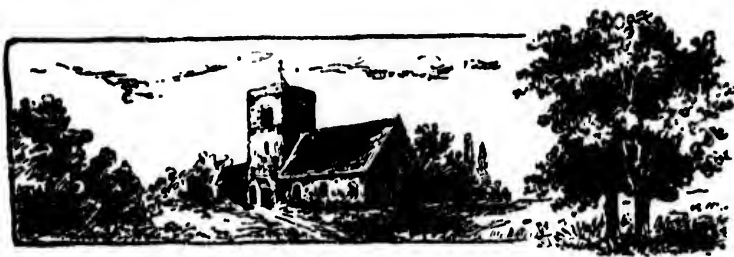
"There shall be no disappointment. We can be ready

immediately," said Rachel, quietly. You shall have a little refreshment and rest, and then we can go. Clement is at Winterdyne. He has talked every day of going down to see Will. We can leave a message for him to follow us."

Within the hour the carriage was rapidly covering the distance between Stonecroft and Studleigh.



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CHAPTER XXXIII.

COUSINS.

ON his couch, in the south window of the room where his father died, lay the young Squire of Studleigh, towards the close of a lovely August day. Nearly a month had gone since Lady Emily's hurried visit to Stonecroft, and still he lingered, though they expected each day would be his last upon the earth. The attack which had so fearfully alarmed his mother, and made his physicians scarcely less anxious, had passed away; and though it left him perceptibly weaker, had not been repeated. Of his own choice, his father's rooms were made ready for him. Many an hour, in the days of his comparative health, he had been wont to spend in that large and pleasant room, which was haunted by painful memories for Lady Emily—memories in which regret and remorseful pain were bitterly commingled. She often told herself that she had failed in love and duty to the husband who had worshipped her, and longed, as the living so often passionately long, that opportunity could be given for atonement. Opportunity was given, perhaps, in what her son now required of her. It was her sad aim, in the midst of her agony, to bury every thought of self, and present to her boy a serene, and even a smiling face. The physicians

never ceased to enjoin that the patient should be kept quiet, but surrounded by a cheerful serene atmosphere.

Rachel Ayre and Clement came and went between the two houses, but at Studleigh Evelyn remained. In her hour of need the work of comforting her aunt and being useful to others lifted her entirely out of herself. It was an exquisite and beautiful thing to see how naturally she slipped into her place, and how in a few days Lady Emily learned to lean upon the gentle, helpful girl, and to find in her affection the greatest consolation.

Very gradually the walls of pride and self-will had been broken down, never again to be raised. Slowly the veil was lifted from the heart of that haughty woman, and revealed her to be but a weak woman after all, whose need of love was very great.

William Ayre's face was very serene as he lay there, with the tender glory of the sunsets shining about him like a radiance. He looked wonderfully well in spite of his long illness—his face was not painfully emaciated, nor did he look what he and others believed himself to be—a dying man. His mother often said that from the day his cousin entered the house he had been better and brighter, and more perfectly content ; and it was simply true.

He had been reading the sweet story of Lancelot and Elaine, and the book had fallen on the floor with its leaves open, and he was thinking, not of the story, but of something else, which had flushed his face, and brought a bright, wonderful light into his eyes. Dinner was going on downstairs, the only hour of the day there was no watcher by the sick man's side. It had passed quickly that evening, and when the opening of the door disturbed him he looked round in surprise. It was Evelyn who entered, looking very stately and sweet in her white gown with the black ribbon bands, and the pale pearls round her neck, the slight mourning she had chosen to wear for her dead lover,

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"Is dinner over, cousin? Surely you have hurried to-night?"

"I am glad you have not missed us. We fancied we had been longer than usual, Will," Evelyn answered, as she stepped lightly across the floor. "Aunt Emily has gone to lie down on condition that I stay here, so I have come to stay."

She stooped down and lifted the open book from the floor. "Lancelot and Elaine! Why will you pore so over that doleful story, Will? I am not sure that I have much compassion for poor Elaine, but, of course, she will always be an idol among men." She spoke with a light and gentle banter, and smiled down upon him as she shook up his pillows. There was no sisterly action, no sweet sisterly thoughtfulness which Evelyn did not do for and show to her cousin, and all with a quiet and beautiful cheerfulness which carried strength with it."

"Sweet is true love, though given in vain, in vain," quoted Will, with a quick smile. "Do you not believe that, cousin?"

"I don't believe in doing things in vain, Will," she answered energetically. "Now, I'm going to read the 'Back of the North Wind' as a tonic after that sweet stuff. Have you everything you want?"

"Everything, now you have come; but I don't want you to read. Sit still and speak to me, cousin."

"Well, I will, if you talk good sense," she said, nodding brightly. "If we are to talk I may as well work. Saturday is mamma's birthday, and I have to finish this little gift for her. Well, I am listening."

"It is nearly a month since you came to Studleigh, cousin."

"A month on Friday, what then?"

"Are you not wearying to get away to your own cheerful home?"

"No, I am very happy here,"

"Really happy, Evelyn?"

He bent forward with a curious eagerness, and looked her fully in the face.

"As happy as I can be anywhere," she said, in a low voice. "As happy as any of us can be at Studleigh, when its dear master is so ill."

"Do you feel at home in the house, Evelyn?" he asked, with almost feverish eagerness. "Do you like the place—could you live here?"

"I think it is the loveliest place in the world, Cousin Will," answered Evelyn, in mild surprise. "You know I do. I have often said so. Just look at the prospect from that bay-window. It is perfectly enchanting."

"You have never felt quite at home in Stonecroft, I think," he added, musingly. "Is that not true?"

"What are you talking about, Will? I never saw you in such a quizzical mood. We would be very ungrateful indeed if we were not happy there."

"I am glad you like Studleigh; yes, very glad. When are Ciement and Lady Sybil to be married?—not this furlough, surely?"

"Oh, no; there is no talk of their marriage. I am quite sure it will not take place for a long time. It isn't likely that Lord and Lady Winterdyne will be in a hurry to part with their only daughter."

"That is true, unless they look for you in a sense to fill her place," he said, looking at her keenly.

