Title: Sisters Three

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Mrs George de Horne Vaizey

"Sisters Three"

Chapter One.

New Year's Day.

"I wish something would happen!" sighed Norah.

"If it were something *nice*," corrected Lettice. "Lots of things happen every day, but they are mostly disagreeable. Getting up, for instance, in the cold, dark mornings—and practising—and housework, and getting ready for stupid old classes—I don't complain of having too little to do. I want to do less, and to be able to amuse myself more."

"We want a change, that is the truth," said Hilary, bending forward on her seat, and sending the poker into the heart of the fire with a vigorous shove. "Our lives jog-trot along in the same way year after year, and it grows monotonous. I declare, when I think that this is the first day of another January it makes me ill! Fifty-two more Mondays to sit in the morning-room and darn stockings. Fifty-two Saturdays to give out stores. Three hundred and sixty-five days to dust ornaments, interview the cook, and say, 'Well, let me see! The cold mutton had better be used up for lunch'—Oh, dear me!"

"I'll tell you what—let's have a nice long grumble," said Lettice, giving her chair a hitch nearer the fire, and bending forward with a smile of enjoyment. "Let's hold an Indignation Meeting on our own account, and discuss our grievances. Women always have grievances nowadays—it's the fashionable thing, and I like to be in the fashion. Three charming and beauteous maidens shut up in the depths of the country in the very flower of their youth, with nothing to do—I mean with far too much to do, but with no amusement, no friends, no variety! We are like the princesses in the fairy tales, shut up in the moated tower; only then there were always fairy godmothers to come to the rescue, and beautiful princes in golden chariots. We shall have to wait a long time before any such visitors come tramping along the Kendal high-road. I am sure it sounds melancholy enough to make anyone sorry for us!"

"Father is the dearest man in the world, but he doesn't understand how a girl of seventeen feels. I was seventeen on my last birthday, so it's worse for me than for you, for I am really grown-up." Hilary sighed, and rested her sleek little head upon her hand in a pensive, elderly fashion. "I believe he thinks that if we have a comfortable home and enough to eat, and moderately decent clothes, we ought to be content; but I want ever so much more than that. If mother had lived—"

There was a short silence, and then Norah took up the strain in her crisp, decided accents. "I am fifteen and a half, and I look very nearly as old as you do, Hilary, and I'm an inch taller. I don't see why I need go on with these stupid old classes. If I could go to a good school, it would be another thing, for I simply adore music and painting, and should love to work hard, and become celebrated; but I don't believe Miss Briggs can teach me any more than I know myself, and there is no better teacher for miles around. If father would only let me go abroad for a year; but he is afraid of trusting me out of his sight. If *I* had seven children, I'd be glad to get rid of some of them, if only to get a little peace and quietness at home."

"Mother liked the idea of girls being educated at home, that is the reason why father objects to sending us away. The boys must go to boarding-schools, of course, because there is no one here who can take them in hand. As for peace and quietness, father enjoys having the house full. He grumbles at the noise sometimes, but I believe he likes it at the bottom of his heart. If we do happen to be quiet for a change in the evening, he peers over his book and says, 'What is the matter; has something gone wrong? Why are you all so quiet?' He loves to see us frisking about."

"Yes, but I can't frisk any longer—I'm too dull—I want something to happen," repeated Norah, obstinately. "Other people have parties on New Year's Day, or a Christmas-tree, or crowds of visitors coming to call. We have been sitting here sewing from ten o'clock this morning—nasty, uninteresting mending—which isn't half done yet, though it

is nearly four o'clock. And you never think of me! I'm fifteen, and I feel it more than either of you. You see it is like this. Sometimes I feel quite young, like a child, and then you two are too proper to run about and play with me, so I am all alone; and then I feel quite old and grown-up, and am just as badly off as you, and worse, because I'm the youngest, and have to take third turn of everything, and wear your washed-out ribbons! If only something would happen that was really startling and exciting—!"

"I sink it's very naughty to wish like that!" A tiny, reed-like voice burst into the conversation with an unexpectedness which made the three sisters start in their seats; a small figure in a white pinafore crept forward into the firelight, and raised a pair of reproachful eyes to Norah's face. "I sink it's very naughty to wish like that, 'cause it's discontented, and you don't know what it might be like. Pr'aps the house might be burned, or the walls fall down, or you might all be ill and dead yourselves, and *then* you wouldn't like it!"

The three girls looked at each other, undecided between laughter and remorse.

"Mouse!" said Hilary, severely, "what are you doing here? Little girls have no business to listen to what big people are saying. You must never sit here again without letting us know, or that will be naughty too. We don't mean to be discontented, Mouse. We felt rather low in our spirits, and were relieving ourselves by a little grumble, that's all. Of course, we know that we have really many, many things to be thankful for—a nice house, and—ah—garden, and such beautiful country all round, and—ah—good health, and—"

"And the bunnies, and the pigeons, and the new carpet in the dining-room, and because the puppy didn't die—and—and—*Me*!" said the Mouse, severely; and when her sisters burst into a roar of laughter she proceeded to justify herself with indignant protest. "Well, it's the trufh! The bunnies *are* pretty, and you said, 'Thank goodness! we've got a respectable carpet at last!' And Lettice cried when the little pup rolled its eyes and squealed, and you said to Miss Briggs that I was only five, and if I *was* spoiled she couldn't wonder, 'cause I was the littlest of seven, and no one could help it! And it's 'Happy New Year' and plum pudding for dinner, so I don't sink you ought to be discontented!"

"You are quite right, dear, it's very naughty of us. Just run upstairs to the schoolroom, and get tidy for tea, there's a good little Mouse. Shut the door behind you, for there's a fearful draught." Hilary nodded to the child over her shoulder, and then turned to her sisters with an expressive shrug. "What a funny little mite she is! We really must be careful how we speak before her. She understands far too well, and she has such stern ideas of her own. Well, perhaps after all we are wrong to be discontented. I hated coming to live in this quiet place, but I have been ever so much stronger; I never have that wretched, breathless feeling now that I had in town, and I can run upstairs to the very top without stopping. You can't enjoy anything without health, so I ought to be—I am!—very thankful that I am so much better."

"I am thankful that I have my two dear hobbies, and can forget everything in playing and drawing. The hours fly when I can sit out of doors and sketch, and my precious old violin knows all my secrets. It cries with me, and sings with me, and shrieks aloud just as I would do if I dared to make all the noise I want, when I am in a temper. I do believe I could be one of the best players in the world if I had the chance. I feel it in me! It is aggravating to know that I make mistakes from want of proper lessons, but it is glorious to feel such power over an instrument as I do when I am properly worked up! I would not change places with any girl who is not musical!"

Lettice said nothing, but she lifted her eyes to the oval mirror which hung above the mantelpiece, and in her heart she thought, "And I am glad that I am so pretty. If one is pretty, everyone is polite and attentive; and I do like people to be kind, and make a fuss! When we were at the station the other day the people nudged each other and bent out of the windows of the train as I passed. I saw them, though I pretended I didn't. And I should look far nicer if I had proper clothes. If I could only have had that fur boa, and the feather for my hat! But what does it matter what I wear in this wretched place? There is no one to see me."

The firelight played on three thoughtful faces as the girls sat in silence, each occupied with her special train of thought. The room looked grey and colourless in the waning light, and the glimpse of wintry landscape seen through the window did not add to the general cheeriness. Hilary shivered, and picking up a log from the corner of the grate dropped it into the fire.

"Well, there is no use repining! We have had our grumble, and we might as well make the best of circumstances. It's New Year's Day, so I shall make a resolution to try to like my work. I know I do it well, because I am naturally a good housekeeper; but I ought to take more interest in it. That's the way the good people do in books, and in the end they dote upon the very things they used to hate. There's no saying—I may come to adore darning stockings and wending linen before the year is out! At any rate I shall have the satisfaction of having done my best."

"Well, if you try to like your work, I'll try to remember mine—that's a bargain," said Lettice solemnly. "There always seems to be something I want particularly to do for myself, just when I ought to be at my 'avocations,' as Miss Briggs has it. It's a bad plan, because I have to exert myself to finish in time, and get a scolding into the bargain. So here's for punctuality and reform!"

Norah held her left hand high in the air, and began checking off the fingers with ostentatious emphasis. "I resolve always to get up in the morning as soon as I am called, and without a single grumble; always to be amiable when annoyed; always to do what other people like, and what I dislike myself; always to be good-tempered with the boys, and smile upon them when they pull my hair and play tricks with my things; always be cheerful, contented, ladylike in deportment, and agreeable in manner. What do you say? *Silly*! I am not silly at all. If you are going to make resolutions at all, you ought to do it properly. Aim at the sky, and you may reach the top of the tree; aim at the top of the tree, and you will grovel on the ground. You are too modest in your aspirations, and they won't come to any good; but as for me—with a standard before me of absolute perfection—"

"Who is talking of perfection? And where is the tea, and why are you still in darkness, with none of the lamps lighted?

It is five o'clock, and I have been in my study waiting for the bell to ring for the last half-hour. What are you all doing over there by the fire?" cried a masculine voice, and a man's tall figure stood outlined in the doorway.

Chapter Two.

Hilary in Luck.

There was a simultaneous exclamation of dismay as the three girls leapt from their seats, and flew round the room in different directions. Hilary lighted the lamps, Norah drew the curtains across the windows, while Lettice first gave a peal to the bell, and then ran forward to escort her father to a chair by the fire.

"Tea will be here in a moment, father; come and sit down. It's New Year's Day, you know, and we have been so busy making good resolutions that we have had no time for anything practical. Why didn't you come down before? You are a regular old woman about afternoon tea; I believe you would miss it more than any other meal."

"I believe I should. I never get on well with my writing in the first part of the afternoon, and tea seems to give me a fresh start. So you girls have been making good resolutions? That's good hearing. Tell me about them." And Mr Bertrand leant back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, and looking up at his young daughters with a quizzical smile. A photographer would have been happy if he could have taken a portrait at this moment, for Mr Bertrand was a well-known author, and the books which were written in the study in Westmoreland went far and wide over the world, and made his name a household word. He had forgotten his beloved work at this moment, however, at the sight of something dearer still—his three young daughters standing grouped together facing him at the other side of the old-fashioned grate, their faces flushed from the heat of the fire, their eyes dazzled by the sudden light. How tall and womanlike they looked in their dark serge dresses! Lettice's hair framed her face in a halo of mist-like curls; Hilary held up her head in her dignified little fashion; mischievous Norah smiled in the background. They were dearer to him than all his heroines; but, alas, far less easy to manage, for the heroines did as they were bid, while the three girls were developing strong wills of their own.

"I believe you have been plotting mischief, and that is the beginning and the end of your good resolutions!"

"Indeed, no, father; we were in earnest. But it was a reaction, for before that we had been grumbling about— Wait a moment, here comes tea. We'll tell you later on. Miss Briggs says we should never talk about disagreeable topics at a meal, and tea is the nicest meal of the day, so we can't afford to spoil it. Well, and how is Mr Robert getting on this afternoon?"

Mr Bertrand's face twitched in a comical manner. He lived so entirely in the book which he was writing at the time that he found it impossible to keep silent on the subject; but he could never rid himself of a comical feeling of embarrassment in discussing his novels in the presence of his daughters.

"Robert, eh? What do you know about Robert?"

"We know all about him, of course. He was in trouble on Wednesday, and you came down to tea with your hair ruffled, and as miserable as you could be. He must be happy again to-day, for your hair is quite smooth. When is he going to marry Lady Mary?"

"He is not going to marry Lady Mary at all. What nonsense! Lady Mary, indeed! You don't know anything about it! Give me another cup of tea, and tell me what you have been grumbling about. It doesn't sound a cheerful topic for New Year's Day, but I would rather have even that than hear such ridiculous remarks! Grumbling! What can you have to grumble about, I should like to know?"

"Oh, father!" The three young faces raised themselves to his in wide-eyed protest. The exclamation was unanimous; but when it was over there was a moment's silence before Hilary took up the strain.

"We are dull, father! We are tired of ourselves. You are all day long in your study, the boys spend their time out of doors, and we have no friends. In summer time we don't feel it, for we live in the garden, and it is bright and sunny; but in winter it is dark and cold. No one comes to see us, the days are so long, and every day is like the last."

"My dear, you have the housework, and the other two have their lessons. You are only children as yet, and your school days are not over. Most children are sent to boarding-schools, and have to work all day long. You have liberty and time to yourselves. I don't see why you should complain."

"Father, I should like to go to school—I long to go—I want to get on with my music, and Miss Briggs can't teach me any more."

"Father, when girls are at boarding-schools they have parties and theatricals, and go to concerts, and have all sorts of fun. We never have anything like that."

"Father, I am not a child; I am nearly eighteen. Chrystabel Maynard was only seventeen at the beginning of the book?"

Mr Bertrand stirred uneasily, and brushed the hair from his forehead. Chrystabel Maynard was one of his own heroines, and the allusion brought home the reality of his daughter's age as nothing else could have done. His glance passed by Norah and Lettice and lingered musingly on Hilary's face.

"Ha, what's this? The revolt of the daughters!" he cried. "Well, dears, you are quite right to be honest. If you have any grievances on your little minds, speak out for goodness' sake, and let me hear all about them. I am not an ogre

of a father, who does not care what happens to his children so long as he gets his own way. I want to see you happy. —So you are seventeen, Hilary! I never realised it before. You are old enough to hear my reason for keeping you down here, and to judge if I am right. When your mother died, three years ago, I was left in London with seven children on my hands. You were fourteen then, a miserable, anaemic creature, with a face like a tallow candle, and lips as white as paper. The boys came home from school and ran wild about the streets. I could not get on with my work for worrying about you all, and a man must work to keep seven children. I saw an advertisement of this house in the papers one day, and took it on the impulse of the moment. It seemed to me that you would all grow strong in this fine, mountain air, and that I could work in peace, knowing that you were out of the way of mischief. So far as the boys and myself are concerned, the plan has worked well. I get on with my work, and they enjoy running wild in their holidays; but the little lasses have pined, have they? Poor little lasses! I am sorry to hear that. Now come—the post brought me some cheques this morning, and I am inclined to be generous. Next week, or the week after, I must run up to London on business, and I will bring you each a nice present on my return. Choose what it shall be, and I will get it for you if it is to be found in the length and breadth of the city. Now then, wish in turns. What will you have?"

"It's exactly like the father in *Beauty and the Beast*, before he starts on his travels! I am sure Lettice would like a white moss rose!" cried Norah roguishly. "As for me, I am afraid it's no use. There is only one thing I want—lessons from the very best violin master in London!"

"Three servants who could work by electricity, and not keep me running after them all day long!"

"Half a dozen big country houses near to us, with sons and daughters in each, who would be our friends."

They were all breathless with eagerness, and Mr Bertrand listened with wrinkled brow. He had expected to be asked for articles of jewellery or finery, and the replies distressed him, as showing that the discontent was more deepseated than he had imagined. For several moments he sat in silence, as though puzzling out a difficult problem. Then his brow cleared, and he smiled, his own, cheery smile.

"Hilary, pack your boxes, and get ready to go up to London with me on Monday week. If you are seventeen, you are old enough to pay visits, and we will stay for a fortnight with my old friend Miss Carr, in Kensington. She is a clever woman, and I will talk to her and see what can be done. I can't work miracles, but I will do what I can to please you. May I be allowed to have another cup of tea, Miss Seventeen?"

"Poor, dear, old father! Don't look so subdued. You may have a dozen if you like. Monday next! How lovely! You are the dearest father in all the world!"

Mr Bertrand shrugged his shoulders.

"When I give you your own way," he said drily. "Pass the cake, Lettice. If I have three grown-up daughters on my hands, I must make every effort to keep up my strength."

Lettice and Norah had a little conversation on the stairs as they went upstairs to change their dresses for dinner.

"It's very nice for Hilary, this going up to London; but it doesn't do *us* any good. When is something going to happen for *us*?"

"I suppose we shall have to wait for our turn," sighed Lettice dolefully; but that very same evening an unexpected excitement took place in the quiet household, and though the Mouse's prophecy was fulfilled, inasmuch as it could hardly be called an incident of a cheerful nature, it was yet fated to lead to great and far-reaching results.

Chapter Three.

An Unexpected Guest.

The old grandfather's clock was just striking six o'clock when Raymond and Bob, the two public schoolboys, came home from their afternoon excursion. They walked slowly up the drive, supporting between them the figure of a young fellow a few years older than themselves, who hopped painfully on one foot, and was no sooner seated on the oak bench in the hall, than he rested his head against the rails, and went off into a dead faint. The boys shouted at the pitch of their voices, whereupon Mr Bertrand rushed out of his sanctum, followed by every other member of his household.

"Good gracious! Who is it? What is the matter? Where did he come from? Has he had an accident?" cried the girls in chorus, while Miss Briggs ran off for sal volatile and other remedies.

The stranger was a tall, lanky youth, about eighteen years of age, with curly brown hair and well-cut features, and he made a pathetic figure leaning back in the big oak seat.

"He's the son of old Freer, the Squire of Brantmere," explained Raymond, as he busied himself unloosing the lad's collar and tie. "We have met him several times when we have been walking. Decent fellow—Harrow—reading at home for college, and hates it like poison. We were coming a short cut over the mountains, when he slipped on a bit of ice, and twisted his ankle trying to keep up. We had an awful time getting him back. He meant to stay at the inn to-night, as his people are away, and it was too dark to go on, but he looks precious bad. Couldn't we put him up here?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Better carry him straight to bed and get off that boot," said Mr Bertrand cordially. "It will be a painful job, and if we can get it done before he comes round, so much the better. Here, you boys, we'll carry him upstairs between us, and be careful not to trip as you go. Someone bring up hot water, and bandages from the

medicine chest. I will doctor him myself. I have had a fair experience of sprained ankles in my day, and don't need anyone to show me what to do."

The procession wended its way up the staircase, and for the greater part of the evening father and brothers were alike invisible. Fomentations and douches were carried on with gusto by Mr Bertrand, who was never more happy than when he was playing the part of amateur surgeon; then Miss Briggs had her innings, and carried a tray upstairs laden with all the dainties the house could supply, after partaking of which the invalid was so far recovered that he was glad of his friends' company, and kept them laughing and chatting in his room until it was time to go to bed.

The next morning the ankle was much better, but, at his host's instigation, the young fellow despatched a note to his mother, telling her not to expect him home for a few days, as Mr Bertrand wished him to stay until he was better able to bear the long, hilly drive.

The girls discussed the situation as they settled down to finish the much disliked mending in the afternoon. "It's very annoying," Hilary said. "I do hope he won't be long in getting better. We were going to London on Monday week, but if he is still here we shall have to wait, and I hate having things postponed."

"I wish he had been a girl," said Norah, who came in for so much teasing from her two brothers during the holidays that she did not welcome the idea of having another boy in the house. "We could have had such fun together, and perhaps she might have asked us to stay with her some day. I should love to pay visits! I wonder if father will take us up to London in turns, now that he has begun. I do hope he will, for it would be great fun staying in Kensington. I remember Miss Carr when we were in London; she was a funny old thing, but I liked her awfully. She was often cross, but after she had scolded for about five minutes, she used to repent, and give us apples. She will give you apples, Hilary, if you are very good!"

Hilary screwed up her little nose with an expression of disdain. Apples were not much of a treat to people who had an orchard at home, and she had outgrown the age of childish joy at the gift of such trifles. Before she could speak, however, the door burst open, and Raymond precipitated himself into the room. He was a big, broad fellow of sixteen, for he and Lettice were twins, though widely differing in appearance. Raymond had a flat face, thickly speckled over with freckles, reddish brown hair, and a pair of brown eyes which fairly danced with mischief. It was safe to prophesy that in less than two minutes from the time that he entered the room where his sisters were sitting, they would all three be shrieking aloud in consternation, and the present instance was no exception to the rule. It was very simply managed. He passed one hand over the table where lay the socks and stockings which had been paired by Hilary's industrious fingers, and swept them, helter-skelter, on the floor. He nudged Norah's elbow, so that the needle which she was threading went deep into her fingers, and chucked Lettice under the chin, so that she bit her tongue with a violence which was really painful. This done, he plunged both hands into his pockets and danced a hornpipe on the hearthrug, while the girls abused him at the pitch of their voices.

"Raymond Bertrand, you are the most horrid, ungentlemanly, nasty, rude boy I ever knew!"

"If you were older you'd be ashamed of yourself. It is only because you are a stupid, ignorant little schoolboy that you think it funny to be unkind to girls."

"Very well, then! You have given me all my work to do over again; now I won't make toffee this afternoon, as I promised!"

"I don't want your old toffee. I can buy toffee in the village if I want it," retorted Raymond cheerfully. "Besides, I'm going out to toboggan with Bob, and I shan't be home until dark. You girls will have to go and amuse Freer. He is up, and wants something to do. I'm not going to stay indoors on a jolly afternoon to talk to the fellow, so you'll have to do it instead."

"Indeed, we'll do nothing of the kind; we have our work to do, and it is bad enough to have two tiresome boys on our hands without looking after a third. He is your friend, and if you won't amuse him, he will have to stay by himself."

"All right! Nice, hospitable people you are! Leave him alone to be as dull as he likes—it's no matter to me. I told him that you would look after him, so the responsibility is off my shoulders." Raymond paused, pointed in a meaning manner towards a curtained doorway at the end of the room, tiptoed up to the table, and finished his reply in a tragic whisper. "And I've settled him on the couch in the drawing-room, so you had better not speak so loudly, because he can hear every word you say!"

With this parting shot, Mr Raymond took his departure, banging the door after him, while his sisters sat paralysed, staring at each other with distended eyes.

"How awful! What *must* he think? We can't leave him alone after this. Hilary, you are the eldest, go and talk to him."

"I won't—I don't know what to say. Norah, you go! Perhaps he is musical. You can play to him on your violin!"

"Thank you, very much. I'll do nothing of the kind. Lettice, you go; you are not shy. Talk to him prettily, and show him the photographs."

"I daren't; I am horribly shy. I wouldn't go into that room now, after what he has heard, for fifty thousand pounds!"

"Norah, look here, if you will go and sit with him until four o'clock, Lettice and I will finish your work between us, and we will all come and have tea in the drawing-room, and help you out for the rest of the afternoon!"

"Yes, Norah, we will; and I'll give you that pink ribbon for your hair. Do, Norah! there's a good girl. You won't mind a bit after the first moment."

“It’s all very well,” grumbled Norah; but she was plainly softening, and after a moment’s hesitation, she pushed back her chair and said slowly, “All right, I’ll go; but mind you are punctual with tea, for I don’t bargain to stay a moment after four o’clock.” She brushed the ends of cotton from her dress, walked across to the door, and disappeared through the doorway with a pantomimic gesture of distaste. At the other side she paused and stood facing the invalid in silent embarrassment, for his cheeks were flushed, and he looked so supremely uncomfortable that it was evident he had overheard the loud-toned conversation which had been carried on between the brother and sisters. Norah looked at him and saw a young fellow who looked much older and more formidable than he had done in his unconsciousness the night before, for his grey eyes had curious, dilating pupils, and a faint mark on the upper lip showed where the moustache of the future was to be. The stranger looked at Norah, and saw a tall, slim girl, with masses of dark hair falling down her back, heavily marked eyebrows, and a bright, sharply cut little face, which was very attractive, if it could not strictly be called pretty.

“How do you do?” said Norah desperately. “I hope you are quite—I mean, I hope your foot is better. I am glad you are able to get up.”

“Thank you very much. It’s all right so long as I lie still. It’s very good of you to let me stay here. I hope I’m not a great nuisance.”

“Oh, not at all. I’m sure you are not. I’m not the eldest, you know, I’m only the third, so I have nothing to do with the housekeeping, but there are so many of us that one more doesn’t make any difference. My name is Norah.”

“And mine is Reginald, but I am always called Rex. Please don’t trouble about me if you have anything else to do. If you would give me a book, I’d amuse myself.”

“Are you fond of reading?”

“‘I think I’ll stay and talk to you.’” (See page 27.)

“No, I hate it—that is to say, I like it very much, of course, but I have had so much of it for the last two years that I sometimes feel that I hate the sight of a book. But it’s different here, for a few hours.”

“I think I’ll stay and talk to you, if you don’t mind,” said Norah, seating herself on an oak stool by the fire, and holding out a thin, brown hand to shade her face from the blaze. “I’m very fond of talking when I get to know people a little bit. Raymond told us that you were reading at home to prepare for college, and that you didn’t like it. I suppose that is why you are tired of books. I wish I were in your place! I’d give anything to go to a town, and get on with my studies, but I have to stay at home and learn from a governess. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could change places? Then we should both be pleased, and get what we liked.”

The young fellow gave a laugh of amusement. “I don’t think I should care for the governess,” he said, “though she seems awfully kind and jolly, if she is the lady who looked after me last night. I’ve had enough lessons to last me for the rest of my life, and I want to get to work, but my father is bent on having a clever son, and can’t make up his mind to be disappointed.”

“And aren’t you clever? I don’t think you look exactly stupid!” said Norah, so innocently, that Rex burst into a hearty laugh.

“Oh, I hope I’m not so bad as that. I am what is called ‘intelligent,’ don’t you know, but I shall never make a scholar, and it is waste of time and money to send me to college. It is not in me. I am not fond of staying in the house and poring over books and papers. I couldn’t be a doctor and spend my life in sick-rooms; the law would drive me crazy, and I could as soon jump over a mountain as write two new sermons a week. I want to go abroad—to India or Ceylon, or one of those places—and get into a berth where I can be all day walking about in the open air, and looking after

the natives."

"Oh, I see. You don't like to work yourself, but you feel that it is 'in you' to make other people exert themselves! You would like to have a lot of poor coolies under you, and order them about from morning till night—that's what you mean. I think you must be very lazy to talk like that!" said Norah, nodding her head in such a meaning fashion that the young fellow flushed in embarrassment.

"Indeed, I'm nothing of the kind. I am very energetic—in my own way. There are all sorts of gifts, and everyone knows which one has fallen to his share. It's stupid to pretend that you don't, I know I am not intellectual, but I also know that I have a natural gift of management. At school I had the arrangement of all the games and sports, and the fellows would obey me when no one else could do anything with them. I should like to have a crowd of workmen under me—and I'll tell you this! they would do more work, and do it better, and be more contented over it, than any other workmen in the district!"

"Gracious!" cried Norah, "you are conceited! But I believe you are right. It's something in your eyes—I noticed it as soon as I saw you—a sort of commanding look, and a flash every now and then when you aren't quite pleased. They flashed like anything just now, when I said you were lazy! The poor coolies would be frightened out of their senses. But you needn't go abroad unless you like. You could stay at home and keep a school."

"No, thank you. I know too much about it. I don't want the life worried out of me by a lot of boys. I could manage them quite well though, if I chose."

"You couldn't manage me!" Norah brought her black brows together in defiant fashion, but the challenge was not taken up, for Master Rex simply ejaculated, "Oh, girls! I wasn't talking about girls," and laid his head against the cushions in such an indifferent fashion that Norah felt snubbed; and the next question came in a very subdued little voice—"Don't you—er—*like* girls?"

"Ye–es—pretty well—the ones I know. I like my sister, of course, but we have only seen each other in the holidays for the last six years. She is sixteen now, and has to leave school because her chest is delicate, and she has come home to be coddled. She don't like it a bit—leaving school, I mean—so it seems that none of us are contented. She's clever, in music especially; plays both violin and piano uncommonly well for a girl of her age."

"Oh, does she? That's my gift. I play the violin beautifully," cried Norah modestly, and when Rex laughed aloud she grew angry, and protested in snappish manner, "Well, you said yourself that we could not help knowing our own talents. It's quite true, I *do* play well. Everyone says so. If you don't believe it, I'll get my violin and let you hear."

"I wish you would! Please forgive me for laughing, I didn't mean to be rude, but it sounded so curious that I forgot what I was doing. Do play! I should love to hear you."

Norah walked across the room and lifted the beloved violin from its case. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was tingling with the remembrance of that incredulous laugh, but her anger only made her the more resolved to prove the truth of her words. She stood before Rex in the firelight, her slim figure drawn up to its full height, and the first sweep of the bow brought forth a sound so sweet and full, that he started in amazement. The two sisters in the adjoining room stopped their work to listen, and whispered to one another that they had never heard Norah play so well; and when at last she dropped her arms, and stood waiting for Rex to give his verdict, he could only gasp in astonishment.

"I say, it's wonderful! You can play, and no mistake! What is the piece? I never heard it before. It's beautiful. I like it awfully."

"Oh, nothing. It isn't a piece. I made it up as I went along. It is too dark to see the music, and I love wandering along just as I like. I'll play you some pieces later on when the lamps are lit."

"I say, you know, you are most awfully clever! If you play like that now, you could do as well as any of those professional fellows if you had a chance. And to be able to compose as well! You are a genius—it isn't talent—it's real, true, genuine genius!"

"Oh, do you think so? Do you really, truly think so?" cried Norah pitifully. "Oh, I wish you would say so to father! He won't let us go away to school, and I do so long and pine to have more lessons. I learnt in London ever since I was a tiny little girl, and from a very good master, but the last three years I have had to struggle on by myself. Father is not musical himself, and so he doesn't notice my playing, but if you would tell him what you think—"

"I'll tell him with pleasure; but if he won't allow you to leave home, I don't see what is to be done—unless—look here! I've got an idea. My sister may want to take lessons, and if there were two pupils it might be worth while getting a man down from Preston or Lancaster. Ella couldn't come here, because she can only go out on fine days, but you could come to us, you know. It would make it so much more difficult if the fellow had to drive six miles over the mountains, and we are nearer a station than you are here. I should think it could be managed easily enough. I'll write to the mater about it if you like."

"Will you, really? How lovely of you! Oh, it would be quite too delightful if it could be managed. I'd bless you for ever. Oh, isn't it a good thing you sprained your ankle?" cried Norah in a glow of enthusiasm, and the burst of laughter which followed startled the occupants of the next room by its ring of good fellowship.

"Really," said Hilary, "the strange boy must be nicer than we thought. Norah and he seem to be getting quite good friends. Let us hurry up, and go and join them."

Chapter Four.

Round the Fire.

Mrs Freer wrote a grateful letter to Mr Bertrand, thanking him for his hospitality to her son, and arranging to drive over for Rex on the following Saturday afternoon, so that Hilary's anxiety was at an end, and she could enjoy the strange boy's society with an easy mind. After Norah had broken the ice, there was no further feeling of shyness. When Rex hobbled downstairs at ten o'clock in the morning, he ensconced himself on the old-fashioned sofa in the sewing-room, and remained there until he adjourned into the drawing-room for the evening. The boys came in and out as they pleased, Miss Briggs coddled him and brought him cups of beef-tea, but it was upon the girls that he chiefly depended for amusement. In the morning they were busy with their household duties; but, as regular lessons had not begun, afternoon was a free time, and while Norah drew, Lettice carved, and Hilary occupied herself manufacturing fineries for the London visit, a brisk clatter of tongues was kept up, in which the invalid took his full part. The sound of five-finger exercises would come from the schoolroom overhead, but so soon as four o'clock struck, the Mouse would steal in, in her little white pinafore, and creep on to the corner of the sofa. She and the "strange boy" had made friends at once, and were on the best of terms.

"I wish you lived with us for ever!" she said one afternoon, looking lovingly in his face, as he stroked her wavy locks.

"And I wish you lived with me, Mouse," he answered. "I should like a little sister like you, with a tiny pointed chin, and a tiny little nose, and big dark eyes. You are a real little mouse. It is exactly the right name for you."

"No, it's my wrong name. My true name is Geraldine Audrey. It's written that way in the Bible."

"Dear me! that's a big name for a small person. And who gave you that name?" asked Rex, laughing. But the child's face did not relax from its characteristic gravity as she replied—

"My godfathers and my godmothers, and a silver mug, and a knife and fork in a case, with 'GAB' written on the handles. Only I mayn't use them till I'm seven, in case I cut my fingers."

Dear little Geraldine Audrey! Everyone loved her. She was always so desperately in earnest, so unsuspicious of fraud, that her little life was made a burden to her in the holidays by reason of the pranks of her big brothers. They sent her into village shops to demand "a halfpenny-worth of pennies," they kept her shivering in the drive staring at the lions on the top of the gate-posts, to see them wag their tails when they heard the clock strike twelve; they despatched her into the garden with neat little packets of salt to put on the birds' tails, and watched the poor mite's efforts in contortions of laughter from behind the window curtains. The Mouse was more sorrowful than angry when the nature of these tricks was explained to her. "I fought you told the trufh," she would say quietly, and then Raymond and Bob would pick her up in their arms, and try to make amends for their wickedness by petting her for the rest of the day.

On the third day of Rex's visit, the weather was so tempestuous that even Raymond and Bob did not stir from the house. They spent the morning over chemical experiments in the schoolroom, but when afternoon came they wearied of the unusual confinement and were glad to join the cosy party downstairs. Norah had a brilliant inspiration, and suggested "Chestnuts," and Master Raymond sat in comfort, directing the efforts of poor red-faced Bob, as he bent over the fire and roasted his fingers as well as the nuts. When half a dozen young people are gathered round a fire, catching hot nuts in outstretched hands, and promptly dropping them with shrieks of dismay, the last remnants of shyness must needs disappear; and Rex was soon as uproarious as any other member of the family, complaining loudly when his "turn" was forgotten, and abusing the unfortunate Bob for presenting him with a cinder instead of the expected dainty. The clatter of tongues was kept up without a moment's intermission, and, as is usual under such circumstances, the conversation was chiefly concerned with the past exploits of the family.

"You can't have half as many jokes in the country as you can in town," Raymond declared. "When we were in London, two old ladies lived in the house opposite ours, who used to sit sewing in the window by the hour together. One day, when the sun was shining, Bob and I got hold of a mirror and flashed it at them from our window so that the light dazzled their eyes and made them jump. They couldn't see us, because we were hiding behind the curtains, but it was as good as a play to watch first one, then the other, drop her work and put up her hand to her eye? Then they began shaking their fists across the road, for they knew it was us, because we had played some fine tricks on them before. On wet days we used to make up a sham parcel, tie a thread to the end, and put it on the side of the pavement. Everyone who came along stooped down to pick it up, we gave a jerk to the string and moved it on a little further, then they gave another grab, and once or twice a man overbalanced himself and fell down, but it didn't always come off so well as that—oh, it was capital sport!"

"You got into trouble yourselves sometimes. You didn't always get the best of it," Norah reminded him. "Do you remember the day when you found a ladder leaning against the area railings of a house in the white terrace? Father had forbidden you to climb ladders, but you were a naughty boy, as usual, and began to do it, and when you got to the top, the ladder overbalanced, and you fell head over heels into the area. It is a wonder you were not killed that time!"

Raymond chuckled softly, as if at a pleasant remembrance. "But I was not, you see, and the cook got a jolly fright. She was making pastry at a table by the window, and down we came, ladder and I, the finest smash in the world. There was more glass than flour in the pies that day!"

"But father had to pay for new windows, and you were all over bruises from head to foot—"

"That didn't matter. It was jolly. I could have exhibited myself in a show as a 'boy leopard,' and made no end of money. And I wasn't the only one who made father pay for new windows. When Bob was a little fellow, he broke the nursery window by mistake, and a glazier came to mend it. Bob sat on a stool watching him do it, and snored all the

time—Bob always snores when he is interested—and as soon as the man had picked up his tools and left the room, what did he do but jump up and send a toy horse smashing through the pane again. He wanted to watch the glazier put in another, but he hadn't the pleasure of seeing it mended that time. He was whipped and sent to bed."

"We–w–w–well," cried Bob, who was afflicted with a stammer when he was excited, "I didn't c–c–ut off my eyelashes, anyway! Norah went up to her room one day and p–played barber's shop. She cut lumps off her hair wherever she could get at it, till she looked like an Indian squaw, and then she s–s–snipped off her eyelashes till there wasn't a hair left. She was sent to bed as w–well as me."

"They have grown again since then," said Norah, shutting one eye, and screwing up her face in a vain effort to prove the truth of her words. "I had been to see Lettice have her hair cut that day, and I was longing to try what it felt like. I knew it was naughty, but I couldn't stop, it was too fascinating. ... Oh, Lettice, *do* you remember when you sucked your thumb?"

Lettice threw up her hands with a little shriek of laughter. "Oh, how funny it was! I used to suck my thumb, Rex, until I was quite a big girl, six years old, I think, and one day mother spoke to me seriously, and said I really must give it up. If I didn't I was to be punished; if I did, I was to get a prize. I said, 'Well, may I suck my thumb as long as ever I like to-day, for the very last time?' Mother said I might, so I sat on the stairs outside the nursery door and sucked my thumb all day long—hours, hours, and hours, and after that I was never seen to suck it again. I had had enough!"

"It must be awfully nice to belong to a large family," said Rex wistfully. "You can have such fun together. Edna and I were very quiet at home, but I had splendid times at school, and sometimes I used to bring some of the fellows down to stay with me in the holidays. One night I remember—hallo, here's the Mouse! I thought you were having a nice little sleep on the schoolroom sofa, Mouse. Come here and sit by me."

Geraldine advanced to the fireplace in her usual deliberate fashion. She was quite calm and unruffled, and found time to smile at each member of the party before she spoke.

"So I was asleep, only they's a fire burning on the carpet of the schoolroom, and it waked me up."

"Wh–at?"

"They's a fire burning in the miggle of the carpet—a blue fire, jest like a plum pudding!"

There was a simultaneous shriek of dismay, as work, scissors, and chestnuts were thrown wildly on the floor, and the Bertrand family rushed upstairs in a stampede of excitement. The schoolroom door stood open, the rug thrown back from the couch on which the Mouse had been lying, and in the centre of the well-worn carpet, little blue flames were dancing up and down, exactly as they do on a Christmas pudding which has been previously baptised with spirit. Bob cast a guilty look at his brother, who stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at the conflagration with smiling patronage.

"Phosphorus pentoxide P2O5," he remarked coolly. "What a lark!"

"It wouldn't have been a lark if the Mouse had been stifled by the nasty, horrid fumes," said Lettice angrily. "Get some water at once and help us put it out, before the whole house is on fire."

"Water, indeed! Don't do anything so foolish. You mustn't touch it with water. Here, it's only a square, pull the thing up and throw it through the window into the garden. That's the best thing we can do," said Raymond, dropping on his knees and setting himself to pull and tear with all his strength. Bob and the girls did their best to assist him, for the Bertrands were accustomed to help themselves, and in a very few minutes the carpet was lifted, folded hurriedly in two, and sent flying through the window to the garden beneath. After which the tired and begrimed labourers sank down on chairs, and panted for breath.

"This is what comes of chemical experiments," said Hilary severely. "I shall ask father to forbid you to play with such dangerous things in the house. I wonder what on earth you will do next."

"Have some tea! This sort of work is tiring. I'm going downstairs to ring the bell and hurry Mary up," said Raymond coolly. It was absolutely impossible to get that dreadful boy to realise his own enormities!

Chapter Five.

A Visit to London.

On Saturday afternoon Mrs Freer drove up to the door in an old-fashioned carriage. She was a thin, little woman, not at all like her big son, whom she evidently adored as the most wonderful specimen of his sex, and full of gratitude for the kindness which had been shown to him. Rex's letter had evidently been of a descriptive nature, for his mother recognised each of the three girls, addressed them by name, and referred to their special interests.

"How do you do, Miss Hilary? I hope my son's illness has not interfered with the arrangements for your journey. How do you do, Miss Lettice? How do you do, Norah? Rex has told me of your wonderful playing. I hope you will let me hear something before I go."

Norah was never loath to play, and on this occasion was anxious to make a good impression, so that Mrs Freer might gain her father's consent to the proposed music lessons. At the earliest opportunity, therefore, she produced her violin, played her favourite selections, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Mrs Freer was unmistakably impressed.

The little head in the large black bonnet approached Mr Bertrand's in confidential fashion. Norah watched the smile of pleasure on her father's face, followed by the usual pucker of the brows with which he was wont to receive a difficult question. Mrs Freer was evidently approaching the subject of the professor from Lancaster, and presently, oh, joy! the frown passed away, he was leaning forward, clasping his hands round his knees, and listening with an air of pleased attention.

"Mr Freer is quite willing to allow Edna to take lessons, even if they should be rather expensive, for the poor child frets at being separated from her friends, and she is not strong enough to remain at school. She could not come here to have her lesson, I am afraid, for she is only allowed to go out when the weather is mild and sunny; but if you would allow Norah to come to us for the day, once a fortnight (fortnightly lessons would be quite enough, don't you think?), it would be a real pleasure to have her. She would have to stay for the night, of course, for it is too far to come and go in one day, but Edna would be all the more charmed! It would be a charity to the poor child!"

"You are very good. It sounds feasible. If you will be kind enough to make inquiries, I shall be happy to fall in with your arrangements. And now let me give you some tea."

Half an hour later the carriage was brought round again, for the nights grew dark so soon that it was necessary to make an early start on the ten-mile drive. Rex hobbled down the hall on his sticks, escorted by the entire Bertrand family, for the week of his visit had seemed to place him on the standing of a familiar friend, and the Mouse shed tears when he kissed her in the porch, while Lettice looked the picture of woe. Norah was the most cheerful of all, for Rex whispered in her ear—"I'll keep them up to the mark about the lessons. We will have some good times together when you come over, and—I say!—I impressed upon your father that you were awfully clever; you'll have to do as much for me, and convince mine that I am too stupid to do any good at college—!"

"Oh, I will!" said Norah emphatically. "I will! Good-bye. I'm most fearfully obliged!" She stood on the path waving her hand and nodding farewells so long as the carriage remained in sight. It seemed as if her wish were to be fulfilled indeed, and the thought of the new friends and the fortnightly visits to Brantmere filled her with delighted expectation.

For the next few days Hilary was as busy as a bee preparing for her visit to London. She gathered together all her nicest things, and, not content with her own, cast a covetous eye on the possessions of her sisters. Half a dozen times in the course of the morning the door of the room in which the two youngest sisters sat would burst open, and Hilary's sleek little head appear round the corner to make some new request.

"Lettice! you might lend me your new muff!"

"Oh, Hilary! I only got it at Christmas, and I need it myself in this cold weather."

"Don't be so selfish. I'll leave you my old one. It doesn't matter what sort of a muff you wear here, and you know quite well mine is too shabby for London. It's only for a fortnight!"

"Oh, well, I suppose you must have it. It's very hard, though, for I do like nice things, even if I am in the country."

"Oh, thanks awfully. I'll take mine to your room." Then the door would bang and Hilary's footsteps be heard flying up the staircase, but in less than ten minutes she would be down again with another request. "You don't mind, I suppose, if I take your silver brushes?"

"My silver brushes! I should think I *do* mind, indeed. What next?"

"But you never use them. You might just as well lend them to me as leave them lying in their case upstairs."

"I am keeping them until I go away visiting. If I don't even use them myself, it's not likely I am going to lend them to anyone else."

"Lettice, how mean! What harm could I do to the brushes in a fortnight? You know what a grand house Miss Carr's is, and it would be too horrid for me to go with a common wooden brush. I do think you might lend them to me!"

"Oh, well, you can have them if you like, but you are not afraid of asking, I must say! Is there anything else—?"

"Not from you; at least, I don't think so just now. But, Norah, I want your bangle—the gold one, you know! Lend it to me, like a dear, won't you?"

"If you lose it, will you buy me a new one?"

"I won't lose it. I'll only wear it in the evening, and I'll be most awfully careful."

"You have a bangle of your own. Why can't you be content with that?"

"I want two—one for each arm; they look so nice with short sleeves. I'll put it in my jewel-box, and lock it up safely—"

"I haven't said I would lend it to you yet."

But Hilary ran away laughing, and gathered brushes and bangles together in triumph.

It was on the evening preceding the journey to London that Mr Bertrand came upon his second daughter standing alone in the upstairs corridor, which ran the whole length of the house, pressing her forehead against the panes of the windows. Lettice had been unusually quiet during the last few days, and her father was glad to have the opportunity of a quiet talk.

“All alone, dear?” he asked, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her towards him. “I was thinking about you only a few minutes ago. I said on New Year’s Day, you remember, that I wanted to give each of you three girls some special little present. Well, Hilary is having this trip with me, and Norah seems in a fair way of getting her wish in the matter of lessons; but what about you? I’ll take you with me next time I go away; but in the meantime, is there any little thing you fancy that I could bring back from London town?”

“No, thank you, father. I don’t want anything.”

“Quite sure? Or—or—anything I can do for you here, before I go?”

“No, thank you, father. Nothing at all.”

The tone was dull and listless, and Mr Bertrand looked down at the fair face nestled against his shoulder with anxious eyes.

“What is it, dear? What is the matter, my pretty one?”

He was almost startled by the transformation which passed over the girl’s face as he spoke the last few words. The colour rushed into the cheeks, the lips trembled, and the beautiful eyes gazed meltingly into his. Lettice put up her arm and flung it impetuously round his neck.

“Do you love me, father? Do you really love me?”

“Love you! My precious child! I love every one of you—dearly—dearly! But you—” Mr Bertrand’s voice broke off with an uncontrollable tremble—“you know there are special reasons why you are dear to me, Lettice. When I look at you I seem to see your mother again as I met her first. Why do you ask such a question? You surely know that I love you, without being told?”

“But I like being told,” said Lettice plaintively. “I like people to say nice things, and to be loving and demonstrative. Hilary laughs at me if I am affectionate, and the boys tease. Sometimes I feel so lonely!”

Mr Bertrand drew his breath in a short, stabbing sigh. He was realising more keenly every day how difficult it was to bring up young girls without a mother’s tender care. Hilary, with the strain of hardness and self-seeking which would ruin her disposition unless it were checked in time; beautiful Lettice, longing for love and admiration, and so fatally susceptible to a few flattering words; Norah, with her exceptional talents, and daring, fearless spirit—how was he to manage them all during the most critical years of their lives? “I must speak to Helen Carr. Helen Carr will help me,” he said to himself, and sighed with relief at the thought of sharing his burden with the kind-hearted friend of his youth.

It was nearly six o’clock when the travellers drove up to the door of the white house in Kensington, and Miss Carr came into the hall to meet them, looking far less altered by the lapse of years than did her young visitor, who had developed from a delicate schoolgirl into a self-possessed young lady of seventeen.

“And this is Hilary. Tut, tut! what do you mean by growing up in this ridiculous manner, child?” Miss Carr pecked the girl’s cheek with a formal kiss, and turned to hold out both hands to Mr Bertrand. “Austin! how good to see you again. This is a pleasure—a real pleasure.” There was no doubting the sincerity of the tone, which was one of most affectionate welcome, and the plain old face beneath the white cap was beaming with smiles. Miss Carr had been Austin Bertrand’s devoted friend from his youth onwards, one of the earliest believers in his literary powers, and the most gratified by the fame which he had gained. Hilary was left out in the cold for the next ten minutes, while the old lady fussed round her father, inquiring anxiously if he were cold, if he were tired, and pressing all manner of refreshments upon him. Even over dinner itself she received scanty attention. She had put on a pretty blue dress, with a drapery of lace over the shoulders, arranged her hair in a style copied from the latest fashion book, and snapped the gold bangles on her arms, with a result which seemed highly satisfactory upstairs, but not quite so much so when she entered the drawing-room, for Miss Carr put up her eye-glasses, stared at her fixedly for several moments, and then delivered herself of an expressive grunt. “Deary me! seventeen, are we! Don’t be in too great a hurry to grow up, my dear. The time will come when you will be only too thankful to be young!”

At this rate Hilary began to feel that it was not uninterrupted bliss to be in London, and this suspicion was deepened when at nine o’clock her hostess looked at her stolidly, and remarked—

“You are tired, my dear. Go to bed, and have a good night’s rest.”

Hilary bridled, and held her little head at the angle of injured dignity which her sisters knew so well. Nine o’clock indeed! As if she were a baby!

“Oh, thank you, Miss Carr, but I am not tired. It was such an easy journey. I am not sleepy at all.”

“My dear, all young girls ought to get to bed and have their beauty sleep before twelve o’clock. Don’t mind me. Your father will manage to entertain me. He and I have always plenty to say to each other.”

After such plain speaking as this, it was impossible to object any further. Hilary rose with a flush on her cheeks, kissed her father, and held out a stiff little hand towards Miss Carr. The old lady looked at her, and her face softened. She was beginning to repent, in the characteristic manner to which Norah had referred. Hilary felt herself pulled forward, kissed lovingly on the lips, and heard a kindly tone take the place of the mocking accents, “Good-night, dearie, good-night! We must have some good times while you are here. Sleep well, and to-morrow we will talk things over, and make our plans.”

The door shut behind the girl, and the two occupants of the room looked at one another in silence. Miss Carr’s

expression was self-conscious and apologetic; Mr Bertrand's twitching with humorous enjoyment.

"Too bad, Helen, too bad! I can't have my poor little lass snubbed like that!"

"My dear Austin, it will do her all the good in the world. What a little Miss Consequence! What have you been about to let the child think so much of herself?"

"Put a woman's responsibilities on her shoulders before she was ready to bear them. My dear Helen, that's the very thing about which I am anxious to consult you. These girls of mine are getting on my nerves. I don't know what to do with them. Hilary has the audacity to be seventeen, and for the last eighteen months she has practically done all the housekeeping. Miss Briggs looks after the Mouse—Geraldine, you know—gives lessons to Lettice and Norah, but beyond that she does little else. She is a good, reliable soul and a great comfort in many ways, but I fear the girls are getting beyond her. We had a conference on New Year's Day, and I find that they are tired of present arrangements, and pining for a change. I promised to think things over, and see what could be done, and I want your advice. Hilary is a conscientious, hard-working little soul. She has been thrust into a responsible position too soon, and it is not her fault if she is a trifle overbearing, poor child. At the same time, it will be a terrible misfortune if she grows up hard and unsympathetic. Norah is a vivacious young person, and they tell me she is developing a genius for music. She is afire to go abroad and study, but I think I have settled her for the time being with the promise of the best lessons that the neighbourhood can produce. Lettice—"

"Yes—Lettice?"

"She is a beautiful girl, Helen! You remember what Elma was at her age. Lettice is going to be quite as lovely; but I am more anxious about her than any of the others. She is demonstrative herself, and loves demonstration, and flattery, and appreciation. It's natural, of course—quite natural—but I don't want her to grow up into a woman who lives only for admiration, and whose head can be turned by the first flattering tongue that comes along. What would be the best thing for a girl with exceptional beauty, and such a disposition as this—?"

Miss Carr gave one of her comical grunts, "Small-pox, I should say!" she replied brusquely, then softened into a laugh at the sight of her friend's horrified face. "I see you are like most parents, Austin; all your geese are swans! Norah a genius, Lettice a beauty, and Hilary a model housewife! You seem to be in a nest of troubles, poor man; but I can't undertake to advise you until I know more of the situation. We will have a pleasant time while you are here—take Miss Consequence about, and let her see a little life; and then, as you're an old friend, I'll sacrifice myself on your behalf, and as soon as the weather is anything like warm, pay you a visit, and see how things are for myself."

"My dear Helen, this is really noble of you. I know your dread of the 'North Countrie,' and I assure you I appreciate your self-sacrifice. There is no one else in the world who can help me so much as you."

"Well, well, I have an idea; but I won't say anything about it until I know the girls better. Would you be willing to—"

"Yes, what?"

"Nothing at all. What a silly old woman I am to be sure, when I had just said that I wouldn't speak of it! It's something for the good of your girls, Austin, but that's all you will hear about it until I come to Cloudsdale, and see them for myself."

Chapter Six.

Scarlet Slippers.

So soon as Mr Bertrand's arrival in town became known, he was inundated with invitations of every description. To most of these it was impossible to take Hilary, but Miss Carr was indefatigable in escorting the girl to concerts and entertainments, and insisted that she should accompany her father when it was possible.

"If the child is old enough to have the responsibility of a household, she is old enough to have a little enjoyment, and to make her entrance into society. She is eighteen next May, she tells me, and she is old for her age. You must certainly take her to Lady Mary's 'At Home.' There will be music, and recitations, and a crowd of people—just the sort of thing to please a young girl!"

Mr Bertrand shrugged his shoulders and affected to be horrified at the idea of having to take out a grown-up daughter. "It makes a man feel so old," he said, "and I know quite well I shall forget all about her when I begin talking to my old friends! However, I'll do my best. See that the child has something decent to wear, like a good soul. I'm not so short of money now as in the days when you used to send hampers to my rooms in Oxford, and I should like her to look well. She is not a beauty like Lettice, but she is a nice-looking little girl in her way, isn't she, Helen?"

"Oh, I think we may give her credit for more than that. She has an exquisite complexion, and holds up her little head as if she were quite conscious of being the eldest child of a famous man. You won't be ashamed of your daughter, I promise you."

Hilary was delighted at the thought of accompanying her father to the "At Home," but though she gushed over the prospect in her letters to her sisters, she did her utmost to hide her excitement from Miss Carr. The old lady had a habit of making sly little hits at her expense, the cause of which the girl totally misunderstood. She imagined that it was her youth and want of experience which annoyed her hostess, whereas, in reality, it was her affectation of age and worldly knowledge. When the night arrived, however, it was impossible to keep as calm as she would have liked, as she arrayed herself in her dainty new frock before dinner. Miss Carr's choice had been eminently successful. A

plain white satin dress with an overskirt of chiffon, which gave an effect of misty lightness, a wreath of snowdrops among the puffings at the neck, and long ends of ribbon hanging from the waist. Hilary looked very sweet and fresh as she walked into the drawing-room, with a flush of self-conscious pleasure on her cheeks, and her father gave a start of surprise as he saw her.

“So! My little girl!” Miss Carr was not yet in the room, and he took Hilary by the hands, holding her out at arm’s length, and looking down at her with grave, tender eyes. “It’s very nice, dear. I’m proud of you!” Then drawing her to him, and kissing her on the forehead, “We must be great friends, you and I, my big daughter. This is the beginning of a new life for you, but you will not grow to think less of the old home and the old friends?”