She bent her head low over her sewing, and made no reply, but he saw the hand which held the needle tremble.

"Forgive me, dearest. I do not know what has come to me to-day. I have wounded you so often. Will you forgive me, Evelyn?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Cousin Will. You never wound me," she said, looking up with a swift, bright smile. "Do let me read to you. I am afraid you have not a thirst for knowledge, sir."

"Yes, I have for knowledge of a kind," he made answer. "But I don't want knowledge out of any more books. It is realities a man must deal with when he comes to this. Don't grudge me your sweet companionship, Evelyn, although I know it is a shame that you should be shut up here day by day with a dying man; you, for whom the world should look its brightest."

"Oh, Will, how can you say such dreadful things? It has comforted me more than I can say to be here with you and Aunt Emily. You see, I was just beginning to think life had no further uses for me, when God showed me that I could be of service to others yet: and that, though a great sorrow had come to me, I need not sit down and fold my hands."

"It was a great sorrow, then?" he said, wistfully, and his eyes dwelt searchingly on her beautiful face as he asked the question. She was looking away through the western window to the woods, kindled into a ruddy flame by the red glory of the dying day.

"It was a blow, Will, a fierce and terrible blow, which seemed to slay me. I cannot tell you just how I feel. Sometimes I do not understand myself," she said, dreamily.

"If you could tell me, dear, perhaps it would relieve you. Aunt Rachel told me that you had never spoken of it to her. It is not always well to shut one's self up alone even with such a grief as that."

"No, it is not well, but I seemed to want to think, and think, until I found out just where I stood. It was all so hurried and sudden, Will, even before he went away. I did not seem quite to realise what I had done. There were even times when I feared I had been too hurried. When I hear mamma speaking about her own marriage, and how she went to India on a few days' notice, I wonder. Am I so very different from other women, or is it that I am only more slow of thought and decision? I could not,

at least ; I do not think I could have gone out to the Cape if I had been asked to do it when they went away."

"Why not? Did you not care for poor Raybourne, Evelyn?"

"Yes—but—it seems to me that one has to think a long time, and be very sure. Marriage involves so much. There are fearful risks in it. Those who marry ought to know each other so well, that there can be no risk of disappointment after."

Will Ayre turned his head away for a moment, and Evelyn wondered what were his thoughts.

"Are you shocked and horrified at me, Cousin Will?" she asked, quickly, yet with a most perfect confidence. Never in all the years of their sweet cousinly intimacy had he once misunderstood or misjudged her.

"No. I was only thinking. Evelyn, tell me more. I want to know just how you and my mother stand to each other. I see when you are both here with me that you seem to be at home with each other, but I want to know the innermost."

"There is no innermost, except what you see. I have had many lessons here, Cousin Will. You have taught me lessons which, please God, I shall never forget, but among them all, I hope I have been truly and clearly shown the wrong which can be done in the world by prejudice and hard judgment."

"You mean that my mother has misjudged you and Aunt Rachel. I know she has——"

"I did *not* mean that, Will, although there may be truth in that too. I mean that never in all the world has there been a woman more misjudged than your mother has been by me. I used to feel fearfully bitter against her, Will. I could ask her forgiveness for it now on my knees."

"I love my mother dearly, Evelyn, but I cannot say that she was kind to Aunt Rachel. *Her* prejudice against you all has been one of the bitterest sorrows of my life."

"I am glad it has all been cleared up now, Will," the girl answered, softly. "I used to think that if Aunt Emily could only know a little of mamma, as we know her, how different everything would be——"

"She will know her now. She is learning to love her, I can see," replied the Squire, quietly. "It will be a fearful trial to my mother to leave Studleigh, Evelyn. I do not know where she can fix her home."

"What relations have you at Portmayne Castle now, Will?"

"My Uncle Fulke and his wife. They have a large family. It is out of the question that my mother could ever return there, nor will she care to live in the Dower House here when the new heir enters into possession."

"How calmly you speak of it all," cried Evelyn, with quivering lip. "You think of everything, of every one. I wonder if there is one selfish thought in your heart. Mamma says every day you are so like your father that it breaks her heart——"

"It is the finest tribute, the only one I desire from those who loved him, and who love me, Evy," said the Squire, with a placid smile.

After a little silence he turned on his couch and looked her full in the face.

"We have talked a great deal, Evelyn, but have never touched upon the point which is uppermost in my mind, though we have been very near it," he said, and his own face flushed deeply.

"Has my mother said anything to you? She knows what has been in my mind for days——"

"No, she has said nothing. Tell me what you mean, cousin," Evelyn said, quietly.

"I scarcely dare, but I will, because I know your wide sympathy and your largeness of heart. Will you take my name, Evelyn, before I die?"

The girl's work fell from her nerveless hands, and she grew pale to the very lips.

"I do not think I understand you," she said, with difficulty ; but even while she spoke the truth flashed upon her as clear as the noonday sun.

"It is a fearful thing to ask, a sacrifice of such magnitude that I do not dare, when I look at your beauty and think what life may yet hold for you, to anticipate your answer. I see you know what I mean, but before you speak let me say something, let me try and explain away the reasons why a man, dying as I am, should dare to think of such a thing."

She drooped her head, and her hands played nervously with the gay-coloured silks on her lap, but she spoke no word.

"I do not want to say a word against Clem, honest fellow."

"You know very well, Will, that Clem would insist on Aunt Emily living in Studleigh just as long as she chose," Evelyn interrupted, quickly.

"It is not that, Evelyn. I have no fear whatever but that Clem will do what is just and true after his own generous heart. But he has no desire for a country life ; you have heard him say so dozens of times. He will always be a soldier and a rover, and so the place and the people will suffer."

"And what do you think I could do for them?" the girl asked, in the same still, passionless voice.

"The part of the estate which is not entailed would be yours. It includes Pine Edge, and you would live there, not all the year, but sometimes, and could thus take some interest in the place," said Will.

"But your mother?"

"My mother's fortune is very ample. In any case she wishes me to bequeath all my money to you. I have done so absolutely ; but, if you think you could agree to take my

name, it would be sweet to me to think that you had a right to it all, the right of a wife. I think, going through this simple ceremony a few hours before I die, Evelyn, would scarcely hurt your prospects. It is a strange, wild whim, perhaps; one of the vagaries of a sick man's fancy. But it is my mother's desire and mine. If out of your sweet compassion you could make up your mind to do this thing it will give to me the greatest happiness this world can hold."

Evelyn Ayre sat in deep silence for a moment with her face hidden, and then, without a word spoken, rose up and glided from the room.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

TILL DEATH US DO PART.

THE Squire was not long left alone. He was still agitated with the excitement of what had just passed, when his mother, after a vain attempt to snatch a few moments' needed sleep, came upstairs.

"I thought Evelyn was here, William," she said, when she opened the door and found him alone.

"She *was* here. She has not long gone. Have you had a rest, mother?"

"A rest, but not a sleep. How hot you are," she said, as she laid her hand on his brow. "You seem quite excited. Is it possible, Will, that you have spoken to your cousin about what we talked of yesterday?"

"Yes, I have spoken."

"And what did she say? Has she left you in anger, Will?"

"Oh, no, I think not! Evelyn is never angry," he answered, brightly. "I do not suppose she will consent. It is a great deal to ask, mother—too much—from a young girl like Evelyn, with life all before her."

"I do not know. She has a high ideal of life's purpose. She believes we should always consider others first. If the

mere taking of your name would make you happier while you are with us, I do not think she would hesitate, dear."

"There speaks the mother," replied Will, with a smile of love. "Let us not speak any more about it. It is I who am selfish, seeking to satisfy a sick man's fancy."

"I do not see it in that light, Will," said the fond mother, rebelliously. "It is to benefit her ultimately. It will give her a great position."

"Not so very great, since Clement's wife will be mistress in the old house. Sometimes one feels this law of primogeniture to be something of a hardship," said the Squire, musingly. "Mother, will you admit that I was not mistaken in my high opinion of our kinsfolk?"

"I will admit everything, Will. I am a humbled and repentant woman. I have something to ask your Aunt Rachel's forgiveness for yet; but every time I see her my courage fails me. It was a cruel thing I did, making them leave Pine Edge. I may confess my true reason now, Will, since circumstances have so strangely changed. I saw the beauty of her little girl; I feared that if you were allowed to grow up together you would have become attached to each other, and then the thought was perfectly intolerable to me. How swift is retribution after all! It is the very thing I desire now with all my heart."

"You do love Evelyn, then?"

"I do. It would be impossible to be beside so sweet and beautiful a character and not love her," she answered, generously. "I have, by my own fault, been a miserable woman all my days, trying with my weak, selfish hands to control destiny, the privilege of the Creator alone. Oh, my son, I have suffered too, and yet, in the midst of all my suffering, I would not have things other than they are. I feel strangely calm and resigned, as if I could bear anything, and keep still."

Will Ayre looked up at the beautiful face with ineffable love in his own. She had greatly changed. The freshness

of her beauty was long since gone, and she looked her years to the full. The bright ebony hair, which had been a dream of loveliness in her husband's eyes so long ago, had lost its lustre, and was almost grey—her eyes were dimmed by many tears, and by the strain of many an anxious vigil, but there was upon that face now a serene and perfect peace, a subdued and wistful tenderness a thousand times more winning than the pride of its early beauty; because it told of a heart gradually weaned from the sordid interests of self, and awakened to the richer meanings of life. It had been a long transition, long and trying, not only to herself, but to others; but it was over now, and Lady Emily had reached the height of her true womanhood. And so, for her, sorrow and disappointment had had their benign uses.

Meanwhile, in the room set apart for her, Evelyn was kneeling by the open window with her hands clasped; her heart in a strange tumult. The certainty that her cousin loved her was no surprise to her; but that he should have told her so, and asked her at the eleventh hour, to be his wife, placed her in a peculiar and trying position. She felt neither horrified nor angry. Only a vast compassion filled her soul, and a keen appreciation of his unselfishness and generous motives. She was still occupied with these strange comminglings of thoughts and feelings when a low and hesitating knock came to the door, followed by her aunt's voice.

"It is I, Evelyn. May I come in?"

"Certainly, Aunt Emily."

The girl sprang up and held open the door.

"My son has sent me to you, Evelyn. Do not let what he has said drive you away from us," said Lady Emily, hurriedly. "Think no more about it, my love. It cannot make much difference to him now, and I think it has relieved him that he has spoken out frankly to you. He has loved you all his life. Think what it must have been to

him to keep silence so long, and don't be very hard in your judgment."

"Oh, Aunt Emily, hush! I am not hard at all," cried the girl, in a great burst of sorrow. "Life is so hard to understand. I wish God would show me what to do."

Lady Emily put her arm round the drooping shoulders, with a tender, caressing touch.

"I cannot bear to see you vexed, my darling. You, who have been so good to me and mine," she said, in a low, husky voice.

"I am not vexed at all, except for Will. May I go home to-night, Aunt Emily, without seeing him? I want to speak to mamma, and I will come back to-morrow——"

"If you are very anxious to go, my dear, I will order the carriage at once," Lady Emily replied. "But do not, I entreat you, sacrifice your own feelings—feelings which must be sacred to you, even for the sake of Will. He has had many disappointments, one more or less can make but little difference to him now. Already I think he regrets what he has said, he is so fearful of distressing you. Only this fancy took a strange hold upon him, and when he asked my advice, I thought it better that he should reveal what was in his mind to you. Perhaps I was selfish in that too. It is so hard not to think *only* of my son in these sad days."

"It was not selfish, only natural. I wish you could believe, and make Will believe, that I am neither distressed nor angry on my own account, but only for him," Evelyn answered in a low voice, and with flushed face. "How could I misjudge him? He has always been so good. If—if it will make him happier, perhaps I ought to grant what he asks. It would be no hardship to me to be called by his name, and to have closer right to watch by him to the end. By to-morrow, I think, after I have spoken with mamma, I shall know just what to do. To-morrow I shall come back in any case."