“No, no, father! no, never!” Hilary spoke in a quick, breathless whisper, and there was an unusual moisture in her eyes. Her father saw that she was nervous and excited, and hastened to change the subject before there was any danger of a breakdown. The door opened at this moment to admit Miss Carr, and he advanced to meet her holding Hilary’s hand in his, in the high, stately fashion in which a knight of old led out his partner in the gavotte.

“Miss Hilary Maud Everette Bertrand—at your service. And many thanks to the good fairy who has worked the transformation!”

“Humph!” said Mrs Carr, shortly. “Fine feathers make fine birds. There’s the gong for dinner, and if you two are not hungry, I am, so let us get the serious business over first, and then I’ll have a look at the fineries.” Then, after her usual fashion, she slipped her hand through the girl’s arm and led her affectionately across the hall. “Sweet seventeen! Ah, dear me, I wonder how many years ago it is since I went out in my first white dress? I was a pretty girl then, my dear, though you may not think it to look at me now, and I remember my excitement as if it were yesterday.”

When the carriage came to the door two hours later on, Hilary wrapped herself up in fleecy shawls and went into the drawing-room to bid her hostess good-night, but she was not allowed to take her departure so easily. Miss Carr protested that she was not wrapped up sufficiently, and sent upstairs for a hood and a pair of hideous scarlet worsted bedroom slippers, which she insisted upon drawing over the dainty white satin shoes. Hilary protested, but she was not allowed to have a say in the matter.

“Nonsense, my dear; it’s a bitterly cold night, and you have half an hour’s drive. We can’t have you catching cold, just to have your feet looking pretty in a dark carriage. Go along now, and ‘Good-night,’ for I shall be in bed when you come back. I’ll hear all your adventures in the morning,” and she waved the girl away in the imperious fashion which no one dare resist.

Hilary was annoyed, but she soon forgot the ugly slippers in the fascination of a drive through the brightly-lighted streets, and when the carriage drew up beneath an awning, and she had a peep at a beautiful hall, decorated with palms and flowering plants, and saw the crowd flocking up the staircase, her breath came fast with excitement. Her father led her into the house and disappeared through a doorway on the left, while she herself was shown into a room on the right, wherein a throng of fashionable ladies were divesting themselves of their wraps, and giving finishing touches to their toilets before the mirrors. Those who were nearest to Hilary turned curious glances at her as she took off her shawls, and the girl felt a sudden and painful consciousness of insignificant youth. They were so very grand, these fine ladies. They wore such masses of diamonds, and such marvellous frocks, and mantles, and wrappings, that she was over-awed, and hurried out of the room as quickly as possible, without daring to step forward to a mirror. Such a crowd of guests were making their way up the staircase, that Hilary and her father could only move forward a step at the time, but after they had shaken hands with a stout lady and a thin gentleman at the head of the stairs, there was a sudden thinning off, for a suite of reception rooms opened out of the hall, and the guests floated away in different directions.

Mr Bertrand led the way into the nearer of the rooms, and no sooner had he appeared in the doorway, than there came a simultaneous exclamation of delight from a group of gentlemen who stood in the centre of the floor, and he was seized by the arm, patted on the shoulder, and surrounded by a bevy of admiring friends. Poor Hilary stood in the background, abashed and deserted. Her father had forgotten all about her existence. The group of friends were gradually drawing him further and further away. Not a soul did she know among all the brilliant throng. Several fashionably dressed ladies put up their eye-glasses to stare at her as she stood, a solitary figure at the end of the room, then turned to whisper to each other, while the youngest and liveliest of the party put her fan up to her face and tittered audibly. They were laughing at her, the rude, unkind, unfeeling creatures.

“What could there be to laugh at?” asked Hilary of herself. Her dress had been made by a fashionable modiste; Miss Carr’s own maid had arranged her hair. “I may not be pretty, but there’s nothing ludicrous about me that I know of,” said the poor child to herself, with catching breath. In spite of her seventeen years, her new dress, and all her ecstatic anticipations, a more lonely, uncomfortable, and tearfully-inclined young woman it would be difficult to find. She looked round in despair, espied a seat in a retired corner, and was making for it as quickly as might be, when she came face to face with a mirror, and in it saw a reflection which made the colour rush to her cheeks in a hot, crimson tide. A girlish figure, with a dark head set gracefully upon a slender neck, a dainty dress, all cloudy chiffon, satiny ribbons, and nodding snowdrops, and beneath—oh, good gracious!—beneath the soft frilled edgings, a pair of enormous, shapeless, scarlet worsted bed slippers! It would be difficult to say which was the more scarlet at that moment—the slippers themselves or Hilary’s cheeks. She shuffled forward and stood in the corner, paralysed with horror. There had been such a crowd in the cloak-room, and she had been so anxious to get away, that she had forgotten all about the wretched slippers. So that was why the ladies were laughing! Oh, to think how she must have looked—standing by herself in the doorway, with those awful, awful scarlet feet shown up against the white skirts!

“Sit down and slip them off, and hide them in the corner. No one will see you!” said a sympathetic voice in her ear, and Hilary turned sharply to find that one end of the seat was already occupied by a gentleman, who was regarding her with a very kindly smile of understanding. His face was thin, and there were signs of suffering in the strained

expression of the eyes, so that Hilary, looking at him, found it impossible to take his advice otherwise than in a friendly spirit.

“Th–ank you,” she stammered, and pulling off the offending slippers, hid them swiftly behind the folds of the curtains, and seated herself on the sofa by his side.

“That’s better!” cried the stranger, looking down with approving eyes at the little satin shoes which were now revealed. “Forgot to take them off, didn’t you? Very natural. I did the same with snow-shoes once, and was in the room for half an hour before I discovered that I still had them on.”

“But snow-shoes are black. They wouldn’t look half so bad. I saw those ladies laughing at me. What *must* they have thought?”

“Do you think it matters very much what they thought?” The stranger turned his face towards Hilary, and smiled again in his slow, gentle manner. “Why trouble yourself about the opinion of people whom you don’t know, and whom you will probably never see again? I suppose it is a matter of perfect indifference to them, but what *I* think about them is, that they were exceedingly ill-bred to behave as they did, and I should attach no value whatever to their opinions. Have you—er—lost sight of your friends?”

“No, they have lost sight of me.” The stranger was at once so kind, and so sensible, that Hilary began to feel a delightful sense of restored equanimity, and even gave a little laugh of amusement as she spoke. “I came with my father, and he has gone off with some friends and forgotten all about my existence. He is over there at the end of the room; the tall man with the brown moustache—Mr Austin Bertrand.”

The stranger gave a little jump in his seat, and the colour tinged his cheek. “Bertrand!” he exclaimed. “You are Bertrand’s daughter!” He stared at Hilary with newly-awakened interest, while she smiled, well pleased by the sensation which the name caused.

“Yes; Austin Bertrand, the novelist. You know him, then? You are one of his friends?”

“Hardly that, I am afraid. I know him slightly, and he has been most kind to me when we have met, but I cannot claim him as a friend. I am one of his most ardent admirers.”

“And do you write yourself?” queried Hilary, looking scrutinisingly at the sensitive, intellectual face, and anticipating the answer before it came.

“A little. Yes! It is my great consolation. My name is Herbert Rayner, Miss Bertrand. I may as well introduce myself as there is no one to do it for me. I suppose you have come up to town on a visit with your father. You have lived in the Lake district for the last few years, have you not? I envy you having such a lovely home.”

Hilary elevated her eyebrows in doubtful fashion. “In summer it is perfectly delightful, but I don’t like country places in winter. We are two miles from a village, and three miles from the nearest station, so you can imagine how quiet it is, when it gets dark soon after four o’clock, and the lanes are thick with snow. I was glad to come back to London for a change. This is the first grown-up party I have been to in my life.”

Mr Rayner smiled a little, repeating her words and lingering with enjoyment on the childish expression. “The first *party*! Is it indeed? I only wish it were mine. I don’t mean to pretend that I am bored by visiting, as is the fashionable position nowadays. I am too fond of seeing and studying my fellow-creatures for that ever to be possible, but a first experience of any kind has an interest which cannot be repeated. I am like you, I don’t like winter. I feel half alive in cold weather, and would like to go to bed and stay there until it was warm again. There is no country in the world more charming than England for seven months of the year, and none so abominable for the remaining five. If it were not for my work I would always winter abroad, but I am obliged to be in the hum of things. How do you manage to amuse yourself in the Lakes?”

“We don’t manage at all,” said Hilary frankly. “At least, I mean we are very happy, of course, because there are so many of us, and we are always having fun and jokes among ourselves; but we have nothing in the way of regular entertainments, and it gets awfully dull. My sisters and I had a big grumbling festival on New Year’s Day, and told all our woes to father. He was very kind, and said he would see what could be done, and that’s why I came up to London—to give me a little change.”

“I see!” Mr Rayner looked into the girl’s face with a scrutinising look. “So you are dull and dissatisfied with your surroundings. That’s a pity! You ought to be so happy, with such a father, brothers, and sisters around you, and youth, and health! It seems to me that you are very well off.”

Hilary put up her chin with an air of offended dignity. For one moment she felt thoroughly annoyed, but the next, her heart softened, for it was impossible to be vexed with this interesting stranger, with his pathetic, pain-marked face. Why had he used that word “consolation” in reference to his work? And why did his voice take that plaintive note as he spoke of “youth and health”? “I shall ask father about him,” said Hilary to herself; and just at that moment Mr Bertrand came rushing across the room with tardy remembrance.

“My dear child, I forgot all about you. Are you all right? Have you had some coffee? Have you found anyone to—er—” He turned a questioning glance upon the other occupant of the seat, knitted his brows for a second, and then held out his hand, with an exclamation of recognition. “Rayner! How are you? Glad to see you again. I was only talking of you to Moss the other day. That last thing of yours gave me great pleasure—very fine indeed. You are striding ahead! Come and lunch with me some day while I am in town. I should like to have a chat. Have you been making friends with my daughter? Much obliged to you for entertaining her, I have so many old friends here that I don’t know which way to turn. Well, what day will you come? Will Tuesday suit? This is my present address, and my kind hostess allows

me to ask what guests I will. There was something I had specially on my mind to ask you. Tuesday, then—half-past one! Good-bye till then. Hilary, I will look you up later on. Glad you are so well entertained." He was off again, flying across the room, scattering smiles and greetings as he went, while the two occupants of the corner seat exchanged glances of amusement.

"That's just like father. He gets so excited that he flies about all over the house, and hardly knows what he is doing."

"He is delightfully fresh and breezy; just like his books. And now you would like some refreshments. They are in the little room over there. I shall be happy to accompany you, if you will accept my somewhat—er—inefficient escort."

Hilary murmured some words of thanks, a good deal puzzled to understand the meaning of those last two words. Somewhat to her surprise, her new friend had not risen to talk to her father, and even now, as she stood up in response to his invitation, he remained in his seat, bending forward to grope behind the curtains. A moment later he drew forth something at the sight of which Hilary gave an involuntary exclamation of dismay. It was a pair of crutches; and as Mr Rayner placed one under each arm and rose painfully to his feet, a feeling of overpowering pity took possession of the girl's heart. Her eyes grew moist, and a cry of sympathy forced themselves from her trembling lips.

"Oh—I—I'm *sorry*!" she gasped, with something that was almost a sob of emotion, and Mr Rayner winced at the sound as with sudden pain.

"Thank you," he said shortly. "You are very kind. I'm—I'm used to it, you know. This way, please." And without another word he led the way towards the refreshment room, while Hilary followed, abashed and sorrowful.

Chapter Seven.

An "At Home."

Hilary asked her father many questions about the new acquaintance, and took great interest in what he had to tell.

"Clever fellow, clever fellow; one of the most promising of the younger men. I expect great things of him. Yes, lame, poor fellow! a terrible pity! Paralysis of the lower limbs, I hear. He can never be better, though I believe there is no reason why he should get worse. It's a sad handicap to such a young man, and, of course, it gives a melancholy cast to his mind. It was kind of him to entertain you so nicely—very kind indeed."

Hilary gave her head a little tilt of displeasure. Why should it be "kind" of Mr Rayner to talk to her? Father seemed to think she was a stupid little girl, on whom no grown-up person would care to waste their time; but Mr Rayner had not seemed at all bored by her conversation, and when some friends had tried to take him away, he had excused himself, and preferred to remain in the quiet corner.

When Tuesday came, and Mr Rayner arrived, Mr Bertrand was busy writing, and despatched his daughter to amuse his guest until he should have finished his letters. "Tell him I won't be more than ten minutes; and he must excuse me, like a good fellow, for I am obliged to catch this post," he said, and Hilary went into the long drawing-room, to find her new friend seated on the couch, with his crutches by his side. He was looking better than when she had seen him last, and had a mischievous smile on his face.

"Good morning, Miss Two Shoes!" he cried, and Hilary gave a little start of consternation.

"Oh, h–ush! They don't know—I didn't tell them. Miss Carr would never stop talking about it, and father would tease me to death. I only said that I had forgotten to put the slippers on coming home, which was quite true. It was rather awkward, for they belonged to Miss Carr. She insisted on lending them to me at the last moment. The servants would be surprised when they found them behind the curtains the next morning, wouldn't they?"

"They would!" said Mr Rayner drily, and there was a peculiar smile upon his face which Hilary could not understand. "So they were not yours, after all. I thought the size seemed rather—excessive! I promise not to betray you if you would rather keep the secret, but if the story gave as much pleasure to your father as it has done to me, it seems rather selfish to keep it from him. I have had the heartiest laughs I have known for months past, thinking of the tragic incident of the scarlet slippers!"

"Please don't!" said Hilary; but she laughed as she spoke, and so far from being offended, was quite thankful to hear that she had been the means of giving some amusement to the new friend. "I have been hearing all about you from father," she continued, nodding her head at him cheerily. "He has promised to give me one of your books to read when we get back to Clearwater. Will you please write your name in my autograph book? I brought it downstairs on purpose. There are pens and ink on this little table."

Mr Rayner smiled, but made no objections. He took a very long time over the signature, however, and when Hilary took up the book, she saw that each leg of the H ended in the shape of a dainty little shoe, so finely done that it would probably escape the notice of anyone who was not critically inclined.

"Too bad," she cried laughingly; "I am afraid you are going to be as persistent as father in keeping up the joke."

"They are the proper slippers, you observe—not the woollen atrocities," replied Mr Rayner; and Hilary was still rejoicing in the discovery that he could be mischievous like other people, when the door opened, and her father came rushing into the room.

Luncheon was served immediately afterwards, and when it was over, Mr Bertrand carried off the young man to have

a private talk in the library. They did not make their appearance until the afternoon was well advanced, and when they did, the drawing-room was full of people, for it was Miss Carr's "At home" day, and the presence of Austin Bertrand, the celebrated novelist, brought together even more visitors than usual.

Hilary had not found the entertainment at all amusing. It seemed absurd to her innocent mind that people should come to see Miss Carr, and exchange no further word with her than "How d'you do," and "Good-bye," and though the hum of conversation filled the room, most of the visitors were too old and too grand to take any notice of a girl just out of the schoolroom. A few young girls accompanied their mothers, but though they eyed Hilary wistfully, they would not speak without the introduction which Miss Carr was too busy to give. One girl, however, stared more persistently than the rest, and Hilary returned her scrutiny with puzzled curiosity. She was a tall, elegant girl, but there was something in the wavy line of the eyebrows which seemed strangely familiar, and she had a peculiar way of drawing in her lips, which brought back a hundred misty recollections. Where had she seen that face before? Hilary asked herself, staring fixedly at the stranger. The stranger began to smile; a flash of recollection passed across each face, and the next moment they were clasping hands, and exclaiming in mutual recognition—

"Hilary!"

"Madge!"

"The idea of meeting you here! I haven't seen you since we were tiny little dots at school. I thought you lived ever so far away—up in the North of England."

"So we do; but we are here on a visit. Madge! how grown-up you are! You are only six months older than I, but you look ever so much more than that. How are you, and what are you doing, and how are all your brothers and sisters? Lettice will be so interested to know I have seen you."

"Dear Lettice, yes! She was a nice girl. So affectionate, wasn't she? I should like to see her again. Perhaps I may, for father has taken a house at Windermere for next summer, and if you are not far away, we could often meet and go excursions together."

"Oh, how lovely! We are three miles from Windermere station, but we have a pony carriage and bicycles, and could drive over to see you. Do sit down, Madge. I don't know anyone here, and it is so dull sitting by myself in a corner."

"I am afraid I can't. I am with mother, you see, and she doesn't like to be left alone. Perhaps I shall see you again before I go!" And Madge Newcome nodded, and strolled off in a careless, indifferent manner which brought the blood to Hilary's face. Mrs Newcome was talking to a group of friends and looked very well satisfied, so much so that Hilary suspected that the daughter's anxiety had been more for herself than her mother, and that Miss Madge did not appreciate the attractions of sitting in a quiet corner.

"It's very unkind, when I told her I knew nobody; but she was a selfish girl at school. She doesn't want to stay with me, that's the truth. I wish this horrid afternoon would come to an end!" she told herself dolefully, and it was with unconcealed delight that at last she heard the sound of Mr Rayner's crutches, and welcomed that gentleman to a seat by her side. He looked brighter than she had yet seen him, and had evidently been enjoying himself upstairs.

"Well," he said cheerily, "here you are in the midst of the merry throng! Have you had a pleasant time? Not! Why, how's that? I thought you enjoyed seeing a crowd of people."

"I thought I did, but I find I don't like it so much as I expected," said Hilary dejectedly. "When people are talking and laughing all round, and I am left to keep myself company in a corner, it isn't at all amusing. I suppose there are a great many celebrated people here, but I don't know one from the other, so I am no wiser."

"Never mind, I know them all. We will sit here quietly, and when anyone interesting comes along, I will let you know. Your father has been so kind to me, and has encouraged me until I feel as strong as a giant, and greedy for work. He has asked me to come down to the Lakes to visit you some time in spring, so I may see you again before long. Now then! one of those ladies over there on the sofa is the Duchess of M—. Guess which of the three she is!"

"Oh, I know; the pretty one, of course, with the blue dress, and the bonnet with the cream lace."

"Wrong! Guess again."

"The dark one with the beaded cape!"

"Wrong again! It is the grey-haired lady in the corner."

Hilary gasped, and stared aghast at the stout, shabby lady, who looked everything that was motherly and pleasant, but as different as possible from her ideas of what a duchess ought to be. Then Mr Rayner went on to point out a poet, a painter of celebrated pictures, and half-a-dozen men and women whose names the girl had known from her youth, but who all seemed terribly disappointing in reality. She expressed her opinions in a candid manner, which seemed vastly to amuse her hearer, and they were so merry together that Hilary saw many envious glances directed towards their corner, and realised that other people were envying her in their turn. Madge Newcome came up to say good-bye, before leaving, and elevated her eyebrows in a meaning manner towards Mr Rayner.

"You seem to be having a pleasant time. I think Mr Rayner has such an interesting face, but people say he is so stiff and reserved that it is impossible to know him."

"He is not reserved to me!" said Hilary consequentially. She had not forgiven Madge Newcome for her desertion an hour earlier, and shook hands with an air of dignified reserve.

Chapter Eight.

A Painful Awakening.

A fortnight in London passes quickly enough; but the time seems much longer to the friends who are left at home, and who have no variety in the quiet course of their lives. Half-a-dozen times a day Lettice and Norah said to each other, “What will Hilary be doing now?” And when a letter came, telling the plans of the next few days, they followed her movements hour by hour, telling each other, “Now she will be driving into town!” “Now she will be looking at the pictures!” “Now she will be dressing for the evening!” When the day of the traveller’s return arrived, there was quite a bustle of excitement in the home. Lettice ordered Hilary’s favourite puddings for dinner, Norah gave the drawing-room a second dusting in the afternoon, while Miss Briggs put on her cap with the pink ribbons, and dressed Geraldine in her best frock. They were all in the hall, ready to receive the travellers, as the fly from the station drove up to the door, and while Mr Bertrand stayed without to pay the driver, Hilary lost no time in hurrying indoors. Within the first two minutes the sisters noticed a change in her manner. Her voice seemed to have a new tone; when Miss Briggs held out a welcoming hand, she extended her own at an elevation which made the good lady stare, and even while kissing the girls, her eyes were roving round the hall with an expression of dissatisfaction.

“Why have you not lighted all the lamps?” she inquired, and when Lettice replied in amazement that there were as many lamps as usual, she shrugged her shoulders, and muttered something about “inky darkness.” If Mr Bertrand had not appeared at that moment it would be difficult to say what would have happened, but he came rushing in like a breeze of fresh, wintry air, seizing each of the girls in turn, and folding them in a bear-like hug.

“Well—well—well—here we are again! Glad to be back in the old home. How are you, dear? How are you, pet? Miss Briggs, I see you are flourishing! How have all these young people been behaving while I was away? What about dinner? I’m so hungry that I shall eat the Mouse in desperation if I am kept waiting. Well, little Mouse, glad to see your father back again, eh? Come upstairs with me while I change my coat for dinner.”

It was like another house when the cheery, bustling master was at home, and Lettice and Norah forgot their passing annoyance in rejoicing over his return. During the evening, however, Hilary managed to give offence more than once. She kept frowning to herself as she sat at the head of the table, and looking up and down with a discontented air which was very exasperating to those who had done their utmost to study her tastes and to give her a pleasant home-coming. When dinner was over and the family party adjourned into the drawing-room, she kept jumping up from her seat to alter the arrangement of plants and ornaments, or to put some article in its proper place. Norah elevated her eyebrows at Lettice, who nodded in sympathetic understanding, but both girls controlled their irritation out of consideration for their father, whose pleasure in the first evening at home would have been spoiled if his daughters had taken to quarrelling among themselves.

Mr Bertrand had brought home a perfect treasure-trove of presents for the stay-at-homes. A beautiful little brooch and bangle for Lettice; music, books, and a paint-box for Norah: furs for Miss Briggs; and a small toy-shop for the dear little “youngest of seven.”

Such an excitement as there was in the drawing-room while the presentations were going on! such shrieks of delight! such exclamations of “Just what I wanted!” such huggings and kissings of gratitude! Mr Bertrand declared at last that he would be pulled to pieces, and ran upstairs to the shelter of his beloved study. After he had gone, Hilary seemed for the time being to forget her grievances, whatever they might be, and drawing her chair to the fire, settled down to one of the good old-fashioned gossips which her sisters loved Lettice and Norah had a dozen extra questions which they were burning to ask about every incident of the visit to London; and they were not more eager to hear than Hilary was to tell, for what is the good of going away and having adventures if we cannot talk about them when we come home?

The meeting with Madge Newcome was a subject of much interest. “Quite grown-up, you say, and very grand and fashionable! And you went to lunch with her one day. Are the boys at home? What are they like? There was Cyril, the little one in the Eton jacket, who used to play with Raymond; and Phil, the middy; and the big one who was at college—Arthur, wasn’t he? What is he like now?”

“I saw him only once, but it was quite enough. He is in business with his father—a terribly solemn, proper person, who talks about books, and says, ‘Were you not?’—‘Would you not?’ Miss Carr says he is very clever, and good, and intellectual, but all the same, I am sure she doesn’t like him. I heard her describe him to father as ‘that wooden young man.’ It will be nice to see Madge in the summer, though I haven’t forgiven her for leaving me alone that afternoon. Oh, and I must tell you—” And the conversation branched off in another direction, while the girls crouched over the fire, laughing and talking in happy reunion.

Alas! the next day the clouds gathered over the family horizon and culminated in such a storm as was happily of rare occurrence. The moment that she left her bedroom Hilary began to grumble, and she grumbled steadily the whole day long. Everything that Lettice had done during her absence was wrong; the servants were careless and inefficient; the drawing-room—Norah’s special charge—looked as if no one had touched it for a fortnight; the house was dingy and badly lighted, and each arrangement worse than the last. Lettice hated quarrelling so much that she was prepared to bear a good deal before getting angry, but quick-tempered Norah exploded into a burst of irritation before the afternoon was half over.

“The fact is you have been staying for a fortnight in a grand London house, and you are spoiled for your own home. I think it is mean to come back, after having such a lovely time, and make everyone miserable with your grumbling and fault-findings! Lettice did everything she could while you were away, and the house is the same as when you left it.”

“Perhaps it is, but I didn’t know any better then. I know now how things ought to be done, and I can’t be satisfied

when they are wrong."

"And do you expect things to be managed as well in this house with five of us at home, besides father and Miss Briggs, and three servants to do all the work, as it is at Miss Carr's, with no one but herself, and six or seven people to wait upon her?" Lettice spoke quietly, but with a flush on her cheeks which proved that she felt more than she showed. "It's very foolish if you do, for you will only succeed in upsetting everyone, and making the whole house miserable and uncomfortable."

"As you have done to-day!" added Norah bluntly. "I would rather have an old-fashioned house than the finest palace in the world with a cross, bad-tempered mistress going about grumbling from morning till night."

"Norah, you are very rude to speak to me like that! You have no right. I am the eldest."

"You had no right to say to me that I haven't touched the drawing-room for a fortnight."

"I have a right to complain if the work of the house is not properly done. Father has given me the charge. If I see things that can be improved, I am certainly not going to be quiet. Suppose Mr Rayner or the Newcomes came here to see us, what would they think if they came into a half-lit hall as we did last night?"

"Yes, I knew that was it. It's your grand London friends you are thinking of. If they are too grand to come here, let them stay away. Father is a greater man than any of them, if he is not rich."

"Girls, girls, girls! what is all this?" Miss Briggs pulled aside the curtain over the doorway, and came hurriedly into the room. "I heard your voices across the hall. Are you quarrelling the first day Hilary is at home? Don't let your father hear, I beg you; he would be terribly grieved. What is the matter?"

"It's Hilary's fault. She has done nothing but grumble all day long, and I can't stand it. She has made Lettice miserable; the servants are as cross as they can be, and there's no peace in the house."

"Norah has been very rude to me, Miss Briggs. I am obliged to find fault when things are wrong, and I can't help it if the servants are cross."

Miss Briggs looked at the younger girls. "Go upstairs, dears, and change your dresses for dinner. I want to speak to Hilary by herself," she said quietly, and Lettice and Norah left the room with awed faces. The kind old governess did not often interfere with the girls now that they were growing up, but when she did, there was a directness about her speech which was very telling, and this afternoon was no exception to the rule.

"Hilary," she said slowly, when the door had closed behind the two younger girls, "I have been with you now for ten years, and have watched you grow up from a little girl. You were my first pupil, and I can't help taking a special interest in you. You were a dear little child. I thought you would grow up into a sweet, lovable woman; but you will have to change a great deal, Hilary, if you are to do that! You will think me cruel; but your mother is dead, and I must be truthful with you for your own good. I think you have behaved very unkindly to your sisters to-day. You have been away enjoying yourself while they were left at home; they did their best to fill your place, and counted the days until your return, and you have made them miserable from the moment of your arrival. The house is as you left it; but even supposing you had noticed a few things which were not to your taste, you could have put them right quietly, or spoken of them in a pleasant, kindly manner. Things have gone on smoothly and quietly while you were away—more smoothly than when you are at home, my dear, for though Lettice is not such a good manager, she has a sweet, amiable manner which makes the servants anxious to please her by doing their best. You are very young, Hilary, and you make the mistake of over-estimating your own importance, and of thinking you are necessary to the welfare of the household. You can easily make yourself so, if you wish, for you are a very clever housekeeper; but if you continue to be as self-satisfied and as regardless of the feelings of others as you are at present, I tell you plainly that you will end in being a hindrance rather than a help. I am not saying that the other girls are faultless, but instead of setting them a good example, in nine cases out of ten you are the one to begin a quarrel. You think me very cruel to speak like this—it's not easy to do, Hilary—but you may thank me for it some day. Open your eyes, my dear, and try to see yourself as you really are, before it is too late!"