Lady Emily looked at the girl in simple wonder. She was so calm, so simple, so direct in her ideas, and her expression of them. There was no shirking the question, no obtrusion of her own feelings, only a quiet and brave consideration of the whole matter in its serious light, a desire to decide what would be best for all. It was the most wonderful thing Lady Emily had met with in her life, but one could not express a tithe of what she felt at the moment.

Clement and his mother were lingering a few moments in the drawing-room after their return from Winterdyne, where they had been dining, when the rumble of wheels disturbed them.

"That will be a carriage from Studleigh, Clem," Rachel said in quick alarm. "Your cousin must be worse. I wish I had gone over to-day instead of to Winterdyne. I have been thinking so much of them all day."

Before Clement could reply, they heard a light footfall on the corridor, and the next moment Evelyn entered the room.

"What has happened, Evy? Is Will gone?" asked Clement, quickly.

"No, Will is no worse. I wanted to see mamma, and Aunt Emily sent the carriage with me. It is to stay here and take me over in the morning. Will you see about it, Clem, please? The man is waiting."

Clement looked genuinely surprised, and felt that there was something he could not understand, but he went off obediently to see that the man and his horses were accommodated for the night. Then Evelyn turned to her mother with a little, weary smile.

"Let us go upstairs, mamma, before Clem comes back. I have a great deal to say to you. I am very unhappy and perplexed. I don't know what I should do, and I know you will help me. Aunt Emily knew it too, so she let me come at once."

It was about fifteen minutes before Clem returned to the house, and he looked round the empty drawing-room in blank dismay, feeling rather aggrieved that it should be empty. He lingered about in the hall for a little, and when no sound reached him from upstairs, he went into the smoking-room and lit his pipe. It seemed to him that he had been smoking for more than an hour, when he heard a step on the stairs, and his mother's voice—

"Are you there, Clem?"

"Yes, mother, here, and jolly glad to see you," he answered, promptly. "What's up? Has Evy quarrelled with the old lady? I'm not a bit surprised. Why, what's up?"

The last words fell abruptly from his lips when he saw the exceeding paleness of his mother's face. She entered the smoking-room and shut the door.

"Evy is not coming down. A very strange thing has happened. Will has asked her to marry him."

"What! Oh, impossible. Isn't he dying? or is he getting better? What does it mean?"

"He is not getting better. Sit down, dear, and I will try and explain it to you."

But Clem did not sit down. He wandered up and down the room, pipe in hand, while his mother in a few brief words told him what had occurred.

"And do you mean to say, mother, that Evy for one moment would think of such a thing?" he asked, blankly.

"She is thinking of it. She is a very curious girl, Clem. Things lay hold upon her and weigh upon her heart."

"But, mother, so soon after poor Raybourne: it's monstrous. I don't understand her."

"I do. It could not harm poor Raybourne, Clement, though Evelyn should be called your cousin's wife a few hours before his death. That is not what concerns me. It is the future. It is hardly to be expected that Evelyn's life is to end just here. She is very young, and many other

chances of happiness might come to her. I confess I am unable to advise her."

"This appears to me to be a matter easily enough settled. It is Will's mother, I believe, a selfish old woman, who thinks of nothing outside her own four walls. She is urging Evelyn on to this absurd sacrifice, but I shall not permit it!" said Clem, hotly.

"Hush, dear. You wrong your aunt. She is not anxious for it, but the reverse."

"Then poor Will—poor fellow, I am sorry for him—must have become weakened in mind by his illness. In health I know he would be the very last man to ask such a sacrifice at the hands of any woman. Do you mean to say, mother, that you have any doubt in the matter? Why, what good would it do to the living or the dead? I never heard of a more absurd or senseless proposal in my life."

"Poor Will's motives are of the most unselfish, dear," his mother reminded him, quietly. "We must leave Evelyn alone. She is not one to be easily influenced. I have never known so young a woman with such capabilities of decision. We must leave her alone."

"I cannot. I will not permit it," Clement reiterated. "I will see Will myself if it cannot be prevented any other way."

Rachel shook her head, and faintly smiled. Her children were a little beyond her now; the time had gone for her to say—Do this! and it was done. Her sympathies in this matter were strangely divided. There was something weirdly pathetic in the idea of Will's life-long and hopeless love at last asserting itself and claiming recognition. What she had said of Evelyn was absolutely true; and though in the morning Clement tried to reason with his sister, she would give him no satisfaction, and he felt that he was speaking in vain. Poor Clement was in sore distress. The memory of his friend and comrade was so fresh in his

heart that the very idea that Evelyn could entertain a thought of supplanting that memory seemed like perfect sacrilege. It weighed upon him so much that after the early lunch he mounted his horse and followed his mother and sister to Studleigh. When he was shown up to his cousin's room, and saw his face, all his anger died away.

"Come away, old fellow, it seems ages since I saw you," Will said, with a bright unruffled smile. "Now, I have seen everybody I want to see to-day except Evelyn."

"Has she not been here? She left Stonecroft in a great hurry this morning," said Clement, bluntly.

"Not yet; though I know she has come back. Aunt Rachel has just gone out. What a great, splendid fellow you are, Clem! It makes me feel strong to look at you."

The tears sprang hot and bright into Clem's honest eyes, and his heart smote him for his bitter thoughts of his cousin. He felt, after all, that if the granting of his request was to make his closing hours happier and brighter, it could be no such terrible sacrifice, but rather, especially to the woman who made it, something of a privilege. He sat down very meek and quiet by his cousin's side, and Will, looking up at him, read his every thought just as easily as if it had been written on an open page. But the subject was never mentioned between them.

It was sunset that day before Evelyn came to her cousin's room. She opened the door softly, and was beside him before he was aware of her entrance. The red flush mounted to his cheek when he looked round and saw the expression of her face.

"I have come back, dear Will," was all she said: "and if you like I will never leave you any more."

Next morning, when the sun lay warm and bright on all the fair world, a solemn and beautiful scene was enacted in

the room where the old Squire had died. There were present only Lady Emily Ayre, Rachel and her two children, and Lord and Lady Winterdyne, ' their own request.

"Till death us do part !"