Miss Briggs swept from the room in a flutter of agitation, and Hilary sank into the nearest chair, and gazed blankly at the fire. Her heart was beating in heavy thuds, and she put her hand to her head in stupefied fashion. For several minutes she sat motionless, unable to form any definite thought. She only felt a curious shattered sensation, as though she had come through some devastating experience, which had laid waste all her fondest delusions. *What* had Miss Briggs said? That the household arrangements had been managed *better* in her absence than when she was at home. That if she did not alter, she would end in being a hindrance rather than a help. That she set a bad example to the younger girls and was the instigator of quarrels!—Hilary's cheeks burnt with a flush that was almost painful. Her pride was wounded in its most sensitive point. She would have been ready enough to acknowledge that she was not so sweet-tempered as Lettice, or so clever as Norah, but she had been secure in her conviction that no one could touch her in her own department—that she was a person of supreme importance, without whom the whole fabric of the household would fall to pieces. And things had gone on *better* while she was away! *Better*! Hilary writhed in humiliation, and the flush burnt more fiercely than before. If she could only manage to disbelieve it all, and wave it aside as a piece of foolish prejudice; but she could not do this, for her eyes were opened, and she saw the meaning of many things which she had misread before. Miss Carr's quizzical, disapproving glance; her father's anxious gaze; the little scornful sniff on the face of the old cook as she took her morning's orders. Could it be that they all felt the same, and were condemning her in their hearts as a stupid, consequential little girl, who had no importance whatever except in her own estimation? And—"*a hindrance*!" The word brought with it a throb of something deeper than wounded pride, for, with all her faults, Hilary was devoted to her father and her brothers and sisters, and the thought stung like a whip that they might not care for her—that the time could come when they might even wish for her absence!

The light was growing dim in the deserted room, and, as Hilary laid her head back in the old-fashioned chair, the tears which rose to her eyes and trickled down her cheeks were the bitterest she had known in the course of her short life.

Chapter Nine.

The Violin Lesson.

Three days after Mr Bertrand's return, Rex Freer arrived at the house in a state of triumphant excitement. This was by no means his first appearance since he had left Cloudsdale, for he never passed the house on any of his numerous expeditions without running in for ten minutes' chat, so that the girls were getting accustomed to see his head appear at the window as they sat at work, or to hear the loud rat-tat on the door which heralded his coming. They soon had practical demonstration of his "managing powers," for more than once, after definitely making up their minds that nothing would induce them to stir from the house, they found themselves meekly putting on hats and jackets to join a tobogganing party, and to accompany the young gentleman part of his way home. Lettice was always easily influenced, but high-spirited Norah made many protests against what she was pleased to call his "Indian ways," and on one occasion even went so far as to dare a direct refusal. Lettice had left the room to get ready for a walk along the snowy lanes, but Miss Norah sat obstinately in her chair, the heel of one slipper perched on the toe of the other, in an attitude which was a triumph of defiance.

"Well!" said Mr Rex, putting his hands in his pockets, and standing with his back to the fire in elderly gentleman fashion. "Why don't you get on your coat? I can't wait many minutes, you know, or it will get dark. Hurry up!"

"I'm not going. It's too cold. I don't like trudging over the snow. I am going to stay at home."

Norah raised her thin, little face to his with an audacious glance, whereat "the strange boy's" eyes dilated with the steely flash which she knew so well.

"Then please go upstairs and tell Lettice not to trouble to get ready. I can't allow her to come home alone, along the lonely roads," he said quietly; and Norah slunk out of the room and put on her snow-shoes in crestfallen silence, for it did Lettice good to have a daily walk, and she could not be so selfish as to keep her at home.

This afternoon, however, the call was longer than usual, for Rex came as the bearer of good news. "You have only to make up your mind to do anything, and the rest is quite easy," he announced coolly. "The mater has made a point of speaking to everyone she has seen about the music lessons, and she has heard of a capital man in Lancaster who is willing to come down for an afternoon once a fortnight. I met your father in the village, and he agrees to the terms, so now there is nothing left but to write and fill in the day to begin. Thursday suits him best. Do you say Thursday first or Thursday fortnight?"

"Oh, the first Thursday. I don't want to wait a day longer than I can help. Oh, how lovely! So it is really settled. I wanted it so badly that I was afraid it would never come true. How am I to get over to your house, I wonder?"

"I'll drive over and bring you back next morning. We might use our bicycles, but the violin case would be rather a nuisance, and I suppose you'll need a bag of some description. I'll be here at eleven, and then we shall get home to lunch. Edna is in a great state of excitement at the thought of seeing you."

Norah pulled a funny little face of embarrassment. "I'm rather shy, you know," she said, laughing. "I've only seen your mother once, and the other two are absolute strangers; it seems funny to be coming over to stay. Is your father a formidable sort of old gentleman?"

"Humph—well—I think he is rather! He is awfully fond of getting his own way," said Rex, in a tone which implied that he failed to understand how anyone could be guilty of such a weakness. "But he is an awfully decent sort if you take him the right way; and poor little Edna would not frighten a mouse. You will feel at home with her in five minutes. I only wish she knew Lettice. We must arrange for her to come over some time."

Norah looked at him with a feeling of curiosity which was not altogether agreeable. "Why do you wish that she knew Lettice! Do you think she would like her better than me?"

"Oh, yes," said Rex easily. (He was just like other boys, Norah told herself, and had not the slightest regard for a poor girl's feelings!) "She is such a jolly, affectionate little thing, you know, that Edna would take to her at once. And she has heard so much of 'Lovely Lettice'! I say, *isn't* she pretty?"

"Yes, she is—lovely! It's a very good name for her." Norah spoke with all the greater emphasis because, for the moment, she had been guilty of an actual pang of envy of her beloved Lettice, for she regarded the "strange boy" as her special friend, by virtue of having been the first to make his acquaintance, and it was not agreeable to find her own claims to popularity brushed aside in this unceremonious fashion. "Lettice is a darling, and everyone likes her, because she is sweet-tempered, and never says unkind things to make other people miserable," she added, not without the hope that Mr Rex would take the hint to himself. He did nothing of the sort, however, but only yawned, thought he must be going, and marched away with stoical unconsciousness of the aching little heart which he had left behind.

On Thursday morning Rex duly drove up to the door in his father's dog-cart. He was a little before his time, but Norah was waiting for him, wrapped up in her warm scarlet coat; her violin case and bag ready on the hall table. Before he came she had been lamenting loudly, because she felt a conviction that something would happen to prevent his arrival; but when it came to setting off, she was seized with an attack of shyness, and hung back in hesitating

fashion. “Oh, oh! I don’t like it a bit. I feel horrid. Don’t you think father would drive over, and bring me home to-night?”

“H–ush! No! Don’t be foolish, Norie! You will enjoy it ever so much when you get there. Remember everything to tell me to-morrow,” whispered Lettice encouragingly, and Norah climbed up into the high seat and waved her hand to her two sisters until a turn of the drive hid them from sight.

“If you want to cry, don’t mind me!” said Rex coolly, which remark served better than anything else could possibly have done to rouse Miss Norah to her usual composure. The saucy little nose was tilted into the air at once, and the red lips curled in scornful fashion.

“I wonder how it is that schoolboys are always so rude and unpleasant?”

Mr Rex laughed, and gave the horse a flick with the whip, which sent him spinning round the corner at break-neck speed. Norah understood that he was proud of his driving, and wished to impress her with the fact that it was very unlike a schoolboy performance. She pressed her lips together to stifle an exclamation of dismay at his recklessness, and her silence pleased Rex, who liked to see “a girl with some courage,” so that presently he began to talk in quite a confidential strain. “The professor will be at the house about half-past two, so you won’t have too much time to spare. He is a tall, lanky fellow, six feet two, with a straggling black beard, goggle eyes, and spectacles. He looks awfully bad-tempered, but I suppose he can’t do more than rap your knuckles with a pencil, and they all go as far as that.”

“No one ever rapped my knuckles,” said Norah loftily. “You told Hilary a few minutes ago that none of you had seen him, and that your mother had engaged him entirely on her friends’ recommendation. So you can’t know what he is like, or anything about him!”

“How do you know that the friends did not describe him?” cried Rex quickly. “You can’t know what they said. I tell you he is a tall, cadaverous fellow, with a stoop in his back and a white beard.”

“Black! black! You said black last time,” cried Norah in triumph. “You are making it up, and I could imagine what he is like as well as you, if I liked, but I won’t, because it is so horribly uncomfortable when you really meet. I tried that trick with Lettice once, when a friend of Miss Briggs came to visit us. She was a very nice old lady, and awfully kind (she made me a sweet little pin-cushion for my room), but she *was* ugly! She looked just like a fat, good-natured frog, with light eyes very far apart, big, big freckles spotted over her face, and such a great, wide mouth. Well, I saw her first, and then I went upstairs, and Lettice met me and asked me what she was like. I felt mischievous, so I said that she was dark, and tall, and stately, with a long, thin face, and beautiful, melancholy eyes. Lettice went rushing downstairs, and when she saw her she stopped quite short, and began to choke and gurgle as if she were going to have a fit. She pretended that she was laughing at something Raymond was doing in the garden; but it was horribly awkward, and I vowed I’d never do it again. I should hate people to laugh at me, and it’s unkind to do things that you wouldn’t like other people to do to you—I mean—you know what I mean!”

“I know,” said Rex gravely. He looked quite serious and impressed, and Norah cast inquiring glances at his face, wondering what he could be thinking of, to make him so solemn all of a sudden.

At last, “Look here,” he said, “talking of meeting strangers, don’t stare at poor little Edna when you meet! There is—er—something—about her eyes, and she is very sensitive about it. Try and look as if you don’t notice it, you know.”

“Oh, I will!” cried Norah gushingly. She knitted her brows together, trying to think what the “something” could be. Something wrong with her lungs, and something wrong with her eyes—poor Edna! she was indeed to be pitied! “I am glad he told me, for I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for the world,” she said to herself; and many times over, during the course of the next hour, did her thoughts wander sympathetically towards her new companion.

It was a long, cold drive, but Norah could have found it in her heart to wish it were longer, as the dog-cart turned in at the gate of the Manor House and drew up before the grey stone porch. Mrs Freer came into the hall to welcome her guest, with a grey woollen shawl wrapped round her shoulders, and her little face pinched with cold.

“How do you do, dear? I’m afraid you are quite starved. Come away to the fire and get thawed before you go upstairs,” she said cordially; and Norah followed, conscious that a girl’s head had peeped out of the door to examine her, and then been cautiously withdrawn. When they entered the room, however, Miss Edna was seated demurely behind a screen, and came forward in the most proper way to shake hands with the new-comer. Norah was only conscious that she was tall, with narrow shoulders, and brown hair hanging in a long plait down her back, for the fear of seeming to stare at the “something” in her eyes about which she was so sensitive, kept her from giving more than the most casual of glances. Conversation languished under these circumstances, and presently Mrs Freer took Norah upstairs to her room to get ready for lunch. Before that meal was served, however, there was another painful ten minutes to go through downstairs, when the mistress of the house was out of the room and Rex came in to take her place. Edna was reported to be shy, but in this instance it was Norah who was tongue-tied, and the other who made the advances. It is so extremely difficult to speak to a person at whom one is forbidden to look. Norah fixed her eyes on Edna’s brooch, and said, “Yes, oh yes, she was fond of skating.” Questioned a little further, she gave a rapid glance so far upward as to include a mouth and chin, and was so much abashed by her own temerity that she contradicted herself hopelessly, and stammered out a ridiculous statement to the effect that she never used a bicycle, that is to say always—when it was fine. Edna sat silent, dismayed at the reality of the sprightly girl of whom she had heard so much, and it did not add to Norah’s comfort to hear unmistakable sounds of chuckling from the background. She darted an angry glance at Rex, scented mischief in his twitching smile, and turned at bay to stare fixedly into Edna’s face. A broad forehead, thin cheeks, a delicate pink and white complexion, dark grey eyes, wide open with curiosity, but as free from any disfigurement about which their owner could be “sensitive” as those of the visitor herself.

“Oh—oh!” gasped Norah. Rex burst into a roar of laughter, and Edna pleaded eagerly to be told of the reason of their excitement.

“He told me I was not to look at you. He told me—there was something—wrong—with your eyes; that you didn’t like people to stare at you. I—I was afraid to move,” panted Norah in indignation.

“Something wrong with my eyes! But there isn’t, is there? They are all right?” cried Edna in alarm, opening the maligned eyes to about twice their usual size, and staring at Norah in beseeching fashion. “How *could* he say anything so untrue!”

“I never said there was anything ‘wrong.’ I was very particular how I put it. I said there was ‘something’ about your eyes, and that you were sensitive about meeting strangers, and did not like to be stared at. All quite true, isn’t it? It’s not my fault if Norah chose to think you squinted,” declared Rex, jetting the best of the argument as usual, and nodding his head at Norah with the air of triumph which she found so exasperating.

Edna looked from one to the other in startled fashion, as though she were afraid that such flashing looks must be the commencement of a quarrel, and drew a sigh of relief when Norah’s dignity gave way to giggles of uncontrollable amusement.

The Squire made his appearance at the luncheon table, an irascible-looking old gentleman, with red, weather-beaten face, grey hair, and fierce white whiskers sticking out on either side. The ribbons on his wife’s cap trembled every time he spoke to her, and she said, “Yes, love, yes!” and “No, love, no!” to everything he said, as if afraid to differ from him on any subject. Norah jumped on her seat the first time he spoke to her, for his voice sounded so loud and angry. He said, “I am afraid you have had a cold drive,” in much the same tone as that in which the villain on the stage would cry—“Base villain, die a thousand deaths!” and when he called for mustard, the very rafters seemed to ring. “What on earth must he be like when he is really angry, if he is like this when he is pleased?” asked Norah of herself; but there was something in the Squire’s keen, blue eyes which took her fancy, despite his fierceness, and she noticed that when he spoke to his little daughter his face softened, while each time that she coughed, he knitted his brows and stared at her with undisguised anxiety. Edna was evidently his darling, and her delicate health the cause of much anxiety.

At two o’clock the two girls ensconced themselves behind the window curtains and exchanged confidences while watching for the first appearance of the Professor from Lancaster. Edna told Norah about the school which she left; how grieved she had been to say good-bye to her friends, and how sadly she missed their bright society, and Norah comforted her in warm-hearted fashion. “Never mind, I am coming every fortnight, and when the bright days are here you will be able to drive over and see us. I hope you will like me, for I think I shall like you very much indeed, in spite of your eyes.” Then they pinched each other, and crouched together with “Oh’s!” and “Ah’s!” of excitement, as a small, wiry figure came hurrying towards the house. It was Mr Morris, of course, but the collar of his coat was turned up and his hat pulled over his face, so that it was impossible to tell what he was really like. Only one thing was certain—he had neither a white nor a black beard, as Mr Rex had predicted.

“Let me have the first lesson! He won’t think I am so bad if he hears me first,” pleaded Edna; and at the end of an hour she came out of the drawing-room, to announce that Mr Morris was rather terrible, but that she was sure he was a good teacher, and that she had not been so frightened as she expected. Then it was Norah’s turn. She played her favourite pieces, one after the other, while Mr Morris sat at the edge of the table, watching and listening. Never a word of praise or blame did he say until she had finished the third selection. Then he looked at her fixedly with his light, grey eyes (they *were* rather goggled, after all!), and said quietly, “Well, and what do you mean to do?”

“Mean to do? I—I don’t think I understand.”

“Are you content to be a young lady amateur who plays well enough to entertain her friends in her own drawing-room, or do you mean to work seriously, and make a first-rate performer? You can do as you like. You have the talent. It is for yourself to decide.”

Norah’s face was a study in its raptured excitement. “Oh–oh!” she cried breathlessly, “I’ll work—I don’t care *how* hard I work! I love it so much. I want to do my very, very best.”

“Then I’ll work too, and do all I can to help you!” said Mr Morris in return. He jumped off the table as he spoke, and advanced towards her, rubbing his hands as one who prepares for a pleasant task. “Now then!” he cried; and for the next hour Norah was kept hard at work, with never another word of praise, but with many sharp corrections and reminders to call attention to hitherto unsuspected faults. She was radiantly happy, nevertheless, for the first step towards correcting a fault was to discover its existence, and what was the good of a teacher who did not point out what was wrong? At four o’clock Mr Morris took his departure, and Norah found that Edna had retired to her room to rest, as was her custom every afternoon. Mrs Freer was also invisible, but Rex came to join her in the drawing-room, looking particularly cheerful and self-satisfied.

“Well, has the old fellow departed? How are the knuckles? Is he any good? He looks a miserable little shrimp.”

“He’s a delightful teacher! I like him immensely! He told me I could be a splendid player if I would only work hard enough.”

“Oh, well, I could have told you as much as that myself.” It was clear that Rex thought it the polite thing to inquire about the success of the music lesson, but also that his attention was fixed on some other subject. “Look here!” he said suddenly, “the mater and Edna always rest for an hour or two in the afternoon, and I promised to look after you until they come down. Would you like a real, genuine—bloodcurdling adventure?”

Norah gave a shriek of delight. “Rather, just! I should think I would. What is it?”

“You can pin up your dress, and put on a big old coat?”

“Yes—yes!”

“And you won’t mind if you do get grimy?”

“Not a bit I’m used to—I mean, I can soon wash myself clean again.”

“Come along then! Follow me, and tread lightly. I don’t want anyone to see where we are going.” And Rex led the way down the cellar stairs, while Norah followed, afire with curiosity.

Chapter Ten.

A Dangerous Adventure.

The Manor house dated back for nearly two hundred years, and the underground premises were of an extent unknown in modern houses. Rex led the way through various flagged divisions, and leaving behind washing, wine, and coal cellars, came at last to a large door, locked and bolted. Here he stopped, and drawing a bunch of keys from his pocket, fitted one into the lock, and pushed and dragged at the door until it opened before him. “Now then,” he said, turning to Norah, “we will prepare for business! I’ve got a lantern here and two old coats; button yourself up in this, and you will come to no harm. I found these old keys in a drawer to-day, and it struck me that one of them might fit this door, so I came down to experiment before coming back for you. There is a tradition that there is a subterranean passage leading from this house to the lake, and I believe I have discovered the entrance. I’ll show you what I mean. Be careful how you tread, for the floor is strewed with rubbish.”

He took Norah by the arm as he spoke, and led her forward for two or three steps. At first the darkness appeared impenetrable, but presently her eyes became accustomed to the imperfect light, and she saw that she was standing in a long apartment, filled with all manner of odd, injured, and useless articles. Scraps of broken furniture, balks of timber, and strangely-shaped pieces of iron lay on every side. It was evidently a lumber-room of past generations which had been deserted by later tenants, for the grated windows were thick with dust, and the cobwebs hung in wreaths on the walls. Rex lighted the lantern, closed the door as quietly as might be, and dodged in and out the piles of rubbish to the far end of the cellar. “Come here! What do you think of this?” he cried triumphantly; and Norah groped her way forward, to find him standing before a part of the wall which had been broken down for some purpose and left unrepaired. The stones and mortar were piled high on the ground, and hidden behind them was a large hole opening into a dark passage. “This looks like the genuine article, doesn’t it? Are you game to explore, and see where it leads?” queried Rex; and Norah assented eagerly—

“Oh, yes, yes; I should love it! It looks so beautifully mysterious. There may be hidden treasures. Would they belong to me if I found them?”

“You would have a share, of course; the rest would be mine because I discovered the opening. Now then, I’ll go first, and hold the lantern; you will have to stoop, but it may get higher as we go along.”

The passage proved to be smooth, and, to Norah’s relief, quite dry and free from those “creepy, crawly animals” which were the only things about which she was really nervous. But Rex was wrong in thinking that it might improve in height, for it grew ever narrower and lower as they progressed, until at times they were obliged to bend almost double. “This is the way people have to crawl about inside the Pyramids,” said Rex. “It’s a queer kind of place, but I mean to go on until I find where it leads. I say, though! don’t you come on if you would rather not. You could go back to the cellar and wait for me.”

But Norah would not listen to such a suggestion. What if her back did ache, it was not every day that she had the chance of such an adventure; besides, she had no particular wish to be left alone in the dark, while it yet remained to be proved how she was to turn round when the time came for the return journey. For five minutes longer they trudged forward in silence, then Rex’s stick struck against some other substance than stone, and his outstretched hand came across a bar of iron. It proved to be a half-closed grating, shutting out the entrance into the further portion of the passage, but he was not to be turned aside by such a trifle as this, and after much pushing and banging managed to raise it sufficiently to make it possible to scramble underneath. Norah followed in agile fashion, but hardly had she done so than there came the sound of a fall, and a sharp, metallic click.

“What’s that?” cried Rex quickly, and Norah stretched out her hand to discover the cause of the noise. It came, into contact with something hard and cold, and her heart gave a leap of fear, for she realised in an instant that the trap-door had fallen, and that the click which they had heard had been the catch with which it had swung into its rightful position.

“I—I think something has fastened the grating,” she said faintly. “I can’t make it move. We shan’t be able to get back this way.”

“Oh, what nonsense! Let me come and try,” said Rex impatiently, but the passage was so narrow at this point that it was impossible for him to pass, and he had to content himself with directing Norah’s efforts. “I’ll hold the lantern; look up and down and see if you can find the fastening. Push upwards! Put your fingers in the holes, and tug with all your might. ... Try it the other way. ... Kick it with your feet!”

Norah worked with all her strength—and she was a strong, well-grown girl, with no small muscular power—but the grating stood firm as a rock, and resisted all her efforts. “It’s no use, Rex,” she panted desperately; and there was silence for a few moments, broken by a sound which was strangely like the beating of two anxious hearts.

“Well, we shall just have to go on then, that’s all,” said Rex shortly. “A passage is bound to lead somewhere, I suppose. The worst that can happen is that we may have a walk home, and you couldn’t come to much harm in that coat!”

“Oh no! I shall be all right,” said Norah bravely. For a few moments she had been horribly frightened, but Rex’s matter-of-fact speech had restored her confidence in his leadership. Of course the passage must have an outlet. She considered where they would come out, and even smiled faintly to herself at the thought of the comical figure which she would cut, striding through the lanes in the squire’s old yellow mackintosh. She was determined to let Rex see that though she was only a girl, she could be as brave as any boy; but it was difficult to keep up her spirits during the next ten minutes, for the passage seemed to grow narrower all the time, while the air was close and heavy. A long time seemed to pass while they groped their way forward, then suddenly Rex’s stick struck against some obstacle directly in his path, and he stopped short.

“What is it?” cried Norah fearfully. It seemed an endless time to the poor child before he answered, in a voice so strained and hoarse as to be hardly recognisable.

“The passage is blocked. It is walled up. We cannot get any further!” Rex lifted the lantern as he spoke and looked anxiously into the girl’s face, but Norah said nothing. It seemed as if she could not realise the meaning of his words, but there was a dizzy feeling in her head as if a catherine-wheel were whirling round and round, and she felt suddenly weak and tired, so that she was obliged to sit down and lean against the wall.

Rex bent over her with an anxious face.

“You are not going to faint, Norah?”

“Oh, no; I am—quite well.”

There was a long silence, then—“Rex,” said Norah, in a very weak little voice, “did anyone know that you were down in the cellars to-day?”

Rex cleared his throat in miserable embarrassment.

“No, Norah. I am afraid no one saw me.”

“Will they miss the keys?”

“They are very old keys, Norah. Nobody uses them.”

A little frightened gasp sounded in his ear, but Norah said no more. Rex clenched his fist and banged it fiercely on his knee.

“Idiot! idiot that I was! What business had I to let you come. It’s all my fault. It was no place for a girl; but the opening looked right enough, and I thought—”

“I know. Besides, you asked me if I would like an adventure, and I said I would. I came of my own free will. Don’t be angry with yourself, Rex; it is as much my fault as yours.”

“You are a little brick, Norah,” said a husky voice, and Rex’s hand gripped hers with a quick, strong pressure. “I never thought a girl could be so plucky. I’ll not forget—” He broke off suddenly, and Norah’s voice was very unsteady as she asked the next question—

“If—if we shouted very loudly would anyone hear?”

“I—er— Think how far away from the house we must be by this time, Norah!”

There was a long, throbbing silence. Rex sat with his head bent forward on his knees; Norah stared blankly before her, her face looking thin and ghost-like in the dim light. The silence grew oppressive, and presently the lad raised his head and touched his companion on the arm. “Don’t look like that, Norah. What is it? Norah, speak! What are you thinking about?” He had to bend forward to hear the answer, for Norah’s lips were dry, and her throat parched as with thirst.

“Poor father!” she gasped; and Rex started at the sound with a stab of pain.

“Don’t! I can’t bear it. Norah, for pity’s sake don’t give in—don’t give up hope. Something will happen—it will—it must! We shall get out all right.”

“But if we can’t go forward, and if we can’t go back, and if no one can hear us call,” said Norah, still in the same slow, gasping accents, “I don’t see—how—we can. ... Rex! how long shall we have to wait before we—”

“If you say that word, Norah, I’ll never forgive you! We must get out—we *shall* get out! Come, rouse yourself like a good girl, and I will go back to see what I can do with that grating. It’s our only chance. Lead the way until we come to the broadest part of the passage, and then I must manage to pass you somehow or other. It has to be done.”

Norah put out her hands and dragged herself wearily to her feet. The feeble gleam of the lantern seemed only to call attention to the inky blackness, and the air was so close and noisome, that she breathed in heavy pants. It had been a delightful adventure to explore this passage, so long as it was in her power to turn back at any moment; but now that there was this dreadful terror of not being able to get out at all, it seemed like a living grave, and poor Norah staggered forward in sick despair. As they neared the grating, however, it became possible to stand upright, and this,

in itself, was a relief, for her back was aching from long stooping.

Rex laid down the lantern at a safe distance, and put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "Now then, Norah, I am going to squeeze past. I may hurt you a little, but it will be only for a moment. Stretch your arms out flat against the wall, turn your head sideways, and make yourself as small as you can. I will take off my coat. Now! Are you ready?"

"Ready!" said Norah faintly; and the next moment it seemed as if the breath were being squeezed out of her body, as Rex pressed her more and more tightly against the wall. A horrible gasp of suffocation, a wild desire to push him off and fight for her own liberty, and then it was all over, and they were standing side by side, gasping, panting, and tremulous.

"That's over!" sighed Rex thankfully. "Poor Norah! I am afraid I hurt you badly, but it was the best plan to get it over as quickly as possible. Now then, hold up the lantern, and let me have a look round." ...

It was a time of breathless suspense as Rex went carefully over every inch of the door, examining niche and corner in the hope of discovering the secret of the spring by which it was moved. The grating was rusty with age, and had evidently stuck in the position in which he had found it an hour before, when his vigorous shakings had loosened the springs by which it was moved. Try as he might, however, he could not succeed in moving it a second time; there was no sign of knob or handle; he could find no clue to its working.

"It's no use, Rex," said Norah feebly. "You will have to give it up." But the lad's indomitable will would not permit him to agree in any such conclusion.

"I will never give it up!" he cried loudly. "I brought you into this place, and I'll get you out of it, if I have to break every bar with my own hands—if I have to pick the stones out of the wall! Move along a few yards; I'm going to lie down on my back, and try what kicking will do."

No sooner said than done. Rex stretched himself at full length on the ground, moved up and down to get at the right distance, and began to assail the grating with a series of such violent kicks as woke a babel of subterranean echoes. Not in vain he had been the crack "kick" of the football team at school; not in vain had he exercised his muscles ever since childhood in scrambling over mountain heights, and taking part in vigorous out-of-door sports. Norah clasped her hands in a tremor of excitement. It seemed to her that no fastenings in the world could long withstand such a battery, and when Rex suddenly sprang to his feet and charged at the door, she fairly shrieked with exultation.

"Go on! Go on! It shakes! I'm sure it shakes! Oh, Rex, kick! kick for your life!" It was a superfluous entreaty. The strength of ten men seemed to be concentrated in the lad for the next ten minutes, as he fought the iron grating, changing from one position to another, as signs of increasing weakness appeared in different parts of the framework. Norah gasped out encouragement in the background, until at last, with a crash and bang, the old springs gave way, and the grating fell to the ground.

"Now—come!" shouted Rex. He did not waste a moment in rejoicing; now that the barrier was removed both he and Norah were possessed with but one longing—to get out of the passage as quickly as possible into light, and air, and safety. Two minutes later they were seated side by side on one of the beams of timber on the cellar floor, gazing into each other's face with distended eyes. Rex was purple with the strain of his late efforts—his breath came pantingly, his hair lay in damp rings on his forehead. Norah's face was ghastly white; she was trembling from head to foot.

"Thank God!" said Rex solemnly. They were his first words, and Norah bent her head with a little sob of agitation.

"Oh, thank God! We might have been buried alive in that awful place."

Rex took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead, looking anxiously at his companion the while. "You don't think you will be ill, do you, Norah? You look horribly white."

"Oh no!—oh no! I shall be all right in an hour, but I shall never forget it. Rex, I think we ought to be awfully good all our lives—we have had such a wonderful escape, and we know now how it feels— When I thought I was never going to come out of that passage, I was sorry I had been cross to Hilary, and—so selfish! I made up my mind if I had another chance—"

"I don't believe you have ever done anything wrong, Norah," said Rex, in a low, husky voice. There was a long silence, then—"My father will feel inclined to kill me when he hears about this!" he added shortly.

Norah started. "But need we tell them? I don't think it would be wrong to say nothing about it. We are safe, and it has taught us to be more careful in future. It would only upset everyone, and make them miserable, if they knew we had been in such danger. I'll slip quietly to my room, and it shall be a secret between us, Rex—you and I."

Rex looked at her in silence, with his big, keen eyes. "You are the best little soul in the world, Norah," he said. "I wish I were like you!"

Chapter Eleven.

The New Mary.

Norah was white and subdued for the rest of the evening, but as she was a stranger to three out of the four members of the household, this unusual fact attracted little attention. It was taken for granted that, like Edna, she was exhausted by the excitement of the first music lesson, and both girls were despatched to bed at an early hour.

Next morning Rex hied off to the Vicarage, to work for a couple of hours with the vicar, a scholarly recluse, with whom he was reading for college, and the girls were left alone to pursue their acquaintance. Conversation naturally turned on Rex, but Edna told the story of his discontent from a fresh point of view.

“Father doesn’t ask him to choose a profession if he would rather go into business, but he thinks every man is the better for a college education, and that Rex is too young to decide for himself until he is twenty-one. If he works till then, he can do what he likes in the future. But Rex is so obstinate; he thinks he is a man because he is nearly eighteen, and wants to have his own way at once. It makes father so angry.”

Norah pursed up her lips. She could imagine that a conflict of wills between the old Squire and his son would be no trifling matter. In imagination, she saw them standing facing each other, the father ruddy, bristling, energetic, Rex straight and tall, his lips set, his eyes gleaming. They were too like each other in disposition for either to find it easy to give way.

“Boys are a great trial,” she said, sighing profoundly. “We have two, you know—Raymond and Bob. They have gone back to school now, and the house is so peaceful. I am glad I wasn’t born a boy. They never seem happy unless there is a disturbance going on. But both Rex and your father seem so fond of you. Can’t you coax them round?”

“Oh, I daren’t!” Edna looked quite alarmed. “Mother and I never interfere; we leave them to fight it out between themselves. But if they go on fighting for the next three years it won’t be very lively, I must say!”

Edna would have been as much surprised as delighted if she had known that the conflict which had so long destroyed the peace of the household was at an end, even as she spoke. No one could fail to notice that the Squire was in an unusually radiant frame of mind at luncheon, or that he addressed his son with marked favour; but it was not until the drive home was nearly over, and the gates of Cloudsdale in view, that Rex enlightened his companion’s curiosity on the point. He cleared his throat once or twice in a curious, embarrassed manner, before he began to speak.

“Er—Norah—I’ve something to tell you. When we were shut up in that hole last night, I was thinking too. The governor has been very good to me, and it seems ungrateful to stand out about college, when he is so keen on it. It is only for three years. I—er—I told him this morning that I would do my best till I was twenty-one, if he would promise to let me have a free choice after that.”

“Oh, Rex, did you? I am so glad. I am sure you will never regret it. You will always be glad that you did what your father wished, even if it is hard at the time. I think you are very, very good and kind, and unselfish.”

“All right! You needn’t gush. I hate girls who gush,” said Rex curtly; and Norah understood that she was to say no more on the subject, and collapsed into obedient silence.

It seemed a day of good resolutions, for Norah could not but notice that Hilary looked ill and was obviously in low spirits. Her greeting had been more affectionate than usual; nevertheless, the remembrance of the quarrel of a few days earlier still rankled in Norah’s mind, and the resolutions of yesterday were too fresh to allow her to be satisfied without a definite reconciliation. The first time they were alone together, she burst into impetuous apologies. “Oh, Hilary, I wanted to say that I’m sorry I was cross on Monday. I don’t mind a bit about the drawing-room; alter it in any way you like. Of course you know better how things should be, after staying in London. I’m sorry I was rude, but I did dust it, really!”

To her surprise, the tears rose in Hilary’s eyes, and she looked absolutely distressed. “Oh, Norah, don’t! I’m sorry too. I didn’t think I had grumbled so much. But Miss Carr’s house is so beautiful, and when I came home—”

“I know. But it looks ever so much nicer in summer, when the doors are open and the flowers are in bloom. If you like to move the piano, and make it stand out from the walls, I’ll give you my yellow silk for the drapery. Aunt Amy sent it to me for a dress, but I’ve never used it.”

“Thank you, Norah; it’s awfully good of you, but I shall have something else to do besides draping pianos for the next few weeks, I’m afraid,” said Hilary dismally. “Mary has given notice!” And the poor little housekeeper heaved a sigh, for Mary had been a model housemaid, and it would be a difficult matter to replace her in this quiet country place.

“Mary given notice! Oh, how horrid! I hate strange servants, and she has been with us so long. Why ever is she—” Norah checked herself with a quick recollection of the events of the last week, but Hilary did not shirk the unfinished question.

“She was vexed because I found fault. I felt cross and worried, and vented it on her. I didn’t realise it at the time, but I see now that I was unreasonable.” And to hear Hilary confess a fault was an experience so extraordinary, that Norah sat dumbfounded, unable to account for the phenomenon.

The threatened loss of Mary was too important a family event to pass unnoticed in the general conversation. Lettice was full of lamentations, and even Rex had a tribute to pay to her excellence. “The big, strapping girl, who waited on me when I was laid up? Oh, I say, what a nuisance! I wish she would come to us; she has such a jolly good-natured face.”

“If she came to you, I would never stay at your house again. I’d be too jealous,” said Norah dolefully. “We shall never get anyone like Mary.”

“We may be thankful if we get anyone at all. Girls don’t like living so far from the village,” groaned Lettice in concert; and the virtues of Mary, and the difficulties of supplanting her, were discussed at length throughout the afternoon. Hilary’s sense of guilt in the matter made her even more energetic than usual in her efforts to find a new maid. She visited the local registry offices, inserted advertisements in the papers, and wrote reams of letters; and, on the third

day, to her delight, a young woman arrived to apply for the situation. It was the first time that the duty of interviewing a new servant had devolved upon Hilary's shoulders, for all three maids had been in the family for years, and, in her new doubtfulness of self, she would have been glad to ask the help of Miss Briggs, but that good lady had taken Geraldine for a walk, and there was no help at hand.

"I don't know if she is afraid of me, but I am certainly terrified of her!" said poor Hilary, smoothing her hair before the glass, and trying to make herself look as staid and grown-up as possible. "I don't know what on earth to say. Lettice, come and sit in the room, there's a dear, and see what you think of her. I shouldn't like to engage anyone on my own responsibility." So the two girls went downstairs together, and Lettice looked on from a quiet corner, while Hilary sat bolt upright, cross-questioning the new servant. She was a tall, awkward girl, untidily dressed, with a fly-away hat perched on the top of her head, a spotted veil drawn over her face, and the shabbiest of boas wound round her neck. "What a contrast to our nice, trim Mary!" groaned Lettice to herself, while Hilary cudgelled her brain to think of appropriate questions.

"And—er—have you been accustomed to housemaid's work?"

"Oh, yes, miss. I'm very handy about a house, miss. I'm sure I could give you satisfaction, miss."

("I don't like her voice. She has not nearly such nice manners as Mary," sighed Hilary to herself. "Oh dear me!")

"And—er—can you—er—get up in the morning without being called?"

"Oh yes, miss; I'm fond of early rising. It's never any trouble to me to get up."

"And—er—we are rather a large family, and I am very particular. Are you quite strong and able to work?"

"Oh yes, miss; quite strong, miss. Never had a day's illness in my life."

"And—er—(there must be other questions to ask, but it's terribly difficult to think of them. I can't ask her to her face if she is honest and sober—it's absurd," thought Hilary in despair). "And—er—er—I suppose you are good-tempered, and would not quarrel with the other servants?"

"Oh yes, miss. Oh no, miss. All my mistresses would say for me, I'm sure, miss, that there never was a girl with a sweeter temper. I couldn't hurt a fly, miss, I'm sure I couldn't, I've such a tender heart."

("I'm sure she has nothing of the kind. I don't like her a bit; but, oh dear! what can I do? If she goes on agreeing with all I say, I have no excuse for telling her that she won't suit.")

"And—er—you would have to attend to all the bedrooms, and the schoolroom, and help the parlour-maid with the waiting. If you have not been accustomed to a large family, I am afraid you would find it a heavy place."

"Oh no, miss; not too heavy, miss. I'm never so happy as when I'm working. I've been brought up to work."

"Yes—but—but—but I'm afraid you would not suit me," cried Hilary, summoning the courage in despair, and

"'I won't stir an inch till I've had my lunch.'"

determined, at all costs, to put an end to the interview. "I won't trouble you to send your character, for perhaps your mistress might object to give it twice, and I—er—you see—I don't quite know when my present maid is leaving, and I think—I am afraid—"

"Oh, it's no trouble at all, miss. I'll bring it with pleasure. I am sure you would suit me very well. I've always heard of you as such a good mistress, and I'd like to live with you; I would indeed!"

Hilary sat dumbfounded. She was beginning to feel quite afraid of this terrible young woman who stood up before

her, looking so tall and formidable, and tossing her head until all the shabby black feathers shook again on her hat. “I—I won’t detain you any longer,” she said icily, as she rose from her seat. “You can leave your address, and if I change my mind I will let you know.” She laid her hand on the bell as she spoke, but, to her amazement, the young woman suddenly flopped down on a chair, and folded her arms with a determined gesture.

“I won’t stir an inch till I’ve had my lunch,” she said; and from beneath the skirts of her dress there appeared a pair of stout, hob-nailed boots; from within her muff, two big, brown hands; and beneath the veil, a laughing, mischievous face.

“Rex!” screamed Hilary, at the pitch of her voice. “Oh, you horrible, deceiving, bad, impertinent boy!”

“Rex!” echoed Lettice in chorus. “Oh, oh! how lovely I how delicious! However did you do it? Norah!—Norah! Norah! Oh, do come here!”

In rushed Norah, breathless with curiosity, to know what had happened, and the next ten minutes was passed in a clamour of questionings. When had he thought of it? How had he thought of it? Where had he found the clothes? How had he dressed? etcetera, etcetera.

Rex paraded the room with mincing steps, and simpered at his own reflection in the looking-glass.

“Old things of the mater’s and Edna’s. Brought ’em over in the cart, and dressed in the summer-house. What a nice girl I should have made, to be sure! Seems quite a waste, doesn’t it? I say, though, I am nearly suffocating with heat. Can’t I go and take them off somewhere?”

He was crossing the hall on the way to the cloak-room, when who should come tripping downstairs but Mary herself, trim and neat as ever, but casting a glance the reverse of approving at the strange young woman who had come to supplant herself.

“Good morning, Mary. I’ve come to apply for the place,” said Rex gravely; then suddenly picking up his skirts, displayed his trousered legs underneath, and executed a wild schottische round the hall.

Mary gave a shriek, put her hand to her heart, and sank down on the stairs, brushes and all, in a breathless heap. “Oh, Mr Rex, oh! I never in all my life! Oh, what a turn you gave me! Oh! oh! oh!” And she gasped and panted till Norah became alarmed, and went up to pat her on the shoulder.

“Don’t, Mary, don’t! Oh, Mary, I wish it was all fun. I wish you weren’t going.”

“So do I, Miss Norah. I don’t want to leave you, but Miss Hilary—”

“I don’t want you to go, Mary. I would rather have you than anyone else.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” Rex pranced round the hall in wild delight. “Look at that now! Reginald Freer, Esquire, peacemaker and housemaid-waitress. Apply—Brathey Manor—”

“What in the world is the matter? Has everyone gone mad? How am I supposed to write in this uproar?” Mr Bertrand appeared at his study door with an expression of long-enduring misery, whereat there was a general stampede, and the house subsided into silence.

Chapter Twelve.

Visitors Arrive.

Whitsuntide fell in the beginning of June, and as Hilary went a tour of inspection round the house and grounds, she was proudly conscious that everything was looking its very best. The rooms were sweet with the scent of flowers; the open doors and windows showed a vista of well-kept lawn, and in the distance the swelling height of mountains, beautiful with that peculiar rich, velvet green which can be seen in no other country in the world. Who would pause to notice the deficiencies of curtain and carpet, when they could look out of the window and see such a scene as that? As for the garden itself, it was a miracle of beauty, for the flowering trees were still in bloom, while the wild roses had thrown their branches high over the tall fir trees, and transformed the drive into a fairy bower.

Hilary had special reasons for wishing everything to appear at its best to-day, for two visitors were expected to arrive by the afternoon train—Miss Carr, and the crippled author, Henry Rayner himself. Half-a-dozen times she made a round of inspection, each time finding some trifling alteration or addition to make to her preparations. At last, however, all was ready: the tea-tray laid in the drawing-room, her own white dress donned, a bunch of roses pinned in her belt; and there was nothing left but to wait in such patience as she could command, while Lettice and Norah looked at her slyly and exchanged glances of approval.

“Doesn’t she look nice?” they whispered; and, indeed, Hilary was looking her best this afternoon, with the pretty flush in her cheeks, and her eyes alight with excitement. A few minutes after six o’clock the fly drove up to the door, and there sat Miss Carr, in her fashionable London bonnet, and, beside her, Mr Rayner, pale and delicate as ever, but looking around him with an air of intense delight in the beautiful surroundings. Mr Bertrand was on the front seat, and Hilary came forward to do the honours with much less assurance than she would have shown six months earlier.

“My dear, good child, have you any tea? I am perishing of thirst!” cried Miss Carr loudly. She was so bustling and matter-of-fact, that she was the best remedy in the world for shyness; and Hilary led the way to the drawing-room with recovered equanimity. She had only had time for a quick hand-shake with the other visitor, but the glance which

had been exchanged between them was delightful in its memory of past meetings—its augury of good times to come.

“And here are your other big girls. Dear me!” said Miss Carr, bestowing a hasty glance at Norah, and staring hard at Lettice over the edge of her cup. “I remember them all in long clothes, but I shall make a point of forgetting them soon if they go on growing up like this. There is a limit to everything—even to the memory of an old woman like myself. The boys are at school, I suppose? But the little one—my baby—Geraldine?”

“Quite well, sank you—how are you?” said the Mouse, coming forward from her hiding-place, and holding out her tiny hand, with a sweet-faced gravity which was too much for the good lady’s composure. Down went the teacup on the table, and Geraldine was folded in a hearty embrace.

“Bless your innocent face! I’m well, my darling—a great deal better for seeing you. You don’t remember me, do you?”

The Mouse put her head on one side as if considering how to answer truthfully, without hurting the visitor’s feelings. “I *sink* I don’t,” she said slowly, “only p’raps I shall by-and-by. I’m very pleased to see you.”

“There now! What do you think of that? She couldn’t possibly belong to anyone in the world but you, Austin,” cried Miss Carr in triumph; and Mr Rayner held out his hand to the child with a smile that showed that the Mouse had added yet another to the long list of her adorers.

It was not until dinner was over and the whole party had strolled into the garden, that Hilary had a chance of a quiet talk with Mr Rayner; but when her father and Miss Carr began to pace up and down the lawn, he came up to her with a gesture of invitation.

“Won’t you sit down for a few minutes on this seat?” Then, with a smile of friendly interest, “Well—how goes it?—How goes it?”

Hilary drew in her breath with a gasp of pleasure. She had not realised when in London how greatly she had been touched and impressed by her meetings with the crippled author; it was only after she had returned to the quiet of the country home that she had found her thoughts returning to him again and again, with a longing to confide her troubles in his ear; to ask his advice, and to see the kindly sympathy on his face. The deep, rich tone of his voice as he said that “How goes it?” filled her with delighted realisation that the long-looked-for time had arrived.

“Oh, pretty well—better and worse! I have been making discoveries.”

“About—?”

“Myself, I think!” And Hilary stretched out her hands with a little gesture of distaste, which was both graceful and natural.

Mr Rayner looked at her fixedly beneath bent brows. “Poor little Two Shoes!” he said gravely. “So soon! It hurts, Two Shoes, but it’s good in the end. Growing pains, you know!”

“Yes!” said Hilary softly. It was good to find someone who understood without asking questions or forcing confidence. “And you?” she asked presently, raising her eyes to his with a smile of inquiry—“what have you been doing?”

“I? Oh! making discoveries also, I fear; among others, the disagreeable one that I can no longer work as I used, or as other men work, and must, therefore, be satisfied to be left behind in the race. But we are getting melancholy, and it’s a shame even to think of disagreeable subjects in a place like this. What a perfect view! I should never tire of looking at those mountains.”

“Aren’t they beautiful? That is Coniston Old Man right before us, and those are the Langdale Pikes over there to the right. I like them best of all, for they stand out so well, and in winter, when they are covered with snow, they look quite awful. Oh, I am so glad you have come! We generally have good weather in June, and we will have such lovely drives—”

Meantime Mr Bertrand and Miss Carr were having an animated conversation.

“What do you think of my three little girls?” had been his first question, and Miss Carr laughed derisively as she answered—

“Little girls, indeed! They will be grown-up women before you know where you are, Austin. I like that young Norah. There is something very taking about her bright, little face. Miss Consequence has improved, I think; not quite so well pleased with herself, which means more pleasing to other people. She looks well in that white dress. As for Miss Lettice, she is quite unnecessarily good-looking.”

“Isn’t she lovely?” queried Mr Bertrand eagerly. “And you will find her just as sweet as she looks. They have been very good and contented all spring, but it has been in the expectation of your visit, and the changes which you were to make. We are looking to you to solve all our difficulties.”

“Very kind of you, I am sure. It’s not an easy position to fill. The difficulty, so far as I can see, is compressed into the next three years. After that you will have to face it, Austin, and come back to town. You can keep on this house for a summer place, if you wish, but the boys will be turning out into the world by then, and you ought to be in town to keep a home for them. Hilary will be twenty-one, the other two not far behind, and it is not fair to keep girls of that age in this out-of-the-way spot all the year round, when it can be avoided. For the next three years you can go on very well as you are; after that—”

“I’m afraid so! I’m afraid you are right. I’ve thought so myself,” said Mr Bertrand dolefully. “I can’t say I look forward

to the prospect, but if it must be done, it must. I must make the most of my three last years. And, meantime, you think the girls are all right as they are? I need make no change?”

Miss Carr pressed her lips together without speaking, while they paced slowly up and down the lawn. “I think,” she said slowly, at last, “that three girls are rather too many in a house like this. You have Miss Briggs to look after Geraldine, and three servants to do the work. There cannot be enough occupation or interest to keep three young people content and happy. I have thought several times during the spring, Austin, that it would be a good plan if you lent one of your daughters to me for a year or two.”

“My dear Helen! A year or two! One of my girls!”

“Yes—yes! I knew that you would work yourself up into a state of excitement. What a boy you are, Austin! Listen quietly, and try to be reasonable. If you send one of the girls to me, I will see that she finishes her education under the best masters; that she makes her entrance into society at the right time, and has friends of whom you would approve. It would be a great advantage—”

“I know it, I feel it, and I am deeply grateful, Helen; but it can’t be done. I can’t separate myself from my children.”

“You manage to exist without your boys for nine months of the year; and I would never wish to separate you. She could come home for Christmas and a couple of months in summer, and you yourself are in town half-a-dozen times in the course of the year. You could always stay at my house.”

“Yes, yes; it’s all true; but I don’t like it, Helen, and—”

“And you think only of yourself. It never occurs to you that I have not a soul belonging to me in that big, lonely house, and that it might be a comfort to me to have a bright young girl—”

Mr Bertrand stopped short in the middle of the lawn and stared into his companion’s face. There was an unusual flush on her cheeks, and her eyes glistened with tears.

“Oh, my dear Helen,” he cried. “I am a selfish wretch! I never thought of that. Of course, if you put it in that light, I can say no more. My dear old friend—I accept your offer with thanks! You have done so much for me, that I can refuse you nothing. It will be a lifelong advantage to the child, and I know you will make her happy.”

“I will, indeed; and you may trust me, Austin, to consider more than mere happiness. I will do my best to make her such a woman as her dear mother was before her.”

“I know you will. Thank you, Helen. And which—which—?”

“Nay, I am not going to tell you that.” Miss Carr had brushed the tears from her eyes, and with them all signs of her unusual emotion. She was herself again—sharp, decisive, matter-of-fact. “I must have my choice, of course; but I will take a week to make up my mind. And she must be left entirely in my hands for the time being, remember! I shall look after her clothes, education, pleasuring, as if she were my own child. There must be no interference.”

“Obstinate woman! Who would dare to enter the lists against you?” cried Mr Bertrand between a laugh and a sigh. “Heigho! Which of my little lasses am I going to lose? Whichever it is, I shall feel she is the last I could spare, and shall bear you a grudge for your choice. Can’t you give me a hint?”

“No! and I wouldn’t if I could. I’ll tell you when I am ready,” said Miss Carr coolly. And that settled the question for the time being.

Chapter Thirteen.

A Tête-à-Tête.

During the next few days the girls could not help noticing a peculiar contradiction in their father’s manner towards themselves. He was alternately demonstratively affectionate and unreasonably irritable. He snubbed Norah’s performance on the violin, scolded Lettice because she was wearing white dresses instead of her old blue serge, and called attention to flaws in the housekeeping in a manner which sent the iron into Hilary’s soul. And then, when a chance meeting occurred on the landing or stairs, he would throw his arms round them and kiss them over and over again with passionate tenderness.

“Something is happening, but I haven’t the remotest idea what it is,” said Norah to her sisters; and it added to their curiosity to notice that Miss Carr was openly amused at their father’s demeanour, while he was as evidently embarrassed by her quizzical smiles.

Mr Bertrand had decided to say nothing of Miss Carr’s invitation until that lady had made her final choice; but when the third day came he could restrain himself no longer, and taking the girls aside he proceeded to inform them of the new life which was before one of their number. The news was received in characteristic fashion. Hilary stood in silence, thinking deeply; Lettice promptly burst into tears, and clung round her father’s arm; and Norah blurted out a dozen contradictory speeches.

“How horrid of her! I won’t go! I should hate to leave you all. It’s very kind. ... The best masters! It would be lovely, of course, but— Oh, dear! whom will she choose?”

“I couldn’t leave home, father. Who would look after the house? It would be impossible for Lettice to do the

housekeeping. Miss Carr knows me best. I should love it if it were not for leaving home."

"I don't want to go! I don't want to leave you. Oh, father, father! I'd be so homesick! Don't let me go!"

Mr Bertrand stroked Lettice's golden locks, and looked on the point of breaking down himself.

"Whichever Miss Carr chooses will have to go," he said slowly. "I have promised as much, and I think it will be for the best. I shall be in town every two or three months, and she will come home for the Christmas and the summer holidays, so that it will not be a desperate matter. Don't cry, my pet; you are only one of three, remember; it is by no means certain that Miss Carr would have you, even if you begged to go. Perhaps I should not have said anything about it; but it was on my mind, and I was bound to speak. London is a fascinating place. It is the centre of the world—it *is* the world; you will find many compensations."

"I shall see a great deal of Mr Rayner. I'm sure she will choose me. It's only fair. I'm the eldest, and she knows me best," thought Hilary to herself.

"I should go to the Royal College of Music, learn from the best masters, and play at the concerts," thought Norah. "I wonder if it would stop Edna's lessons! I should feel mean if it did that, and I *do* enjoy going over every fortnight and having fun at the Manor!"

Lettice sobbed on her father's shoulder, and tried to smother the thought that it would be "nice" to know grand people, and drive in the park dressed in pretty, fashionable clothes.

Very little more was said on the subject. The girls were shy of revealing their secret thoughts, and Mr Bertrand was already beginning to repent the confidence which had had the effect of damping their high spirits.

"We must get up an excursion of some kind to-morrow, or we shall all be in the blues," he said to himself, and when tea-time arrived he had all the plans cut and dried.

"A char-à-banc will be at the door at half-past ten to-morrow, good people. We will drive over to Grasmere and lunch at the Rothay. It is convenient for the churchyard and the gingerbread shop, and there is a good garden. We can lounge about in the afternoon, and get back in time for a late dinner. There will be eight of us, and the char-à-banc holds twelve, so we shall have plenty of room."

"Oh, father!—Rex and Edna! Do let us ask them! There is time to send a letter to-night, and we could pick them up at the cross-roads. Oh, father!"