A visible emotion thrilled all present as these significant words fell from the lips of the old Vicar who had officiated at that other marriage service we witnessed long ago in the church at Studleigh.

It was believed by all present that William Ayre's marriage-day would likewise be the day of his death.



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CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PHYSICIAN'S VERDICT.

“**I** CONFESS I am surprised that Mr Ayre has disappointed my expectations by gathering strength when he ought, by established precedent, to have lost it. We cannot understand it, but the fact remains, and I, for one, see no reason why he should not live for many years.”

Of this opinion an eminent medical man delivered himself in the library at Studleigh on the afternoon of a dull and wintry-looking September day. He was in the room alone with Lady Emily, and he noticed a peculiar expression come upon her face while he was speaking. It was not exactly the expression he had looked for, in response to his hopeful remarks, and he looked as he felt, extremely puzzled.

“I see you scarcely credit me, Lady Emily, but I assure you I speak in sober earnest. I find your son distinctly better since I examined him last at Bournemouth in June. You may with confidence impart this hopeful news to his wife. Poor, young lady, it will relieve her mind of a heavy burden.”

“I question that.”

The words seemed forced from Lady Emily's lips, and

the physician regarded her with increased and visible surprise.

"Pardon me, but your words astonish me, Lady Emily," he said, quickly. "Is there any reason why the verdict I am justified in giving to-day regarding his state of health should not make her boundlessly happy?"

"Yes, there is a reason. Sit down, Doctor Phillips, and let me speak. You have known us for many years; you knew my husband, and it is sometimes a relief to speak to an outsider. My son's wife married him, believing that by doing so she would make happy the last hours of a dying man. As you are aware, she is my niece, but, perhaps, you are not aware that she was engaged to be married to Lord Winterdyne's son, who was killed at Isandhlwana."

"No, I did not know," said the physician, quickly. "And do you mean to say she married Mr Ayre simply and solely for the reason you name, and that she has no affection for him?"

"I believe so. I am sure of it."

"Then she did him a great wrong," was the grave answer. "But I can scarcely believe it. To see them together one would believe them to be bound up in each other. You may be mistaken. I trust you are, for the happiness of all concerned."

Lady Emily shook her head.

"I fear not. What would you advise? It is a most painful situation, is it not?" she said, with a pathetic smile. "And yet my son cannot die, even if he would."

The doctor laughed.

"Dear Lady Emily, do you take my advice and not trouble yourself about this matter; it will right itself," he said, cheerily. "Above all, don't let our patient think that in *not* dying he has disappointed expectation. It would be too absurd. I confess I do not see much cause for anxiety. I think you are needlessly concerning yourself."

"Do either of them know the opinion you have expressed to-day regarding his condition?" she asked.

"No. I came straight down to you, because I fancied you had suffered most," said the physician, with a grave kind of sympathy which went to his listener's heart.

"I will try to be cheerful as you advise," she said, trying to smile. "After all, as you say, it is too absurd that we should feel as if we were disappointed. I do not feel so, only I can scarcely believe that I dare hope. I have suffered so much, and so long."

"But you will have your compensations now. Who knows but that one day you will hold the heir in your arms? Look at the bright side, and the rest will follow you," said the physician, cheerily, as he shook hands and went, his way.

It was now nearly a month since that impressively simple marriage ceremony had taken place in the house of Studleigh; a month of curious experience for all within its walls. But, although the Squire still lingered, none had dared to hope that there was any substantial improvement in his condition, or that the end could be very long delayed. Therefore the physician's favourable verdict was something of a shock to Lady Emily. Her heart beat tumultuously as she slowly ascended the stairs after he had gone. She felt strangely excited, and, now that she had realised it, almost wildly happy. She had given him up so often—had so many times resigned herself to the inevitable—that, resting on an assurance upon which she had the utmost confidence, she felt as if a new vista had been opened up to her. Something of her inward satisfaction was expressed in her beaming face when she entered her son's room, and when he somewhat languidly raised his head, he was instantly struck by it.

"Well, mother, what does Phillips say? How much longer am I to cumber the ground and wear out your patience?" he asked, with a slight smile. "I hope he gave

some definite satisfaction. I asked him straight out, but he 'heard me as he heard me not,' and went away. Tell me quite frankly. I can bear it."

Lady Emily crossed to her son's couch, and, sitting down by his side, laid her hand on his head.

"Ministered unto by such a mother and such a wife," he said, dreamily, "life during these lingering days has been passing sweet. Mother, I did not think dying could be made so easy. If this be dying, it is easier to die than live."

"William, tell me, have you felt no better these few days ; stronger, more interested in life? I have fancied so," she said, with a visible agitation.

"I have fancied myself so, and Evelyn will try to persuade me, but that cannot be," he said, quietly.

"My son, you will live. Death is farther off than it has ever been. I have Doctor Phillip's authority for what I say," she said, tremblingly.

He looked at her for a moment with wide, questioning eyes, but his face showed no satisfaction nor happy dawn of hope.

"Mother, surely that is impossible, he said at length, slowly, and with difficulty.

"It is true, my son. But you do not look as if I had brought you the happy news of a new lease of life," she said, with a strange, wavering smile, but for a time he gave her no answer, and she, sitting silent by his side, knew that he had forgotten her, and knew that he was thinking of his dearest. Strange that even *that* knowledge had lost its sting for the proud heart of the mother, since she had opened it to admit another love.

"You know," he said at length, turning his face once more to her, "you know that I am thinking of Evelyn. If this thing be true, what is to become of her?"

"I am thinking of that too, William," she answered, with responsive gravity. "She is your wife, dear, and I feel sure

that her wifely duty will never fail you. We know that in Rachel Ayre's daughter we cannot be disappointed."

"But that for me is not enough," he said, wearily, and she saw his face grow grey and pinched in the shadow. "Mother, I have done her a cruel and irreparable wrong. I cannot set her free, though, God knows, I would gladly do so. What do they mean?" he broke off with a sudden passion most unusual in him. "What do they mean by telling a man that he is dying, by setting a limit to his days, when they know no more of life and death than the babe unborn? It seems to me that their boasted skill is of all farces the most wretched and despicable."

She sat silent, understanding and sympathising with his passionate outburst, and yet unable to utter a word of comfort. To her the situation seemed most painful, and the outlook for the happiness of her son and his wife most gloomy.

"Mother, it unmans me to think of that bright creature tied, if I live, to a wretched, broken-down life, which can be but half a life at best. Oh, it was most unnatural and cruel to bind her. Why did nobody point out my selfishness? I saw it in Clement's face once, but he held his peace. It would have been better had they taken her away where her sweet compassion would never have been appealed to. Why did nobody speak? It was cruel! cruel!"

"My son, Evelyn was spoken to by Clement and by others," answered Lady Emily, quickly. "I do assure you she was not coerced. She married you of her own will freely, and I do not think that she is very unhappy. It is not as if she had disliked or despised you. She has always had a cousinly affection for you, William, and there are many marriages happy enough in the main which are built upon a less sure foundation."

William Ayre only wearily shook his head.

"You say these things to comfort me, mother, but the fact

remains. Evelyn married me, believing that I had not many days, perhaps not many hours to live. The possibility that I might recover never once suggested itself to her mind."

"And do you mean to say, William, that you believe she will feel herself aggrieved?"

"She has the right to be. If she refuse to keep the vows she took that day she has right upon her side. She shall be left absolutely free, but who is to tell her this? God help me, I cannot."

"William, I do think you take a morbid view of it," his mother said quickly. "Who has seemed so anxious, who so devoted, during these weary days as Evelyn herself? So marked has her attention been that Dr Phillips spoke of it to me to-day, and of the happiness it would be to her to hear his favourable verdict."

"What you say is all true, but I see in it only the natural outcome of a woman's tender care for the sick and dying. It is better that I should face the true case manfully than shirk the issues which sooner or later must be met," he said, with a kind of sad impatience which betrayed the keenness of his feelings. "Mother, will you leave me for a little and see that I am not disturbed? I want to think this matter out. Above all, see that Evelyn does not come here. Say I am asleep, or anything, only keep her away."

Lady Emily rose up with a heavy sigh, and with a kiss left him to fight his silent battle. She locked the door from without, and slipping the key in her pocket went down to the drawing-room, where she found Rachel waiting with visible anxiety.

"I saw Doctor Phillips go some time ago," she said, quickly. "What did he say to-day? I was glad that Clement had kept Evelyn out of the way while he was here."

"Have they not come back? I am glad of it," Lady Emily said hurriedly, and then to Rachel's great amazement

suddenly burst into tears. It was very seldom, indeed, that the self-possessed woman so gave way, and to Rachel's mind it had but one meaning.

"Dear Lady Emily, we have been long preparing for this, but it must always come with a shock," she said, tenderly. "There are many to help you to bear your sorrow when it comes. It is a common sorrow to us all."

"Strange, is it not, that I should weep at what I am glad of?" said William Ayre's mother, almost solemnly. "I am overwrought. I seem to have utterly lost all my powers of self-control. And yet I never needed them more, for there is a crisis to be faced, and it must be faced at once."

She dashed the tears from her eyes with something of her old imperiousness, and, sitting up, looked straight into the grave, wondering face of her sister-in-law.

"The physician's verdict to-day is the reverse of what we expected. He says my son will be restored to health. It is a fearful complication. Poor Evelyn, she does not know what is in store for her."

For one moment only Rachel did not speak, and then it was with a swift and ready smile.

"What will you say if I tell you I have been preparing myself for this, that I have marked the improvement, but feared to say anything lest your hopes should be disappointed?"

"And do you mean to say that it is no sorrow, no disappointment, to you that your daughter will be bound for life to a delicate husband?"

"Why should it be? I see what lies heavy on your heart, Lady Emily. You fear that Evelyn will look at it from your standpoint. I think differently, and I am her mother. I do not say that at the present moment, perhaps, she entertains for Will the love a wife should have, the love of which you and I now have known the sweetness and the strength; but I do say that there is no reason why it should not come."

A light like the strong, beautiful dawning of a new day shone upon Lady Emily's face.

"May God bless you, Rachel, for ever and ever. It has been your happy privilege to be a blessing to many, but I question if you have ever so directly blessed a human soul as you have done to-day. If I could only believe you—oh, what a future I might look forward to, what hopes might blossom in my heart for my son and daughter. God grant that there may be truth in what you say."

"I am sure of it," repeated Rachel, with that gentleness which was part of herself. "Have you been with Will? Has he any idea of this, or were you afraid to tell him?"

"I have told him. He is in the depths of despair, Rachel. He thinks he has blighted Evelyn's life. It will need a great deal to reassure him. I believe," she added, with a quivering smile, "that the poor boy would die if he knew how. There would be something comical in it if it were not so intensely solemn and pathetic."

"Will you allow me to go to him now, before Evelyn returns?" asked Rachel. "Evelyn herself shall reassure him, but I shall pave the way. He used to put great faith in what I said. I must put his faith to the test to-night."

"Ay, do. He believes in you, and reverences you above all women," said Lady Emily; and as she rose up, she laid her hand on her sister-in-law's shoulder, and for a moment they looked at each other in silence. "There have been many strange passages between you and me, Rachel," Lady Emily said. "Sometimes I look at you in simple wonder, asking myself wherein you differ from other women. The relations between us are not of an ordinary kind. We must either love each other with no ordinary love, or the reverse. My heart has gone out to you as it never went out to a living woman before. Do you forgive me? No, I will have no evasion. Tell me so with these lips which have never lied."

"I forgive you, since you will have your pound of flesh," said Rachel, with a sunny smile, and then the lips of these two women met for the first time in a kiss of peace—a kiss which blotted out the past, and was an earnest of sweeter, brighter, happier days to come.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

"**T**HAT has done you all the good in the world, Evy. I must come and take you out every morning."

"It *has* done me good. I feel like a new creature, and Caliph has carried me splendidly, though Will seemed rather nervous. Just stand still a moment, Clem, and let us admire this prospect. Isn't it glorious?"