"Oh, Norah! Certainly, my dear; ask your friends if you wish. I shall be pleased to have them," said Mr Bertrand laughingly; and Norah rushed off in delight to scribble her note of invitation.

When the char-à-banc came to the door the next morning, Hilary busied herself looking after the storage of cloaks, cushions, camp-stools, and various little etceteras which would add to the comfort of the excursion. She looked a very attractive little mistress of the ceremonies as she bustled about, with a sailor hat on her head and the nattiest little brown shoes in the world peeping out from beneath the crisp, white, pique skirts. Hilary was one of the fortunate people who seemed to have been born tidy, and to have kept so ever since. The wind which played havoc with Norah's locks never dared to take liberties with her glossy coils; the nails which tore holes in other people's garments politely refrained from touching hers; and she could walk through the muddiest streets and come home without a speck upon boots or skirt.

Mr Rayner leant on his crutches and watched her active movements with the wistful glance which was so often seen upon his face. Hilary knew that for the thousandth time he was chafing at his own inability to help, and made a point of consulting him on several matters by way of proving that there were more ways than one in which he could be of service.

"I don't know. In the front—in the back; put them where you like. Are you going to sit beside me?" he replied hurriedly, and with an undisguised eagerness which brought a flush of pleasure into the girl's cheek.

"Oh, yes, I should like to!"

Hilary stood still in a little glow of exultation. The last few days had been delightful with their experiences of lounging, driving, and boating, but the coach-drive along the lovely roads, side by side with Mr Rayner, able to point out each fresh beauty as it appeared, and to enjoy a virtual *tête-à-tête* for the whole of the way—that was best of all! And he had chosen her as his companion before Lettice, before Norah, before any one of the party! The thought added largely to her satisfaction.

As Miss Carr refused point-blank to take the box seat, and as Mr Bertrand insisted that it should be taken by the other visitor, Hilary advanced to the ladder, and was about to climb up to the high seat, when she turned back with an expression of anxious inquiry.

Mr Rayner stood immediately behind, but his "Please go on!" showed that he understood her hesitation, and was annoyed at the suggestion of help. She seated herself, therefore, and tried in vain to look at ease while he followed. For two or three steps he managed to support himself on his crutches with marvellous agility; on the fourth they slipped, and if he had not been seized from behind by Mr Bertrand and pulled forward by Hilary's outstretched hand, he must have had a serious fall. Hilary literally dare not look at his face for the first ten minutes of the drive, for with an instinctive understanding of another person's feeling which was a new experience to this self-engrossed little lady, she realised that he was smarting beneath the consciousness of having made himself an object of general commiseration. Whatever happened, he must not think that she was pitying him. She racked her brain to think of

something to say—some amusing stories to tell. “I wish we were going on a coach instead of a char-à-banc. I love to see the drivers in their white hats and red coats, and to hear the horns blowing. There is something so cheerful about a horn! We are getting to know all the drivers quite well now. I say ‘getting to know,’ because it takes quite three years to know a North-countryman. They are so terribly reserved! Last year I was on the box seat of a coach sitting next to the driver whom we knew best of all. There were some American ladies behind who kept worrying him with questions all the while. ‘Driver, will you show us Wordsworth’s house?’ ‘Driver, you won’t forget Wordsworth’s house?’ ‘Driver, hev you passed by Wordsworth’s house?’ He just sat like a statue and took no notice whatever. Poor man! I wonder how many thousand times he has been asked those questions! One of the horses had bandages round his front leg, and at last I said—I believe I was trying to show off a little bit, you know, just to let them see how polite he would be with me—I said, ‘Oh, Robert, why has the off leader got gaiters on to-day?’ His face was just as blank as if I had never spoken. We drove along in silence for about ten minutes, while I got hotter and hotter. Then he cleared his throat deliberately, and said, ‘Well, in the first place—he needs ’em! and in the second place—he likes ’em! and in the third place—he can’t do without ’em!’ I felt so small!”

A forced “Humph!” being the only reception which the story received, Hilary braced herself to fresh efforts. Two or three experiences of North-country manners were suggested by the last; she related them in her liveliest manner, and even forced herself to laugh merrily at the conclusion. “So funny, wasn’t it? Don’t you think it was good?”

The char-à-banc had now reached Bowness, and, for the first time, she ventured a glance into her companion’s face. He met her eyes and smiled, the slow, sweet smile that transformed his expression.

“I know someone who is good,” he said meaningly. “You have talked yourself out of breath trying to drive away the evil spirit. It’s too bad! I am ashamed of my own stupidity.”

“I wish—” began Hilary eagerly, and stopped short as suddenly as she had begun.

“You wish? Yes, what is it? Tell me, do! I want to hear—”

Hilary paused for a moment and turned her head over her shoulder. A reassuring clatter of voices came to her ear. Rex, Norah, and Lettice chattering away for their lives, and Edna’s soft laughter greeting each new joke. The young folks were too much taken up with their own conversation to have any attention to spare for the occupants of the box seat. She could speak without fear of being overheard.

“I wish you would try not to be so cross with yourself for being lame!”

Mr Rayner winced in the old, pained manner, but the next moment he began to smile.

“‘Cross’! That’s a curious way of expressing it. How am I cross?”

“Oh, always—every way! Every time it is alluded to in the most distant way, you flare up and get angry. You have snubbed me unmercifully three or four times.”

“I have snubbed you? I!” He seemed overcome with consternation. “Miss Hilary, what an accusation. I have never felt anything but sincerest gratitude for your sympathy—I suppose I am stupid. I ought to be hardened to it by this time, but after being so strong, so proud of my strength, it is a bitter pill to find myself handicapped like this—a burden to everybody.”

“You have been with us now for nearly a week, and there have only been two occasions on which you have seemed any different from another man, and each time,” said Hilary, with unflinching candour, “it has been entirely your own fault! You would not let yourself be helped when it was necessary. If I were in your place, I would say to myself—‘I am lame! I hate it, but whether I hate it or not, it’s the truth. I am lame! and everybody knows it as well as I do. I won’t pretend that I can do all that other people do, and if they want to be kind and help me, I’ll let them, and if they don’t offer, I’ll *ask* them! Whatever happens, I am not going to do foolish, rash things which will deceive nobody, and which may end in making me lamer than ever!’ And then I’d try to think as little about it as I could, and get all the happiness that was left!”

“Oh, wise young judge!” sighed Mr Rayner sadly. “How easy it is to be resigned for another person. But you are quite right; don’t think that I am disputing the wisdom of what you say. I should be happier if I faced the thing once for all, and made up my mind as to what I can and cannot do. Well—Miss Carr told me her plans last night. If you come to London, you must keep me up to the mark. I shall hope to see a great deal of you, and if you find me attempting ridiculous things, such as that ladder business to-day, you must just—what is it I am supposed to have done?—‘snub’ me severely as a punishment.”

Hilary smiled with two-fold satisfaction. So Mr Rayner agreed with her in believing that Miss Carr’s choice was practically certain. The prospect of living in London grew more and more attractive as the various advantages suggested themselves, and she was roll of delicious anticipations.

“Oh, I will,” she said merrily. “I am glad that I did not know you before you were ill, because I see no difference now, and I can do it more easily. I think I am like the Mouse; I like you better for being different from other people. She spent a whole morning searching for twigs in the garden, and now all her dolls are supplied with crutches.”

“Dear little mortal! I never met a sweeter child,” cried Mr Rayner, and the conversation branched off to treat of Geraldine and her pretty ways.

Chapter Fourteen.

Lunch was ready when the visitors reached the hotel at Grasmere, and as they were equally ready for lunch, they lost no time in seating themselves at the large table in the window, and making a vigorous attack upon rolls and butter. The other tables were well filled, and Hilary held up her head with complacent pride, while Lettice and Norah nudged each other to call attention to the glances of curiosity and interest which were directed towards their father.

“A party of Americans, and the waiter whispered to them as we passed. Oh, father, you are in for it! *Now*—I told you so! The one with the light hair is getting up. She is going upstairs to bring down the autograph albums. Wait till you’ve finished lunch, then it will be—‘Oh, Mr Bertrand, such an honour to meet you; would you be kind enough to write your name in my little book?’”

Mr Bertrand went through a pantomime of tearing his hair. “Is there no escape?” he groaned. “It’s bad enough to be a lion in town, but I positively refuse to roar in the country. I won’t do it. I have writer’s cramp—I can’t use my right hand. Rayner, my boy, I’ll turn them on to you!”

“He is only pretending. He is really awfully pleased and flattered. Wait till you see how polite he will be when they ask him,” said Lettice mischievously; and, indeed, nothing could have been more courteous than Mr Bertrand’s manner when the American party flocked round him in the hall after luncheon.

“Your books are in every house in America, sir, and it gives us the greatest pleasure to have an opportunity of—”

“Oh, come along!” whispered Norah, pulling impatiently at Edna’s arm. “I know it all by heart. Come into the garden, both of you; Lettice and I have something to tell you—an exciting piece of news!”

“Kitten dead? New ribbons for your hats?” queried Rex indifferently. He was sceptical on the point of Norah’s “exciting confidences,” but this time Lettice looked at him reproachfully with her great, grey eyes.

“No, indeed—don’t make fun—it’s serious! Miss Carr is going to adopt one of us to live with her in London as her own daughter, for the next three years.”

“Nonsense!” Rex sat down in a heap on the grass, in front of the bench where the girls were seated. “Which?”

“Ah, that’s the mystery! She is to have her choice, and she won’t say which it is to be until Wednesday night—two days more. So, you see, you had better be polite, for you mayn’t have me with you much longer.”

“I am always polite to you,” said Rex moodily: and the statement passed unchallenged, for however much he might tease Norah, and snap at Hilary, he was always considerate for the feelings and comfort of “Lovely Lettice!”

“Oh, Norah, Norah! I hope it won’t be you!” cried Edna, clasping her hands round her friend’s arm in warm-hearted affection. “What should I do without you? We have been so happy, and have had such fun! Three years! What an age of a time! We shall be quite grown-up.”

“Yes; and after that, father is going to take a house in London, because the boys will have left school, and it will be better for them. Isn’t it horrid to think that after to-day it may never be the same for one of us again? She will only come back as a visitor, for a few weeks at a time, and everything will be strange and different—”

“And Rex may go abroad before the end of the three years, and Hilary may marry—and—oh, a hundred other horrible things. Perhaps we may never meet again all together like this until we are quite old and grey-headed. We would write to one another, of course; stiff, proper sort of letters like grown-up people write. How funny it would be! Imagine you writing to me, Edna—‘My dear Eleanora, you must not think my long silence has arisen from any want of affection towards you and yours. ... And how has it been with you, my valued friend?’”

The burst of laughter which greeted this speech did something to liven the gloom which was fast settling upon the little party, and presently Mr Bertrand’s voice was heard calling from the verandah—

“Now then, children, what are we to do until four o’clock? Do you want to go on the lake?”

“It’s no good, sir. We could row round it in ten minutes.” This from Rex, with all the scorn of a young man who owned a *Una* of his own on Lake Windermere.

“Do you want to scramble up to the Tarn, then? I don’t. It’s too hot, and we should have no time to spend at the top when we got there.”

“Let us go to the Wishing Gate, father,” suggested Norah eagerly. “It’s a nice walk; and I got what I wished for last summer—I did really—the music lessons! I’m sure there is something in it.”

“Let us go then, by all means. I have a wish of my own that I should be glad to settle. Helen, will you come?”

“No, thank you, Austin, I will not. I can wish more comfortably sitting here in the shade of the verandah I’ve been once before, and I wouldn’t drag up there this afternoon for a dozen wishes.”

“And Rayner—what will you—?”

Mr Rayner hesitated, then, “I—er—if it’s a steep pull, I think I had better stay where I am,” he added, in cheery, decided tones, which brought a flush of delight to Hilary’s cheeks.

She turned in silence to follow her sisters, but before she had advanced many steps, stood still hesitating and

stammering—“I—I—the sun is very hot. My head—”

“Well, don’t come, dear, if you are afraid of head-ache. Stay where you are,” said her father kindly; and Miss Carr chimed in, in characteristic fashion—

“But if you are going to chatter, be kind enough to move away to another seat. I am not going to have my nap disturbed if I know it.”

“Come along, Miss Hilary. Our pride won’t allow us to stay after that!” cried Mr Rayner, picking up his crutches and leading the way across the lawn with suspicious alacrity; and no sooner were they seated on the comfortable bench than he turned a smiling face upon his companion, and wished to know if she were satisfied with the result of her lecture.

“Entirely,” said Hilary. “It sounded brave and man-like, and put all at their ease. It is always best to be honest.”

“It is. I agree with you. What about the head?”

“What head?”

“Ah! and is *that* honest? You know what I mean. Does it ache *very* badly?”

“N–no! Not a bit! I stayed behind because I preferred to—to talk to you,” said Hilary stoutly, wishing she could prevent herself blushing in such a ridiculous fashion, wishing Mr Rayner would not stare at her quite so fixedly; happy, miserable, discomfited, triumphant, all at the same moment, and in the most incomprehensible fashion.

“That’s very satisfactory, because I like to talk to you also,” he said gravely; and the next two hours passed so quickly that it was quite a shock to hear calls from the verandah, and to see the walking party already assembled round the tea-table.

“What did you wish?” was Hilary’s first question, but, with the exception of the Mouse, everyone refused to divulge the secret.

“I wished I might have a doll’s pramulator,” said Geraldine gravely, and when Miss Carr asked if the dolls were not able to take walking exercise, she shook her head with pathetic remembrance.

“Mabel isn’t, ’cause she’s only one leg. She really had two, only one day, Raymond hanged her up from the ceiling, and when I sawed her, I cried, and pulled with my hands, and one leg earned off. So now I want a pramulator.”

“And she shall have one, bless her! and the best that can be bought,” muttered Miss Carr beneath her breath; while Norah whispered eager questionings into her companion’s ear.

“You might tell me, Rex—you might! I won’t tell a soul. What did you wish?”

“Don’t be so curious. What does it matter to you?”

“It does matter. I want to know. You might! Do–oo!”

“No–o! I won’t now. There’s an end of it.”

“Oh, Rex, look here—I’ve sixpence in my pocket. I’ll buy you a packet of gingerbread if you will.”

“I don’t want the gingerbread. What a girl you are! You give a fellow no peace. I didn’t wish anything particular, only —”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Only that she,” with a nod of the head towards where Miss Carr sat sipping her tea—“that she might choose Hilary to live with her in London.”

“Oh–oh! You wouldn’t like it if it were Lettice?”

“Of course not, neither would you.”

“But—but—it might be me!”

“It might. There’s no saying. I’ll have another cup of tea, if you please,” said Rex coolly.

Aggravating boy! It would be just as easy to draw water from a stone, as to persuade him to say anything nice and soothing to one’s vanity!

Chapter Fifteen.

Miss Carr’s Choice.

Wednesday was a day of great, though suppressed excitement, and when evening came, and Miss Carr summoned the girls into the drawing-room, it would be difficult to say which of the three felt the more acute anxiety. Mr Rayner had considerately taken himself out of the way, but Mr Bertrand was seated in an easy chair, his arms folded, his face

grave and set. Miss Carr pointed to the sofa, and the three girls sat down, turning inquiring eyes on her face. It was horribly formal, and even Norah felt cowed and spiritless.

“Girls,” said Miss Carr slowly, “it was my intention to say nothing about my plans until I had made my decision, but it seems that your father has forestalled me and told you of my wishes. ... When you were little children I saw a great deal of you. Your father was one of my most valued friends, your dear mother also, and you were often at my house. When you came here I felt a great blank in my life, for I am fond of young people, and like to have them about me. Last January, your father visited me, and told me of a conversation which he had had with you here. He was anxious about your future, and it occurred to me that in some slight degree I might be able to take the responsibility off his hands. I have felt the need of a companion, and of some fresh interest in life, and nothing could give me more pleasure than to help one of Austin Bertrand’s daughters. Well, my dears, I spoke to your father: he did not like the idea at first, as you will understand, but in the end he gave way to my wishes, and it only remained to make my choice. When I use the word ‘choice,’ you must not imagine that I am consulting merely my own preference. I have honestly tried to study the question from an unselfish point of view—to think which of you would most benefit from the change. One consideration has influenced me of which I can only speak in private, but for the rest I have watched you carefully, and it seemed to me that two out of the three have already a definite interest and occupation in their lives, which is wanting in the other case. Lettice has no special work in the house, no pet study to pursue; therefore, my dears, I choose Lettice—”

There was a simultaneous exclamation of consternation.

“Lettice!” cried Hilary, and drew in her breath with a pang of bitterest disappointment.

“Lettice! Oh, no, no, no!” cried Norah, throwing her arms round her favourite sister, and trembling with agitation.

“My little Lettice!” echoed Mr Bertrand, with a groan of such genuine dismay, that Miss Carr stared at him in discomfiture.

“My dear Austin—if it makes you so unhappy—”

“No—no. I gave you my word, and I am not going back. Besides,” with a kindly glance at the other two girls, “I should have felt the same, whichever way you had decided. Well, that’s settled! I am off now, Helen. We can have our talk later.”

He walked hastily out of the room, and Miss Carr turned back to the girls with a troubled expression.

“My dears, I know you will both feel parting with your sister, but I will do all I can to soften the blow. You can always look forward to meeting at Christmas and Midsummer, and I shall ask your father to bring you up in turns to visit us in London. Though Lettice is to be my special charge, I take a deep interest in you both, and shall hope to put many little pleasures in your way. And now, my dears, will you leave us alone for a time? I want to have a quiet talk with Lettice before we part.”

The two girls filed out of the room, and stood in the hall, facing each other in silence. Miss Briggs put her head out of the morning-room, with an eager—“Well—*Who*!” and when Norah pointed dolefully towards the drawing-room door, disappeared again with an exclamation of dismay. It was the same all round, Hilary told herself. Everyone was miserable because Lettice had been chosen. Everyone called out in sharp tones of distress, as if disappointed not to hear another name. Mr Bertrand was too dear and kind for it to be possible to make a charge of favouritism against him, but Lettice’s striking likeness to her mother seemed to give her a special claim to his tenderness, while as for the rest of the household, Miss Briggs was as wax in Lettice’s hands, for the simple reason that she was a solitary woman, and the girl showed her those little outward signs of affection which make up the sweetness of life; while the servants would do twice as much for her as for any other member of the family, because, “bless her pretty face, she had such a way with her!” Hilary felt indescribably chilled and humiliated as she realised how little regret her own departure would have caused in comparison, and when she spied Mr Rayner’s figure crossing the lawn, she shrank back, with uncontrollable repugnance. “You tell him, Norah! I can’t. I am going upstairs.”

Meanwhile, Lettice herself had not broken down, nor shown any signs of the emotion of a few days earlier. She was a creature of moods, but though each mood was intense while it lasted, it lasted, as a rule, for a remarkably short space of time. If she were in tears over a certain subject on Monday, it was ten to one that she had forgotten all about it before Thursday. If she were wild with excitement over a new proposition, she would probably yawn when it was mentioned a second time, and find it difficult to maintain a show of interest. So, in the present case, she had exhausted her distress at the idea of leaving home while weeping upon her father’s shoulders, and ever since then the idea of the life in London, in Miss Carr’s beautiful house, had been growing more and more attractive. And to be chosen first—before all the others! It was a position which was full of charm to a girl’s love of appreciation.

“Come here, dear,” said Miss Carr tenderly, when the door had shut behind the other two girls; and when Lettice seated herself on the sofa, she took her hands in hers and gazed fixedly into her face. In truth, it would have been difficult to find an object better worth looking at than “lovely Lettice” at that moment. The hair which rippled over her head was of no pale, colourless flaxen, but of a rich coppery bronze, with half-a-dozen shades of gold in its luxuriant waves; the grey eyes had delicately marked brows and generous lashes, and the red lips drooped in sweetest curves. The old lady’s face softened as she gazed, until it looked very sweet and motherly.

“Lettice,” she said softly, “my dear little girl, I hope we shall be happy together! I will do all I can for you. Do you think you can be content—that you can care for me a little bit in return?”

“Yes, oh yes—a great deal!” Lettice’s heart was beating so quickly that she hardly knew what she was saying, but it came naturally to her to form pretty speeches, and the glance of the lovely eyes added charm to her words.

“I hope so—I hope so! And now I want to tell you the reason why I choose you before either of your sisters. I alluded just now to something which had influenced me, but which I could not mention in public. It is about this that I want to speak.” Miss Carr paused for a few minutes, stroking the girl’s soft, flexible hands.

“Do you know what is meant by an ‘Open Sesame,’ my dear?”

“Oh, yes. It is the word which Ali Baba used in the ‘Arabian Nights,’ and that made the doors in the rocks fly open before him.”

“Yes, that is right. I see you know all about it; but would you understand what I meant, dear, if I said that God had given *you* an ‘Open Sesame’ into other people’s hearts and lives?”

Lettice looked up quickly, surprised and awed. “I? No! How have I—?”

“Look in the mirror opposite!” said the old lady gravely, and the girl hung her head in embarrassment.

“No, my dear, there is no need to blush. If you had a talent for music, like Norah, you would not think it necessary to be embarrassed every time it was mentioned, and beauty is a gift from God, just as much as anything else, and ought to be valued accordingly. It is a great power in the world—perhaps a greater power than anything else, and the people who possess it have much responsibility. You are a beautiful girl, Lettice; you will be a beautiful woman; everyone you meet will be attracted to you, and you will have an ‘Open Sesame’ into their hearts. Do you realise what that means? It means that you will have power over other people’s lives; that you will be able to influence them for good or evil; that you can succeed where others fail, and carry sunshine wherever you go. But it will also be in your power to cause a great deal of misery. There have been women in the world whose beauty has brought war and suffering upon whole nations, because they loved themselves most, and sacrificed everything for the gratification of vanity. You are young, Lettice, and have no mother to guide you, so perhaps you have never thought of things in this way before. But when I saw you first, I looked in your face and thought, ‘I should like to help this girl; to help her to forget herself, and think of others, so that she may do good and not evil, all the days of her life.’”

The ready tears rose to Lettice’s eyes and flowed down her cheeks. She was awed and sobered, but the impression was rather pleasurable than otherwise. “A beautiful woman”—“a power over others”—“sunshine”—“success”—the phrases rang in her ear, and the sound was musical. “Of course I’ll be good. I want to be good—then everyone will like me,” she said to herself, while she kissed and clung to Miss Carr, and whispered loving little words of thanks, which charmed the good lady’s heart.

For the next three days all was excitement and bustle. Lettice’s belongings had to be gathered together and packed, and though Miss Carr would hear of no new purchases, there were a dozen repairs and alterations which seemed absolutely necessary. Mr Bertrand took his two guests about every morning, so as to leave the girls at liberty, but when afternoon came he drove them out willy-nilly, and organised one excursion after another with the double intention of amusing his visitors and preventing melancholy regrets. Norah was in the depths of despondency; but her repinings were all for her beloved companion, and not for any disappointment of her own. Now that she had the interest of her music lessons, and the friendship of Rex and Edna, she was unwilling to leave home even for the delights of London and the College of Music. Poor Hilary, however, was in a far worse case. She had made so sure of being chosen by Miss Carr, had dreamed so many rosy dreams about the life before her, that the disappointment was very bitter. The thought of seeing Lettice driving away in the carriage with Miss Carr and Mr Rayner brought with it a keen stab of pain, and the life at home seemed to stretch before her, still and uneventful, like a stretch of dreary moorland. Her pride forbade her showing her disappointment, since no one had expressed any satisfaction in retaining her company. Stay! there was one exception. Mr Rayner had said a few simple words of regret which had been as balm to the girl’s sore heart. He, at least, was sorry that she was not to be in London, and would have preferred her company even to that of “lovely Lettice” herself.

On the whole, it was almost a relief when the hour for departure arrived. Rex and Edna drove over to see the last of their friend and cheer the stay-at-homes by their presence; but it did not seem as though they could be very successful in their errand of mercy, since Edna cried steadily behind her handkerchief, and Rex poked holes in the garden walks with gloomy persistence.

When Mr Rayner said his good-byes, he left Hilary to the last, and held her hand in his a moment or two longer than was strictly necessary. “Good-bye, and thank you for all you have done for me. I’ll remember your advice. ... We shall meet soon, I hope. You will be coming up to town, and Mr Bertrand has been good enough to ask me to come again next spring.”

Next spring! A whole year! As well say the end of the world at once. Hilary felt such a swelling sense of misery that the only way in which she could refrain from tears was by answering in sharp, matter-of-fact tones, and the consciousness that Mr Rayner was surprised and hurt by her manner was part of the general misery against which it was useless to fight.

As for Lettice, she was fairly dissolved in tears—clinging to every one in turn—and sobbing out despairing farewells. “Oh, Norie, Norie! my heart will break! I shall die; I know I shall. I can never bear it. Oh, Mouse, don’t forget me! Don’t let her forget me! Oh, do write—everyone write! I shall *live* on the letters from home!”

The last glimpse was of a tear-stained face, and a handkerchief held aloft in such a drenched condition that it refused to open to the breeze, and when the carriage turned the corner Miss Briggs shuffled off to the schoolroom, Hilary ran off to her room upstairs, leaving the three young people in the porch staring at each other with a miserable realisation of loss.

“What shall I do?—what shall I do? She said *her* heart would be broken, but it is ten times worse for me! The house will seem so dreadfully bare and lonely!”

“Just when we were all so happy! Oh, that hateful Miss Carr! why did she ever come? I thought we were going to have such a h–appy summer,” sobbed Edna dolefully. “It’s always the way! As soon as I make friends, I am bound to lose them.”

Rex put his hands into his pockets and began to whistle. “It will do no good to turn yourselves into a couple of fountains! I’ll go for a walk, and come back when you’ve done crying. It’s a nuisance, but it might have been worse,” he said shortly, and Norah looked at him with a gleam of curiosity lighting up her poor, tear-stained eyes.

“How worse? What do you mean?” she inquired; but Rex did not deign to answer, or to have anything more to say until tea was served a couple of hours later. The tears to which he so much objected were dried by this time, but the conversation was still sorrowfully centred on the dear traveller. “What is she doing now? Poor, poor Lettice! she will cry herself ill. Every mile further from home will make her more wretched!” cried Norah, and the listeners groaned in sympathy.

If they had seen Miss Lettice at that moment, however, their fears would have been allayed. Miss Carr had changed into a corridor train at Preston, and her companion was charmed with the novel position. She had never before travelled in a corridor, and the large, open carriage, the view, the promenade up and down, were all fascinating to her inexperience. Then to have lunch, and afternoon tea just when the journey was beginning to drag—it was indeed a luxurious way of travelling! Lettice had ceased to cry before the train had reached Kendal; at Lancaster she began to smile; at Crewe she laughed so merrily at one of Miss Carr’s sallies, that the people on the next seat turned to look at her with smiles of admiring interest. Everyone was “so nice and kind.” It was a pleasure to see them. Clearwater was a dear, sweet place, but, after all, it was only a poky little village. Delightful to get away and see something of the world!

Chapter Sixteen.

After Three Years.