They drew rein on the brow of the moorland road, and turned back to look at the magnificent valley through which the winding Ayre crept like a gossamer thread.

"See, yonder is Winterdyne," said Clement, pointing with his riding switch far ahead. "Don't you see the tower and the flagstaff?"

"No, I don't," answered Evelyn, with a merry laugh. "Love has sharpened your eyes, Clem. I wish it had been a little nearer, so that I could see Sybil oftener," she added, with some gravity. "I couldn't love her any better, Clem, though she were my sister to-morrow."

"I'm glad of it. Haven't they behaved splendidly about poor Will, Evy? I'll tell you what I think, that if more of our aristocracy were like the Winterdynes we would hear less about class feuds."

"I believe it. Shall we go now? How delicious the wind is, though it felt chilly as we rode out. Yes, I must have a canter on Caliph every morning."

She stooped down over the animal's beautiful neck, and caressingly laid her hand on his head. Clem, with a sudden rush of brotherly pride, thought how well horse and rider accorded, each being beautiful, and young, and full of life. He fancied he had never seen his sister look more fair. The dark, perfect-fitting habit, the dainty hat, the white band at the neck, and the exquisite flush on her face, all combined to make a vision of loveliness which even Sybil could not eclipse. And as his thoughts reverted first to a solitary grave on a foreign battlefield, and then to the prostrate and feeble form of the Master of Studleigh, as he had seen it only an hour ago, his heart swelled with the bitterest rebellion.

"What is it, Clem?" she asked, softly, seeing the deepening shadow on his face.

"Nothing. I was thinking. I can't help it, Evy. I am a brute, but I must speak. I was thinking of poor Hal, and of Will, and of you. Nobody ever deserved a more brilliant or a happier life. I declare, when I see you look as you are looking now, I feel desperate, upon my word I do."

A wavering smile crept about her sweet mouth, and she bent still lower over Caliph's neck.

"Don't fret about me, Clem, dear. I am not very miserable. Sometimes I think I am not miserable at all," she said, in a low voice. "There are times when I think of Harry—I *do* sometimes think of him, Clem, and then I feel very forlorn. But I do not regret having married Will. It has made him so happy, and he loves me so dearly."

Clem made no answer, though some words trembled on his lips—a question he had been longing to ask for some days. To his surprise, Evelyn forestalled him.

"I want you to tell me, quite frankly, Clem, what you

think of Will. Do you think he is getting any worse?" she asked, suddenly.

"I do *not*," Clement answered, with blunt abruptness. "In fact, I believe he is better. Is not there something awfully tragic in the very idea that we should be waiting on for him to die, and he won't?"

"I am not."

Evelyn's voice rang out sharp and shrill on the keen, cool air. "Don't imagine that I have asked the question hoping for a different answer. I have faced all the issues, Clem. The night before my marriage I asked myself, solemnly, what it would mean for me if Will should recover, and should require a lifetime of wifely duty at my hands? Do you think that in such circumstances there are many women who would not have faced *that* contingency?"

"You are a wonderful girl, Evelyn. I don't think I know anything about you. Here mamma and I have been torturing ourselves about it, and wondering what was to be done if poor Will should recover, while you have calmly settled in your own mind every issue. I do not understand women, Evy. I treat them as conundrums, and give them up."

A little laugh escaped Evelyn's lips.

"You will know more about them some day. Sybil will teach you well. She has her whims and caprices, which will mystify you, even more than I do," she answered. "Well, shall we go now?"

"In a moment. Tell me first, Evelyn, what you think about poor Harry? Forgive me if I hurt you, but I want to understand that. It would make my mind easier. You see he was an uncommonly good fellow, and he was so fond of you."

Evelyn turned her fair head away, and it was a moment before she answered.

"I am beginning to think, Clem, that I cannot have cared so much for Harry as he did for me. The sudden-

ness of our parting made me imagine a great many things, and the awful shock of his death was harder for me to bear, because I had begun to realise that in a sense I had hardly been true to him."

"In that case, for the first time since it happened, I can say I believe it was better that he did *not* live to come home. He simply worshipped you, Evelyn. I am glad that he died believing you cared for him. It made him happy at the end, and now it is the living we have to think of. I hope, for your sake, that Will has obtained a new lease of life." As he spoke he leaned forward, kissed his sister, and took his hand from her bridle rein. Then in silence they rode home together.

From his sunny window, William Ayre saw them ride up the avenue, and he grew sick at heart as his eyes dwelt with awful longing on the bright, radiant face of his wife. His wife! Bound to him by an indissoluble bond which he could not loose, "till death us do part."

She saw him at the window, and waved her hand to him as she vaulted lightly from her saddle. Before any one could detain her, or speak a word to her, she had run lightly into the house and upstairs to her husband's room. When Rachel heard her foot on the corridor she slipped into the adjoining dressing-room, and out to the drawing-room landing by another door.

"Oh, Will, I have had such a lovely ride all the way to Copley Downs, and over the moor to Ayreleigh!" she cried, as she entered the room. "And Caliph carried me like a lamb. Won't you make him over to me for my very own?"

He had no answer to her gay chatter, and when she came to the side of his couch she saw instantly that something graver than usual troubled him.

"It was too bad of me, Will, to leave you so long. Do you know we have been two hours away; and talking over old times we forgot the flight of time. But I do not think,"

she added, with an indescribably tender touch, "that we ever for a moment forgot you."

"I am glad, dearest, that you have enjoyed your ride. I must ask Clem to take you out every day. It has done you so much good. Evelyn, you are a most lovely creature."

Her colour rose at his quiet but telling praise.

"Clem has been flattering me this morning, Will, and I am utterly vain. Now, let us talk about you. Clem and I are agreed on one point, for once in our lives, dear. We believe that you are not getting worse, but that you are getting better, Will."

He gave a great start, and she wondered to see the painful flush overspread his face.

"Has any one told you, Evelyn? Do you really believe that, and yet can bear to look at me?" he asked, with a nervous haste which astonished her.