Three years had passed away since Lettice Bertrand had bidden farewell to her Northern home and accompanied Miss Carr to London, but there was little sign of change in the big drawing-room at Kensington, or in the mistress herself, as she sat reading a magazine by the window one sunny June afternoon. When the purse is well lined it is easy to prevent signs of age so far as furniture and decorations are concerned, while the lapse of three years makes little difference in the appearance of a lady who has long passed middle age. Miss Carr looked very contented and comfortable as she lay back against the cushions of her easy chair, so comfortable that she groaned with annoyance as the servant came forward to announce a visitor, and the frown did not diminish when she heard the name.

“Oh, ask Mr Newcome to come up, Baker! I will see him here.” The man disappeared, and she threw down the magazine with an exclamation of disgust. “That stolid young man! Now I shall have to listen to improving anecdotes for the next half-hour. Why in the world need he inflict himself upon me?”

The next moment the door opened and the “‘stolid’ young man” stood before her. So far as appearance went, however, the description was misleading, for Arthur Newcome was tall and handsome, with yellow hair, a good moustache, and strong, well set up figure. He came forward and shook hands with Miss Carr in a quick, nervous fashion, which was so unlike his usual stolid demeanour, that the good lady stared at him in amazement.

“He is actually animated! I always said that it would take a convulsion of nature to rouse him from his deadly propriety, but upon my word he looks excited. What can have happened?”

The laws of propriety do not always permit us to ask the questions nearest our hearts, however, and Miss Carr was obliged to content herself with commonplaces.

“It is a beautiful day. I suppose Madge got home safely last night? She isn’t too tired after the picnic, I hope!”

“A little fatigued, I believe, but no doubt she will have recovered before evening. She is apt to get excited on these occasions and to exert herself unduly.”

“Nobody can say the same of you, more’s the pity,” was Miss Carr’s mental comment. “Madge rows very well, and the exercise will do her no harm,” she said shortly, and relapsed into determined silence. “I suppose he has something to say, some message for Lettice most likely; better let him say it and take himself off as soon as possible,” was her hospitable reflection; but Mr Newcome sat twirling his hat and studying the pattern of the carpet in embarrassed silence.

Three times over did he clear his throat and open his lips to speak, before he got the length of words.

“Miss Carr, I—er, I feel that I am—er—I am deeply sensible of my own unworthiness, and can only rely on your generosity, and assure you of my deep and sincere—”

“What in the name of all that is mysterious is the man driving at?” asked Miss Carr of herself; but she sat bolt upright in her seat, with a flush on her cheeks and a pang of vague, indefinite fear at her heart.

“My dear Mr Newcome, speak plainly, if you please! I cannot follow your meaning. In what respect are you a claimant for my generosity?”

“In respect of what is the most important question of my life,” replied Mr Newcome, recovering his self-possession at last, and looking her full in the face, in what she was obliged to confess was a very manly fashion—“In respect to my love for your ward, Miss Bertrand, and my desire to have your consent to our engagement, to ratify her own

promise."

"Her own promise! Your engagement! Lettice? Do you mean to tell me that you have proposed to Lettice and that she has accepted you?"

"I am happy to say that is my meaning. I had intended to consult you in the first instance, but yesterday, on the river, we were together, and I—I—"

He stopped short with a smile of tender recollection, and Miss Carr sat gazing at him in consternation.

Arthur Newcome had proposed to Lettice, and Lettice had accepted him. The thing was incomprehensible! The girl had showed not the slightest signs of preference, had seemed as gay and heart-whole as a child. Only a fortnight before she had convulsed Miss Carr with laughter by putting on Mr Rayner's top-coat, and paying an afternoon call, *à la* Arthur Newcome, when all that young gentleman's ponderous proprieties had been mimicked with merciless fidelity. And she had actually promised to marry him!

"I—excuse me—but are you quite sure that you understood Lettice aright? Are you sure you are not mistaken?"

Mr Newcome smiled with happy certainty.

"Quite sure, Miss Carr. I can understand your surprise, for I find it difficult to believe in my own good fortune. Lettice is the sweetest, most beautiful, and most charming girl in the world. I am not worthy of her notice, but there is nothing that I would not do to ensure her happiness. She is all the world to me. I have loved her from the day we first meet."

He was in earnest—horribly in earnest! His voice quivered with emotion, his eyes were shining, and his face, which was usually immovable, was radiant with happiness. Miss Carr looked at him, and her heart fell. If the mere thought of Lettice could alter the man in this manner, she could imagine the transformation which must have passed over him as he spoke to the girl herself, among the trees and flowers on the river-bank; and, alas for Lettice! she could imagine also how easily gratified vanity might have been mistaken for reciprocal love. It had been late when they returned from the water party the night before, and Lettice had hurried off to bed. She had been a trifle more lingering than usual in her good-night embrace, but Lettice was always demonstrative in her ways, so that the fact had attracted no attention, and the morning had been so full of engagements that there had been no time for private conferences.

Miss Carr was speechless with grief, disappointment, and dismay. Her anxious training for the last three years, her motherly oversight, her hopes and prayers for the welfare of her beloved child, had they all ended in this, that Lettice had been too selfish to discourage admiration which she could not return?—too weak to say no to the first man who approached with flattering words? Poor, foolish child! What misery she had prepared for herself and everyone belonging to her!—for of course it was all a mistake, her heart was not really touched; the engagement could not be allowed. With a sigh of relief Miss Carr reflected that the onus of responsibility was lifted off her shoulders by the fact of Mr Bertrand's arrival in town that very afternoon, and also that Lettice's engagements for the day would prevent a meeting until she had been able to consult with her father. She drew a long sigh, and her voice sounded both sad and tired as she replied—

"Ah, well! I am only Lettice's guardian in name, Mr Newcome; I have no authority to refuse or to sanction her engagement. I have had a telegram to say that Mr Bertrand is coming to town on business to-day, so you will be able to see him to-morrow and hear what he has to say. Lettice is very young—too young, in my opinion, to be able to know her own mind. I wish there had been no such questions to disturb her for the next two or three years. I don't know what Mr Bertrand will think."

"I am in a good position. I can provide a name that will not be unworthy of her. You know me and my family. We have been friends for years. She would have the warmest welcome—"

"Yes, yes, I am sure of that. I will tell Mr Bertrand all you say, Mr Newcome, and if you call to-morrow morning you will find him at home. In the afternoon he will probably be engaged. I can say nothing, and— Excuse me! I am not so young as I was, and I feel a good deal upset..."

Arthur Newcome rose at once, and held out his hand in farewell.

"Pray pardon me. I can understand your sentiments. It must be a shock to think of losing Lettice in any case, and I am aware that I am not what is called a good match. Such a beautiful girl—her father's daughter, your ward—might marry into any circle. I sympathise with your disappointment; but, believe me, Lettice should never have any reason to regret her choice. I would devote my life to securing her happiness. I will call to-morrow morning, then, with your permission. Eleven o'clock? Thank you! Pray pardon any distress I may have caused you, and think of me as indulgently as you can."

He left the room, and Miss Carr raised both hands to her head with a gesture of despair.

"He is all that he should be—humble, devoted, deferential—but oh, Lettice! my poor, dear child, what a mistake you have made! You would eat your heart out in a year's time, married to a man whom you do not love; and you don't love Arthur Newcome, I know you don't—it is all vanity, and weakness, and imagination. Poor Austin, what a welcome for him! A nice pill for me to have such a piece of news to tell—I, who was going to do such wonders for the child! Well, well! this comes of mixing oneself up in other people's affairs. She could have come to no worse fate than this if I had left her to vegetate in Clearwater."

There was no more rest for Miss Carr that afternoon. The magazine lay neglected on the table, the cushions fell to

the ground and lay unnoticed as she fidgeted about, now rising and pacing angrily to and fro, now throwing herself on a seat in weary despair. She alternately longed for and dreaded Mr Bertrand's arrival, and it needed all her self-control to keep up a semblance of cheerfulness while he drank his tea and refreshed himself after the long journey. It was not easy, however, to deceive such an intimate friend. Mr Bertrand studied her face with critical eyes, and said kindly—

"You are not up to the mark, Helen; you look tired and worried! That youngster of mine has not been misbehaving herself, I hope? What's the trouble?"

"Oh, Austin, the deluge! The most awful complication. I feel inclined to whip her! Would you believe it, that wooden Arthur Newcome called upon me this very afternoon, not two hours ago, to ask my consent to his engagement to Lettice!"

"Arthur Newcome? Oh, I know—the solemn person in the frock coat! What preposterous nonsense! Lettice is a baby! We must not let the young people at home hear of this, or they will tease the poor girl to death. Young Newcome is a favourite butt, and they often mimic him for my benefit. Well, I hope you let the poor fellow down gently, and saved me a disagreeable task."

"But—but, my dear Austin, you don't understand. He cannot be dismissed in that easy fashion, for he says—it is inconceivable—I don't know what to make of it—but he tells me that he has spoken to Lettice herself, and that she has accepted him!"

"What?" Mr Bertrand put down his cup and turned to confront Miss Carr with a face from which every trace of laughter had disappeared. "Accepted him? Lettice? This is serious indeed. Had you ever suspected—or noticed any sign of an attachment growing up between them?"

Miss Carr wrung her hands in distress.

"My dear Austin, how can you ask such a question? As if I would not have consulted with you at once if that had been the case. You know what Arthur Newcome is—the acme of all that is sober and stolid. I have never seen a sign of emotion of any kind on his face until this afternoon. He has seen a good deal of Lettice, for she and Madge are great friends, but I never thought of anything more—never for one moment! And as for Lettice herself, I am confident that the child never thought of him in that light, and that she is as heart-whole as I am myself."

"Then why—why—?"

"Oh, don't ask me! I am too miserable and disappointed to speak. I thought I had guarded against this sort of thing; but you know what Lettice is. He is very much in love, and no doubt she was pleased and flattered."

Mr Bertrand thrust his hands into his pockets and paced up and down the room. His face looked drawn and anxious, but after five minutes had passed he drew a long breath and made a determined effort at cheerfulness.

"Well, it's a bad business, but it has to be faced. I am humiliated and disappointed that Lettice could have behaved so foolishly; but you must not blame yourself, my dear old friend. No one could have done more for the child for the last three years, and I am glad I am here to help you through this difficulty. The young fellow will have to be told that there has been a mistake. I am sorry for him, but it is better now than later on. When did you say you expected Lettice?"

"She may be here at any moment. She was to leave her friends at six o'clock. I thought I heard the door open just now. Perhaps she has arrived."

Chapter Seventeen.

Lettice is Obstinate.

Miss Carr's surmise proved correct, for even as she spoke the door opened and Lettice appeared on the threshold. No longer the Lettice of short skirts and flowing locks, but an elegant young lady who swept forward with a rustle of silken skirts, and held up the sweetest pink and white face in the world to receive her father's kiss of greeting. "Lovely Lettice," indeed, lovelier than ever in the first bloom of womanhood. As her father held her from him at arm's length, the slim figure was almost as tall as his own, and the golden head dropped before the grave, scrutinising glance. Lettice knew that her lover had called during her absence, and Miss Carr's silence, her father's unusual solemnity, added to her natural nervousness. The grey eyes roved from one face to another with a scared, helpless look which they were quick to understand.

"Yes," said Mr Bertrand, "we know all about it by this time, Lettice. Mr Newcome has interviewed Miss Carr. She was intensely surprised; I also; but she has had more opportunity of seeing you together, and she tells me that you have shown no special signs of interest in this young fellow. Tell me, my dear—speak frankly, we are only thinking of your happiness—have you allowed yourself to be persuaded against your own judgment? It is a pity if that is the case, but it can be remedied. There is no engagement as yet, and I can easily explain to Mr Newcome that you have made a mistake."

Lettice had seated herself opposite her father and busied herself pulling off her long suede gloves. She avoided her father's glance, but the answer came in a little, breathless gasp—"Oh, no, no! I don't want—"

"No—you say *no*? Lettice, this is a serious matter. Do you mean to tell me that you love Arthur Newcome, and wish to marry him? Think well, my dear. You know what it means—that you are content to spend your life with this man, to

give up everything for him, to say good-bye to friends and relations—”

“Father, Miss Carr is here; you are all coming up for the winter; he lives here. I should not have to leave you!”

“You can’t count on that, Lettice. Mr Newcome’s business arrangements might make it necessary for him to leave London at any time, and it would be your duty to follow. Do you care for him enough to make such a sacrifice? If you love him you will not hesitate; but *do* you love him? That is what I want to hear! Come, Lettice, speak; I am waiting for your answer.”

“I—I—father, I do like him! I promised I would. I think he is very kind!”

The two elders exchanged glances of baffled helplessness. There was silence for a few minutes, then Mr Bertrand seated himself by Lettice’s side and took her hand in his.

“My dear little girl, let us understand each other. Of course he is ‘kind’; of course you ‘like him,’ but that is not enough; you must do something more than ‘like’ the man who is to be your husband. Do you care for him more than for me and Miss Carr, and your sisters and brothers all together? If he were on one side of the scale and we on the other, which would you choose? That is the way to face the question. You must not be satisfied with less. My dear, you are very young yet; I think you had better let me tell Mr Newcome that he is not to mention this matter again for the next two years, until you are twenty-one. By that time you will know your own mind, and, if you still wished it, I should have no more to say. You would be willing to leave it in that way, wouldn’t you, dear?”

But Lettice did not look at all willing. She drew her hand away from her father’s grasp, and turned her shoulder on him with a pettish gesture which was strangely unlike her usual sweet demeanour.

“Why should I wait? There is nothing to wait for! I thought you would be pleased. It’s very unkind to spoil it all! Other girls are happy when they are engaged, and people are kind to them. You might let me be happy too—”

Mr Bertrand sat bolt upright in his seat, staring at his daughter with incredulous eyes. Could it be possible that the girl was in earnest after all, that she was really attached to this most heavy and unattractive young man? He looked appealingly at his old friend, who, so far, had taken no part in the conversation, and she took pity on his embarrassment and came to the rescue. Two years’ constant companionship with Lettice had shown her that there was a large amount of obstinacy hidden beneath the sweetness of manner, and for the girl’s sake, as well as her father’s, she thought the present interview had better come to an end.

“Suppose you go to the library and have a smoke, Austin, while Lettice and I have a quiet talk together,” she said soothingly, and Mr Bertrand shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of nervous irritation, and strode from the room.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than Lettice produced a little lace-edged handkerchief from her pocket, and began to sob and cry.

“Father is cruel; why won’t he believe me? Why may I not get engaged like other girls? I am nineteen. I was so happy—and now I’m miserable!”

“Come here, Lettice, and for pity’s sake, child, stop crying, and behave like a reasonable creature. There are one or two questions I want to ask you. How long have you known that Arthur Newcome was in love with you?”

“I don’t know. At least, he was always nice. That summer at Windermere, he always walked with me, and brought me flowers, and—”

“That was three years ago—the summer you came to me. So long as that! But, Lettice, whatever your feelings may be now, you have certainly not cared for him up to a very recent period. I don’t need to remind you of the manner in which you have spoken about him. When you saw that lit; was growing attached to you, did you try to show that you did not appreciate his attentions?”

Lettice bent her head and grew crimson over cheek and neck.

“I was obliged to be polite! He was always with Madge, and I did like—”

Miss Carr shut her lips in tight displeasure.

“Yes, my dear, you ‘liked’ his attentions, and you were too vain and selfish to put an end to them, though you did not care for the man himself. Oh, Lettice, this is what I have feared! this is what I have tried to prevent! My poor, foolish child, what trouble you have brought upon us all! Arthur Newcome will have every reason to consider himself badly treated; his people will take his part; you will have alienated your best friends.”

“I am not going to treat him badly. You are very unkind. *He* would not be unkind to me. I wish he were here, I do! He would not let you be so cruel.” And Lettice went off into a paroxysm of sobbing, while Miss Carr realised sorrowfully that she had made a false move.

“My dear child, you know very well I don’t mean to be cruel. I am too anxious for your happiness. Lettice, Mr Newcome is very much in love just now, and is excited and moved out of himself; but though he may not be less devoted to you, in the course of time he will naturally fall back into his old quiet ways. When you think of a life with him, you must not imagine him as he was yesterday, but as you have seen him at home any time during the last three years. You have mimicked him to me many times over, my dear. Can you now feel content to spend your life in his company?”

It was of no use. Lettice would do nothing but sob and cry, reiterate that everyone was unkind, that she was

miserable, that it was a shame that she could not be happy like other girls, until at last Miss Carr, in despair, sent her upstairs to her bedroom, and went to rejoin Mr Bertrand.

“Well?” he said, stopping short in his pacings up and down, and regarding her with an anxious gaze, “what luck?”

Miss Carr gave a gesture of impatience.

“Oh, none—none at all! She will do nothing but cry and make a martyr of herself. She will not acknowledge that she has made a mistake, and yet I know, I feel, it is not the right thing! You must speak to Arthur Newcome yourself to-morrow, and try to make him consent to a few months’ delay.”

“I was thinking of that myself. I’ll try for six, but he won’t consent. I can’t say I should myself under the circumstances. When Lettice has accepted him and cries her eyes out at the idea of giving him up, you can hardly expect the young fellow to be patient. Heigho, these daughters! A nice time of it I have before me, with four of them on my hands.”

Punctually at eleven o’clock next morning Arthur Newcome arrived for his interview with Mr Bertrand. They were shut up together for over half-an-hour, then Mr Bertrand burst open the door of the room where Miss Carr and his daughter were seated, and addressed the latter in tones of irritation such as she had seldom heard from those kindly lips.

“Lettice, go to the drawing-room and see Mr Newcome. He will tell you what we have arranged. In ten minutes from now, come back to me here.”

Lettice dropped her work and glided out of the room, white and noiseless as a ghost, and her father clapped his hands together in impatience.

“Bah, what a man! He drives me distracted! To think that fate should have been so perverse as to saddle me with a fellow like that for a son-in-law! Oh dear, yes, perfectly polite, and all that was proper and well-conducted, but I have no chance against him—none! I lose my head and get excited, and he is so abominably cool. He will wait a month as a concession to my wishes before making the engagement public, and during that time she is to be left alone. He is neither to come here, nor to write to her, and we will say nothing about it at home, so that there may be as little unpleasantness as possible if it ends as we hope it may. I had really no decent objection to make when he questioned me on the subject. He is in a good position; his people are all we could wish; his character irreproachable. He wishes to be married in the autumn, and if he persists I shall have to give in; I know I shall—you might as well try to fight with a stone wall.”

“Autumn!” echoed Miss Carr in dismay. “Autumn! Oh, my poor Lettice! my poor, dear child! But we have a month, you say; a great deal may be done in a month. Ah, well, Austin, we must just hope for the best, and do everything in our power to prevent an engagement.”

Chapter Eighteen.

Lettice Decides.

For the next month, Lettice saw nothing of Arthur Newcome. He had packed up his traps and gone to spend the weeks of probation in Norway, where he would be out of the way of temptation, and have his mind distracted by novel surroundings.

No such change, however, fell to Lettice’s share. Mr Bertrand would not allow the ordinary summer visit to Clearwater to be anticipated. He had forbidden Lettice to mention the proposed engagement to her sisters as he was sanguine that a month’s reflection would be more than enough to convince the girl of her mistake, when the less that was known about the matter the better for all concerned. As Arthur Newcome was out of town he could see no objection to Lettice remaining where she was, and Miss Carr agreed the more readily in this decision as she had made a number of engagements which it would have been difficult to forego. Both were thinking only of the girl’s welfare; but alas! the best-meaning people make mistakes at times, and this arrangement was the most unfortunate which could have been made, considering the object which they had in view. Lettice had nothing to distract her mind from the past, no novelty of any kind to keep her from dwelling on the gratifying remembrance of Arthur Newcome’s devotion. On the contrary, her life was less bright than usual, for the Newcomes were naturally displeased at Mr Bertrand’s objections to the engagement, and would not hold any communication with Miss Carr’s household until the matter was decided. Thus Lettice was deprived of the society of her best friend, and was forbidden the house in which she had been accustomed to spend her happiest hours.

Miss Carr did her best to provide interest and amusement, but there was a constraint between the old lady and her ward, which was as new as it was painful. Lettice was conscious that she was in disgrace. When her father fumed and fidgeted about the room, she guessed, without being told, that he was thinking of the proposed engagement; when Miss Carr sighed, and screwed up her face until it looked nothing but a network of wrinkles, she knew that the old lady was blaming herself for negligence in the past, and pondering what could still be done to avert the marriage, and a most unpleasant knowledge it was. Lettice had lived all her life in the sunshine of approval. As a little child everyone had petted and praised her because of her charming looks; as a schoolgirl she had reigned supreme among her fellows; her short experience of society had shown that she had no less power in the new sphere. Cold looks and reproachful glances were a new experience, and instead of moving her to repentance, they had the effect of making her think constantly of her lover, and long more and more for his return. Miss Carr thought she was vain and selfish—Arthur said she was the best and sweetest of women; her father called her a “foolish little girl”—Arthur called her his queen and goddess; Miss Carr sat silent the whole of the afternoon, sighing as if her heart was broken—Arthur had

walked across London many times over for the chance of a passing word. Other people were disappointed in her, but Arthur declared that she was perfect, without possibility of improvement! Lettice would take refuge in the solitude of her bedroom, cry to herself, and look out of the window wondering in which direction Norway lay, what Arthur was doing, and if he were half as miserable at being separated from her as she was at being left alone in London. Then she would recall the afternoon on the river, when he had asked her to be his wife. How terribly in earnest he had seemed. She had tried to say no, because, though she enjoyed his attentions, she had never really intended to marry him; but the sight of his face had frightened her, and when he had said in that awful voice, “Lettice, do you mean it? Is there no hope? Have you been making a fool of me for all these years?”—she had been ready to promise anything and everything in the world if he would only smile again. And he had been very “kind.” It was “nice” being engaged. She had been quite happy until her father came, and was so cross.

If Miss Carr could have been her own cheery, loving self, and talked to the girl in a natural, kindly manner, still better, if she could have had half-an-hour’s conversation with outspoken Norah, all might have been well; but Miss Carr was under the mistaken impression that it was her duty to show her disapproval by every act and look, and the result was disastrous. Every morning Lettice awoke with the doleful question, “How am I to get through the day?” Every night she went to bed hugging the thought that another milestone had been passed, and that the probation was nearer to its end. By the end of the month her friends’ efforts had so nearly succeeded in making her honestly in love with Arthur Newcome, that they marked the girl’s bright eyes and happy smiles, and told each other sadly that it was no use standing out further.

Arthur Newcome wrote to Mr Bertrand announcing his arrival in London, and asking permission to call and receive his answer from Lettice’s lips, and there was nothing to do but to consent forthwith. An hour was appointed for the next afternoon, and Lettice spent an unconscionable time in her bedroom preparing for the great occasion, and trying to decide in which of her dainty garments Arthur would like her best. Her father had taken himself into the City after a conversation in which he had come perilously near losing his temper, and when Lettice floated into the drawing-room, all pale green muslin and valenciennes insertion, looking more like an exquisite wood nymph than a creature of common flesh and blood, there sat Miss Carr crying her eyes out on a corner of the ottoman.

“Oh, Lettice, Lettice! is it too late? Won’t you listen to reason even at the eleventh hour? It is the greatest folly to enter into this engagement. Never were two people more unsuited to each other! You will regret it all your life. My poor, dear child, you are wrecking your own happiness...”

It was too bad! For almost the first time in her life Lettice felt a throb of actual anger. She had been docile and obedient, had consented to be separated from Arthur for a whole month, and done all in her power to satisfy these exacting people, and even now they would not believe her—they would not allow her to be happy. She stood staring at Miss Carr in silence, until the servant threw open the door and announced her lover’s arrival.

“Mr Newcome, ma’am. I have shown him into the morning-room as you desired.”

Lettice turned without a word and ran swiftly downstairs to the room where Arthur Newcome was waiting for her in painful anxiety. For three long years he had tried to win the girl’s heart, and had failed to gain a sign of affection. Her acceptance had been won after a struggle, and he was racked with suspense as to the effect of this month’s separation. When the door opened, Lettice saw him standing opposite, his tall figure drawn up to its full height, his handsome face pale with the intensity of his emotion.

She gave a quick glance, then rushed forward and nestled into his arms with a little cry of joy.

“Oh, Arthur, Arthur! you have come back! Take care of me! Take care of me! I have been so miserable!”

Chapter Nineteen.

The Scattered Nest.

Two days later a happy party were disporting themselves on the lawn at Cloudsdale. Rex and Edna Freer had driven over to spend the afternoon with their friends, and just as Mary placed the tea-tray on the wicker table, the postman came marching up the drive, and delivered the only thing which was necessary to complete the happiness of the party—a letter from Lettice!

“She has written so little lately, and her letters have been so unlike herself, that I have been quite uneasy,” said Hilary, turning the envelope round and round, and feeling its proportions with undisguised pleasure. “I’ll give you each a cup of tea, and then I’ll read it out, while you listen in comfort.”

The three years which had passed since we saw her last had dealt very kindly with Hilary. The consequential air had given place to an expression of quiet serenity which was by no means unbecoming. Her complexion was pink and white as of yore, and as she presided over the tea-table, her blue cambric dress fitting closely to the line of her neat little figure, her tiny feet crossed before her, and her shining brown hair arranged in its usual fastidious order, it would have been difficult to find a more favourable specimen of a young English girl. Norah, seated opposite on the long hammock chair, was still very girlish in appearance, despite the dignity of eighteen years. She was thin and lanky, and her cheeks had none of Hilary’s delicate bloom, but the heavy eyebrows and expressive lips lent a charm to a face which was never the same in expression for two minutes together, and though there could be no question as to which was the prettier of the two, it was safe to predict that few people who looked at Norah would be tempted to return to the study of Hilary’s more commonplace features.

Edna was narrow-chested and delicate in appearance, but Rex had developed into an imposing looking personage; broad-shouldered, muscular, and with such a moustache as was unequalled by any young fellow of his age in the

country-side. He wore a white flannel suit, and though there were several unoccupied seats at hand, chose to loll on the grass, his long legs stretched out before him, his blue cap pushed well back on his curly head. Nestled beside him sat Geraldine, a little taller, a little older in appearance, but with the same grave, earnest little face which had characterised her three years before. Perhaps the member of the family who was the most changed, was the tall, young fellow who sat beside Norah. Raymond had only lately returned from a two years' sojourn in Germany, where he had acquired an extra four inches, a pair of eye-glasses, and such "a man of the world" manner, that it had been a shock to his sisters to find that his teasing propensities were as vigorous as when he had been a schoolboy. Faithful Bob hovered near, ready to obey his leader's commands, and take part in any mischief which might be at hand, but for the moment all other interests gave way to the hearing of the letter from London.

Hilary handed the last cup to its owner, and opening the envelope, ran her eye rapidly down the sheet. The next moment a loud "Oh!" of amazement startled the hearers into eager curiosity.

"What is the matter?"

"Oh—oh! It can't be true—it can't! Lettice is engaged to be married!"

"*Engaged*!" A moment's breathless silence was succeeded by a very babel of questioning.

"Engaged?" "Who to?" "When?" "Where." "What does she say?" "Oh, read it aloud. Let us hear every word she says!"