"Why, Will, what are you talking of?" she asked, with a slight quiver of the lip. "Let me tell you; we stood for a little on the moor edge talking about things, and after we had agreed that you were getting better, I looked away across the lovely country, and I said to myself, some day perhaps, not very far distant, Will and I will ride here together and admire the scene. If you are not very lazy, dear, perhaps we may do that before the snow comes this very year."

William Ayre turned upon his elbow and fixed his earnest eyes on his wife's face. She never forgot that look. It was the expression of a man who was weighing a matter—a matter of life and death.

"Evelyn, can you face the prospect of a lifetime, even a short lifetime, with me cheerfully?" he asked, with a strange hoarseness in his voice.

"Oh, Will!" was all she said; and he saw her bright eyes grow dim.

"I have been lying here for an hour torturing myself,

because in a moment of extreme selfishness I urged you to the forging of a bond which Scripture itself says no man may put asunder. When I saw you ride up the avenue a picture of youth and strength and loveliness, and realised what I had done, I turned my face to the wall, and prayed that my new strength might go from me, and that I might die."

"Oh, Will!" she said again, and this time her face was hidden.

"I have been trying to find some solution of the difficulty, but there is none. Suppose you voluntarily left me, and if you wished to do so I should not seek to keep you," he went on in his quiet, hopeless voice. "Still you would not be free, still no other, however dear to you, could seek your love. I have done you a great and irreparable wrong, my dearest. May God forgive me for it."

"And you cannot find any solution of the difficulty, Will," she said at last in a low and tender voice, though still keeping her face hidden. "Two heads are better than one. Suppose we try together."

"What would you say then, Evelyn?" he asked, in a voice so eager and earnest that a faint tremulous smile hovered for a moment on her lips, but he did not see it.

"You have had your say, Will," she said, presently. "Suppose I speak now?"

She sat up, tossed her hat to the floor, and with a pretty wilful gesture, pushed back the dark locks which the wind had ruffled so unmercifully.

"It is very kind of you to torment yourself about my settlement in life, and even to give a thought to the 'braw wooers' who might ride down the glen," she said, quite soberly, though there was a gleam of laughter in her eyes. "But don't you think, Will, that this unvarnished candour on your part is a little hard on me? You see I have got used to being a person of importance in this house. I find it is quite an enviable position to be a squire's wife," she

continued, when he made no answer. "Suppose, instead of laying a great many plans to get rid of me you give me a chance to distinguish myself as mistress of Studleigh Manor? I assure you I shall try to bear my honours meekly."

"Evelyn, you speak almost as if it would be no hardship," he said, and the painful intensity of both look and tone completely broke her down.

"Oh, Will, how blind you are, how wilfully blind!" she cried, springing to her feet. "Can't you see that trying to learn in this room lessons of patience and resignation has been an utter failure, and that I have learned only one thing in the wide earth."

"And that?"

But she would not satisfy him yet. She walked slowly to the far end of the long, beautiful room, and looked away over the tree tops to the misty downs, across which the cool south wind was sweeping with unbroken force.

"Yes, it is a lovely spot, Will, and I love it better than any place on earth," she said, by-and-bye, when she came slowly back to his side. "I am prouder of being its mistress than of anything else in the world, except of your love for me."

She knelt down by him, and let her beautiful eyes meet his without faltering.

"Looking forward, Will, I see a husband and wife living a blessed life together in this dear home," she said, dreamily. "Trying, out of gratitude for mercy vouchsafed, to live a life which shall bless others also. It will not be very hard for the husband, because already he has learned how to bless the lives of others, and the wife will not be very anxious about her share, because she will always have such a wise and loving counsellor by her side. Do you understand me now, Will, and are not two heads better than one?"

"Your words are charged with blessed meaning, Evelyn, but you must be plainer still. Can it be possible that in the future you have so exquisitely sketched, you might learn to care a little, even for me?"

"Even for you."

She laid her head down upon his arm and rested her hot cheek on his hand.

"Was ever man so hard to convince? Why, Will, I love you now with all my heart; and I believe," she added, with a little break in her voice, "I believe I have loved you all my life and did not know it."

They were amazed at the rapidity with which the Squire recovered his lost strength. From that day he became a new man, and in less than a month's time was able to journey to the sunny South to establish the cure love had wrought. Husband and wife took that journey alone. There was never much said about it, but it very gradually began to dawn upon them that it would be better so; nay, that though grateful to those who so loved and cherished them, the time had come for them to be alone.

Some months later, in the bright spring month which was to witness the bridal of Sybil and her brave soldier, the Squire and his wife returned to their own; and when the Lady Emily saw the bronzed and bearded man, still slender of figure, but straight and lithe and strong, come up the carriage-way, with his wife leaning heavily and proudly on his arm, while the people who loved him rent the air with their hurrahs, she was totally overcome.

"Courage, Emily!" said Rachel, the faithful and true, ready, as of yore, to speak the tender word in season. "God has been very good to us, and to our children. Are they not a noble pair?"

"Ay. I was but thinking how very little I had aided in the formation of my son's character. I owe a great debt, Rachel, to you and yours, a great debt. It is love and

happiness which have restored my son, even that I owe to you."

"Hush, here they are!"

And the next moment Evelyn's happy face was hidden on her mother's breast, and the joy of reunion was perfect.

In the midst of that deep, true happiness, however, memory had its place—memory which made Clement's face at times very grave and sad. It is ever thus. Even in our brightest hours there must be a touch of sadness—since all who live must leave behind a memory-haunted past, fraught with much that is perplexing and full of pain, if only to remind us that we have no continuing city here.

It is ten years since Evelyn became William Ayre's wife—ten happy years—which have revealed to her what life can hold for those who are one in heart and purpose, and who walk together in love.

The Squire's health is not now such as causes any anxiety. He has a fair share of strength and energy—enough to make life and activity pleasant, more than enough to fill his own and other hearts with fervent gratitude.

There is no child in Studleigh, and it is Clement's son, a boy who has all his father's strength of limb and will, who is regarded as the future Squire. But while the boy is a favourite with all, it is still the prayer of many, many hearts that it may be long before he enters on his inheritance, because Studleigh is blessed unspeakably by the wise, beneficent, and loving rule of William Ayre and Evelyn, his wife.



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