But Hilary folded up the sheet with an air of determination. "Not yet. I'll read it by-and-by; but first you must guess. I'll give you fifty guesses who it is..."

"The painter fellow who did her portrait!"

"That what-do-you-call-him man—the Polish nobleman who sent her the verses!"

"The curate!"

"Sir Neville Bruce!"

"One of the men she met at Brighton!"

"Wrong! wrong! wrong! Guess again. Nearer home this time. Someone you know!"

"Not Mr Rayner?"

"Oh, dear me, no! I should think not. He and Lettice never get on well together. Someone else."

"Someone we know! But we know so few of her friends. Only Mr Neville, and the Bewleys, and—*oh*! No, it can't—it can't possibly be—"

"What? what? Who—who? Never mind if you are wrong. Say whom you are thinking of."

"It—*can't* be Arthur Newcome!"

"Arthur Newcome it is, my dear!" said Hilary tragically; whereupon Raymond instantly dropped his teacup on the grass, and fell heavily on Norah's shoulders.

"Smelling salts! Brandy! I am going to faint! Oh, my heart!"

But, for once, no one paid any attention. Even Norah sat motionless, forgetting to push him away, forgetting everything but the appalling nature of the news which she had just heard.

"Lettice—is—engaged—to—Arthur Newcome?"

"Lettice—is—engaged—to—Arthur Newcome!"

"But—but—we knew that he admired her in his solemn way, but she never seemed to like him! She used to make fun of him, and imitate the way he talked!"

Raymond sat up and passed in his cup for a fresh supply of tea. What was the good of fainting if nobody took any notice! "I say," he cried energetically, "fancy Arthur Newcome proposing! I'd give anything if I could have overheard him. ... 'Miss Bertrand!—Lettice!—may I call you Lettice? Deign, oh deign—'"

"Oh, be quiet, Raymond, and let us hear the letter," pleaded Norah, who was on the verge of tears with agitation and distress. "I can't believe it until I hear her own words. Read it, Hilary, from the very beginning."

Hilary opened out the dainty, scented sheet, and read aloud, with an impressiveness worthy of the occasion:—

"My dearest old Hilary, and Norah, and every one of you,—I have a great piece of news to tell. I am engaged to Arthur Newcome, and he wants to be married some time this autumn. He proposed to me a month ago, on the day of our water party, but father and Miss Carr wished us to wait a month before it was settled, so that I should have time to make up my mind. They think I am so young, but if we wait until September I shall be twenty, and many girls are married at that age. I have a beautiful ring—a big pearl in the centre, and diamonds all round, and Arthur has given me a brooch as well, three dear little diamond swallows—it looks so sweet at my neck! Madge is very pleased, of course, and Mr and Mrs Newcome are very kind. Won't it be nice when I have a house of my own, and you can come

and stay with me? I shall have six bridesmaids—you three, Madge, Edna, and either Mabel Bruce or Monica Bewley. You must think of pretty dresses. I like a white wedding, but it doesn't show the bride off so well—that's the great objection. We shall have a great deal to talk about when I come home next month, and I am longing for the time to come. It is so hot and close in town, and Cloudsdale must be looking lovely just now. Father expects to leave on Tuesday. He does not seem very pleased about my engagement. I suppose parents never are! Good-bye, dear, darling girls. I wish I could be with you now.

"Your own loving Lettice.

"PS—How surprised you will be. Tell me every word you said when you read this letter!"

"Humph I slightly awkward if we took her at her word!" It was Rex who spoke, and there was the same expression of ill-concealed scorn in his voice which had been noticeable on his face since the announcement of the news. "Charming epistle, I must say. So much about 'dear Arthur' and her own happiness. One must excuse a little gush under the circumstances, and Lettice was always demonstrative!"

Hilary looked at him, puckering her forehead in anxious fashion. "You mean that sarcastically! She says nothing about being happy. I noticed that myself. There is something strange about the whole thing. I am quite sure she did not care for him when I was there in spring. What can have possessed her to accept him?"

"Because he asked her nicely, and puts lots of treacle on the bread," said Raymond, laughing. "You could always make Lettice do what you wanted if you flattered her enough. She would accept any fellow who went down on his knees and swore he worshipped her. Oh, I say I fancy having Arthur Newcome as a brother-in-law! We used to call him 'Child's Guide to Knowledge' when he was at Windermere last summer, because he would insist upon improving every occasion. We played some fine pranks on him, didn't we, Norah? We'll give him a lively time of it again if he comes to visit us, as I suppose he will, under the circumstances."

"We can't," said Norah dolefully. "He is engaged to Lettice, and she would be vexed. I don't feel as if I could ever play pranks again. I was so looking forward to having Lettice with us again when we went up to London, but now it will never be the same again. Even if she has a house of her own, Arthur Newcome will be there, and I could never, never get to like him as a brother." She put her cup on the table and walked off by herself into the shrubbery which encircled the lawn, and though the others looked after her in sympathetic silence, they did not attempt to follow. As Lettice's special friend and companion, the news was even more of a shock to her than to the rest, and it was understood that she might prefer to be alone.

Ten minutes later, however, when tea was finished, Rex rose lazily from the ground, stretched his long arms, and strode off in the direction of the shrubbery. Half-way down the path he met Norah marching along in solitary state, white about the cheeks, suspiciously red and swollen about the eyes.

Rex clasped his hands behind his back, and blocked the narrow way.

"Well, what are you doing here?"

"Crying!" Norah flashed a defiant glance at him, then turned aside to dab her face with her handkerchief and gulp in uncontrollable misery, whereupon Rex looked distressed, uncomfortable, and irritated all at the same moment.

"Then please stop at once. What's the use of crying? You can't help it now, better make the best of it, and be as jolly as you can. Norah—look here, I'm sorry to bother you any more to-day, but I came over specially to have a chat. I have not had a chance of speaking to you quietly until now, and my father is driving round for us at six o'clock. Before he comes I wanted to tell you—"

Norah put her handkerchief in her pocket, and faced him with steady eyes. Her heart gave a leap of understanding, and a cold certainty of misery settled upon her which seemed to dry up the fountain of tears, and leave her still and rigid.

"Yes?"

"We had a big talk last night, Norah. The three years are up, you know, and I have fulfilled my share of the bargain. I have known all the time what my decision would be, and six months ago I wrote to all the men I know abroad, asking them to look out for the sort of berth I wanted. On Tuesday I had a letter from a man in India offering me a good opening. You will be surprised to hear why he gives me the chance instead of all the other fellows who are anxious to get it. It is because I am a good musician! I don't mean in your sense of the word, of course, but I can rattle away on the piano and play any air I happen to hear, and he says the fellows up-country set no end of store by that sort of thing. If other qualifications are equal, the post is given to the man who can play, and make things cheerful in the evening. Rather a sarcasm, isn't it, after all the money that has been spent on my education, that such a trifle should decide my destiny? Well—I showed the letter to my father, and he was terribly cut up about the whole thing. I had said nothing about my plans for some time back, for it seemed no use to upset him before it was necessary, but he has been hoping that I was 'settling down.' Norah, I can't do it! I hate leaving home, and shall be wretched when the time comes; but I have roving blood in my veins, and cannot settle down to a jog-trot, professional life in a small English town. If I go out to this place I shall lie low until I have a practical knowledge of the land and its possibilities, and then I'll buy an estate, and work it in my own way. I have the money my uncle left me, and can make my way without asking father for a penny. He is coming over this afternoon, and I am sure he means to talk to you. We didn't say anything to the mater and Edna, but he knows that you and I are friends, and that I will listen to what you say. He means to ask you to persuade me to stay at home. But—you understand how I feel, Norah?"

"Yes, Rex. Don't be afraid! If your father speaks to me I shall advise him to let you go. You have kept your share of the bargain: it is for him to keep his," said Norah steadily. "And it appears that you *want* to go away and leave us."

“You will live in London now for the greater part of the year. If I were at home I should only see you at long intervals. I should not settle in this neighbourhood. Our life would be quite different...”

“Oh yes, quite different! Everything will be different now. You will have gone, and—Lettice too! Rex! don’t be angry if I ask you something. I will try to persuade your father to give you your way, but—tell me this before you go!— Has the news about Lettice had anything to do with your decision?”

Rex stopped short, and stared at her in amazement.

“This news about Lettice! Norah, what do you mean?”

“About her engagement! I always thought that you liked her yourself. You remember what you used to call her —‘Lovely Lettice’?”

“Well, and so she was lovely! Anybody might have seen that. Of course I liked her, but if you mean that I am jealous of Arthur Newcome—no, thank you! I should not care for a wife who would listen to the first man who came along, as Lettice has done. She was a jolly little girl, and I took a fancy to her at first sight, but—do you remember our adventure in the old passage, Norah? Do you think Lettice would have stuck to me, and been as brave, and plucky, and loyal as you were in the midst of your fright? I never forgot that day. It was last night that I spoke to my father, before I heard a word about Lettice, or her matrimonial intentions.”

“So it was; I forgot that!” Norah smiled with recovered cheerfulness, for Rex’s words had lifted a load from her mind, and the future seemed several shades less gloomy than it had done a few minutes before.

“And if you went, how soon would you start?”

“As soon as possible. I have wasted too much time already. The sooner I go, the sooner I can make my way and come home again to see you all. Three or five years, I suppose. You will be quite an old woman, Norah.”

“Yes; twenty-three! Lettice will be married; Hilary too, very likely. The Mouse will be as big as I was when you first knew us, and Raymond a doctor in practice. It will all be different!” Norah’s voice was very low as she spoke the last words, and her face twitched as if she were about to break down once more.

Rex looked at her with the same odd mingling of tenderness and vexation which he had shown a few minutes earlier.

“Of course it will be different! We are not children any longer, and can’t expect to go on as we have been doing. What was the Vicar’s text the other Sunday?—‘As an eagle stirreth up her nest’—I liked that sermon! It has been very happy and jolly, but it is time we stirred out of the old nest, and began to work for ourselves, and prepare for nests of our own. I am past twenty-one, my father need not be afraid to trust me, for I can look after myself, and though the life will be very different out there, I’ll try to do nothing that I should be ashamed to tell you, Norah, when I come home!”

Norah turned round with a flush, and an eager, outstretched hand, but only to behold Mr Rex marching along on the edge of the very flowerbeds, with a head in the air, and a “touch me if you dare” expression, at the sight of which his companion gave a dismal little smile.

That was Rex all over! In spite of his masterful ways, he was intensely shy where his deeper feelings were concerned. To say an affectionate word seemed to require as painful an effort as to drag out a tooth, and if by chance he was betrayed into such an indiscretion, he protected himself against its consequences by putting on his most “prickly” airs, and freezing the astonished hearer by his frigid tones. Norah understood that having shown her a glimpse of his heart in the last remark, he was now overcome with remorse, and that she must be wise and take no notice of the indiscretion.

Chapter Twenty.

More Changes.

For the next ten minutes conversation was of the most desultory character; then the sound of wheels was heard in the distance, and Rex became eager and excited once more.

“There’s my father! Go and meet him, Norah. Get hold of him before Hilary comes with her everlasting chatter. He wants to speak to you. Bring him along here, and I’ll go into the house!”

Norah sped off obediently, and met the Squire as the cart turned in at the gate. He pulled up at once, handed the reins to the man, and jumped down to join her. His ruddy face looked drawn and anxious, and the first glance at the girl showed that she was, like himself, in a woe-begone state of mind.

“Oh, you know all about it! That boy of mine has been talking to you, I can see!” he said, as they shook hands, and turned along the winding path. “Well, well, this is a fine ending to all my hopes. The lad’s as obstinate as a mule—I am sure I don’t know where he got his disposition; if he once takes a thing in his head there’s no moving him. Now he wants to go and bury himself in the wilds of India! I’ve talked until I am tired, and I can’t make him see what mad folly it is. After an expensive college education—”

“Yes, but, Squire, I don’t think that’s a fair argument! Rex didn’t want to go to college; he went against his own wishes because you were set on it. He said it would be waste of money.”

“Tut, tut! nonsense! Waste of money, indeed! I don’t grudge a few hundreds spent on my only son’s education, I hope. Things would have come to a pretty pass if that were the case,” cried the Squire, turning off at a tangent, as usual, the moment he found his position attacked by the enemy. “I thought the boy would have come to his senses long before the three years were over. I have told him—” And he launched off into a lengthy account of the interview of the night before, repeating his own arguments and his son’s replies, while Norah listened with downcast eyes. “There!” he cried in conclusion, “that is the matter in a nutshell, and everyone must see that I am perfectly reasonable and within my rights. Now, my dear, you talk to him; he thinks a great deal of your opinion. Just tell him plainly that if he persists in his folly, he is ruining his life, and behaving in a very wrong, undutiful manner to his mother and to me. Talk to him plainly; don’t spare your words!”

“I can’t do that, Squire. I’m sorry, but I don’t agree with you. Rex has given in to your wishes for three whole years, though, from his point of view, it was waste of time. He has worked hard and not grumbled, so that he has kept every word of his promise. Now he asks you to fulfil yours. I am sure you must feel sad and disappointed, but I don’t think you ought to be angry with Rex, or call him undutiful.”

“Eh—eh, what’s this? Are you going to side against me? This is a pretty state of affairs. I thought I could count upon your help, and the boy would have listened to what you said. Well, well, I don’t know what is coming over the young folk nowadays! Do you mean to say that you *approve* of Rex going abroad?”

“Yes, I do! It is better to be a good planter than a bad lawyer,” said Norah steadily; and the Squire pursed up his lips in silence.

The girl’s words had appealed to his pet theory, and done more to silence objections than any amount of arguing. The Squire was always lecturing other people on the necessity of doing the humblest work as well as it was possible for it to be done, and had been known on occasions to stand still in the middle of a country lane, brandishing his stick while he treated a gang of stone-breakers to a dissertation on the dignity of labour. The thought that his son might perform his duties in an unsatisfactory manner was even more distasteful than the prospect of separation.

“Well, well,” he sighed irritably, “no one need envy a man for having children! They are nothing but trouble and anxiety from beginning to end. It’s better to be without them at all.”

“You don’t mean what you say. You know quite well you would not give up your son and daughter for all the money in the world. You love Edna all the more because she needs so much care, and you are just as proud of Rex as you can be. Of course he is self-willed and determined, but if you could change him into a weak, undecided creature like the vicar’s son, you would be very sorry to do it!”

“You seem to know a great deal about my sentiments, young lady,” said the Squire, trying hard to look ferocious. Then his shoulders heaved, and he drew a long, weary sigh. “Well, my last hope has gone if you range yourself against me. The boy must go and bury himself at the ends of the earth. Goodness knows when he will come back, and I am getting old. Ten to one I may never see him again!”

“It will be your own fault if you don’t. Westmoreland is sweet and beautiful, but if I had no ties and plenty of money like you, I would never be content to settle here for the rest of my life, while the great, wide world lay beyond. If Rex goes to India, why should you not all pack up some year and pay him a visit? You could sail down the Mediterranean and see all the lovely places on the way—Gibraltar, and Malta, and Naples, and Venice; stay a month or two in India, and come home overland through Switzerland and France. Oh, how delightful it would be! You would have so much to see and to talk about afterwards. Edna would get fat and rosy, and you and Mrs Freer would be quite young and skittish by the time you got home! If you went to see him between each of his visits home, the time would seem quite short.”

“I daresay! I daresay! A very likely prospect. I am too old to begin gadding about the world at my time of life,” said the Squire; but he straightened his back even as he spoke, and stepped out as if wishing to disprove the truth of his own words. Norah saw his eyes brighten, and the deep lines down his cheeks relax into a smile, and knew that her suggestion had met a kindly welcome, “Well, there’s no saying! If all the young people go away and leave us, we shall be bound to make a move in self-defence. You are off to London for the winter. It seems a year of changes—”

“Oh, it is, it is, and I am so miserable! Lettice—my own, dear Lettice—is going to be married, and she will never come back to live with us any more. I have been looking forward to London, just to be with her, and now it is further off than ever. It will never come!”

Norah had fought hard for the self-possession which she had shown during the whole of the interview; but now her lips trembled, and the tears rushed into her eyes. The future seemed dreary indeed, with Rex abroad, Lettice appropriated by Arthur Newcome, and Edna at the other end of England. She had hard work not to cry outright, to the great distress of the Squire, who was the kindliest of men, despite his red face and stentorian voice.

“Ha, humph—humph! Sorry, I’m sure. Very sorry! Come, come, my dear, cheer up! Things may turn out better than we expect. I didn’t know you had a trouble of your own, or I would not have intruded mine. Shall we go up to the house? There, take my arm. What a great, big girl you are, to be sure!”

Norah found time for a whispered conference with Rex before he took his seat behind his father and Edna in the dog-cart.

“It’s all right! I have spoken to him and he means to give in. Be as kind and patient as possible, for he *does* feel it, poor old man, and he is very fond and proud of you!”

“Humph!” said Rex shortly. He knitted his brows and looked anxiously at the girl’s face. “You are awfully white! Don’t cry any more, Norah, for pity’s sake. We are not worth it, either Lettice or I.” Then he was off, and Raymond turned to

his sister with a long, lazy yawn.

“Well, and so Rex is bound for India! He has just been telling me about it. Lucky beggar! When I take my degree I mean to ask father to let me travel for a year or two before settling down to work.”

“Oh, dear, dear!” sighed Norah to herself, “what a stirring up of the poor old nest! There will be no eagles left if this sort of thing goes on much longer. And we were so happy! Why, oh, why did I ever wish for a change?”

Chapter Twenty One.

Lettice at Home.

Lettice’s annual summer visit was postponed this year until the middle of August, for Arthur Newcome had gained his point, as Mr Bertrand had prophesied, and the wedding was arranged to take place at the end of September. Mr Bertrand had done his best to gain more time, but it was difficult to fight against a man who was so quiet, so composed, and so immovably determined as Arthur Newcome. He listened to what was said with the utmost politeness, and replied to all argument with the statement that he was twenty-eight, that he was in a good position, and saw no reason for waiting indefinitely. After this performance had been enacted four or five times, Mr Bertrand’s patience gave way, and he declared that he was powerless to stand out any longer, and that perhaps it was a good thing to get the wedding over, since if he had much to do with Arthur Newcome, he should certainly collapse, and fall into a nervous decline.

“His very presence oppresses me. It is all I can do not to yawn in his face when he is telling those long-winded yarns. Poor little Lettice! I wonder what sort of conversation he treats her to when they are alone. I thought she looked very tired yesterday at dinner. Get her all the pretty things she wants for this *trousseau*, Helen. I must do what I can for the poor child, for I fear she has a dull time before her.”

Miss Carr sighed, and shook her head. As time went on she was more and more distressed about her ward’s engagement, for now that his time of suspense was over, Arthur Newcome had lost his temporary gleam of brightness and had settled down into the old solemn ways which made him so different from other young men of his age. The previous night was not the only occasion on which Lettice had seemed weary and dispirited after a *tête-à-tête* with her lover, but she showed plenty of interest in the selection of her *trousseau* and in the equipment of the handsome house which Mr Newcome was preparing for his bride.

By the middle of August dressmakers and upholsterers had received the necessary instructions, and could be left to complete their work, while the tired little bride-elect went north to recoup her energies. How glad she was to escape from London only Lettice herself knew; while at Cloudsdale, the whole house was turned upside down in excitement at the prospect of her arrival. Lettice, as an engaged young lady, a bride on the eve of her marriage, had assumed a position of vast importance in her sisters’ eyes, and the questions as to how she would look, how she would bear herself, formed the subject of many lengthy discussions.

The hour came at last. Lettice was once more among them. She came rushing in, in the old impetuous way, kissing everyone in turns, and exclaiming in delight at being once more at home. There had never been any unpleasantness connected with Lettice’s home-comings. Though she had lived in the lap of luxury for the last three years, she was utterly unspoiled by its influence, and so far from being dissatisfied with her own home, seemed to take an affectionate delight in finding it unchanged in every particular. Her sisters followed her from room to room, listening with smiles to her ecstatic exclamations.

“Oh, how nice it looks—the dear old place! What a sweet, sweet smell of mignonette! Oh, look at the old red table-cloth, and the ink-stain in the corner, where I upset the bottle. Oh, how lovely to see it all again! And the dear old sofa where we used to camp out all together—I have never found such a comfy sofa anywhere else. Tea! How pretty the urn looks! I love that cheerful, hissing sound! And what cream! You never see cream like that in London.”

She was all smiles and dimples, and though decidedly thinner, the flush upon her cheeks made her look so bright and well that she was a picture of a radiant young bride. Hilary and Norah watched her with fascinated eyes as she flitted about the room, or lay back in the chintz-covered chair. What a vision of elegance she was! The blue serge coat and skirt was exactly like those which the village dressmaker had made for their own wear—exactly like, and yet how different! The sailor hat was of a shape unknown in northern regions; each little detail of her attire was perfect in its unobtrusive beauty, and with every movement of the hand came the flash of precious stones. If she had been a whit less like herself Norah would have been awed by the presence of this elegant young lady; but it was the old Lettice who flung her arms round her neck the moment they were left alone together in their own room; the old Lettice who kissed, and hugged, and caressed with a hundred loving words.

“Oh, Norah, I *have* wanted you! I longed for you so, but father would not let me write. It was a horrid, horrid time, and I was wretchedly lonely. Dear, darling Norie! I am so glad to be back.”

“And, oh, Lettice, I am so glad to have you! I have a hundred questions to ask. Let me look at your ring. It is a beauty, far nicer than the ordinary row of diamonds. And are you awfully happy? I was very much surprised, you know; but if you are happy, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks!”

“N–no!” said Lettice slowly. “Yes, of course I am happy. It hasn’t been as nice as I expected, for Miss Carr has behaved so queerly, and father was not pleased. But—oh yes, I am quite happy. Madge is delighted about it, and Arthur does everything I like. He is very kind!”

“You funny old Lettice! Kind! of course he is kind!” cried Norah laughing, and kissing the soft, fair cheek. The flush of

excitement had faded by this time, and the girl's face looked pale and wan, while the blue shadows beneath her eyes gave a pathetic expression to the sweet face. "Lettice," cried Norah anxiously, "how ill you look! You were excited before, and I didn't notice it, but you are as white as a ghost, and so thin! Aren't you well, dear? Have you a head-ache? Can I do anything: for you?"

"Oh, no, no!" Lettice stretched out her arms over her head with a long, weary sigh. "I shall be quite well now that I am at home, and with you, Norah. I have been tired to death in London lately. You have no idea how tiring it is to be engaged. I have stood such hours and hours at the dressmaker's being tried on, and Arthur and I were always going to the house. The workmen are so stupid; they have no idea of colourings. The drawing-room was painted three times over before Arthur was satisfied. I was so tired that I would have left it as it was, but he is so obs—, he likes to have things done exactly in his own way, and worries on and on until he gets it. I thought it would be fun furnishing a house, but it gets a little tiresome when people are so very, very particular. We will have a nice lazy time, won't we, Norah? Arthur is not coming up for three weeks, so we shall be alone and have no one to bother us."

"Ye–es!" stammered Norah confusedly.

This novel way of regarding the presence of a lover was so amazing that it took away her breath, and before she recovered, Miss Briggs entered the room, and there was no more chance of private conversation for the present.

Nothing could have been sweeter or more amiable than Lettice's demeanour during the first week at home. She seemed to revel in the simple country life, and to cling to every member of the household with pathetic affection. She went into the kitchen and sat on the fender stool, talking to the cook and inquiring for "your aunt at Preston," "the little niece Pollie," "your nephew at sea," with a kindly remembrance which drew tears from the old soul's eyes. She made dresses for Geraldine's dolls, trimmed Miss Briggs' caps, and hovered about her father and sisters on the watch for an opportunity to serve them. Everyone was charmed to have her at home once more, and fussed over her in a manner which should have satisfied the most exacting of mortals; but sweet and loving as she was, Lettice did not look satisfied. The grey eyes seemed to grow larger and larger until her face appeared all eyes, and her cheeks showed a faint hollow where the dimples used to play. One miserable night, too, Norah woke to find Lettice sobbing with her head buried in the pillow, and heard a pitiful repetition of the words, "What shall I do? What shall I do?" But when she inquired what was wrong, Lettice declared that a tooth was aching, and sat up in the bed and rubbed her gums obediently with a lotion brought from the medicine cupboard. Norah blamed herself for doubting her sisters word, but she could not help noticing that the toothache yielded very rapidly to the remedy, and the incident left a painful impression on her mind.

Norah was not the only member of the household who was anxious about Lettice's happiness. Mr Bertrand had a serious conversation on the subject with his eldest daughter one morning when Lettice's pallor and subdued voice had been more marked than usual.

"I can't stand seeing the child going about like this. She looks the ghost of what she was five or six months back, and seems to have no spirit left. I shall have to speak to her. It is most painful and awkward on the very eve of the marriage, but if she is not happy—"

"Perhaps it is only that she is tired, and feels the prospect of leaving home," said Hilary; and at that very moment the door was burst open and in rushed Lettice herself, cheeks flushed, hair loose, eyes dancing with merriment. She and Raymond had just played a trick upon unsuspecting Miss Briggs with magnificent success. She was breathless with delight, could hardly speak for bursts of laughter, and danced up and down the room, looking so gay and blithe and like the Lettice of old, that her father wont off to his study with a heartfelt sigh of relief. Hilary was right. The child was happy enough. If she were a little quieter than usual it was only natural and fitting under the circumstances. He dismissed the subject from his mind, and settled contentedly to work.

One thing was certain: Arthur Newcome was a most attentive lover. Lettice contented herself with scribbling two or three short notes a week, but every afternoon the postman brought a bulky envelope addressed to her in the small neat handwriting which was getting familiar to every member of the household. Norah had an insatiable passion for receiving letters, and was inclined to envy her sister this part of her engagement.

"It must be so lovely to get long epistles everyday. Lettice, I don't want to see them, of course, but what sort of letters does he write? What does he talk about? Is it all affection, or does he tell you interesting pieces of news?"

Lettice gave the sheets a flick with her white fingers.

"You can read it if you like. There is nothing private. I must say he does not write exciting letters. He has been in Canterbury, and this one is a sort of guide-book about the crypt. As if I wanted to hear about crypts! I must say I did not think when I was engaged that I should have letters all about tombs and stupid old monuments! Arthur is so serious. I suppose he thinks he will 'improve my mind,' but if I am to be improved I would rather read a book at once and not be lectured in my love letters."

She had never spoken so openly before, and Norah dared not let the opportunity pass.

"Oh, Lettice, dear! aren't you happy? aren't you satisfied?" she cried earnestly. "I have been afraid sometimes that you were not so fond of Arthur as you should be. Do, do speak out, dear, if it is so, and put an end to things while there is time!"

"An end! What do you mean? I am to be married in less than a month—how could I put an end to it? Don't be foolish, Norah. Besides, I do care for Arthur. I wish sometimes that he were a little younger and less proper, but that is only because he is too clever and learned for a stupid little thing like me. Don't talk like that again; it makes me miserable. Wouldn't you like to have a house of your own and be able to do whatever you liked? My little boudoir is so sweet, all blue and white, and we will have such cosy times in it, you and I, and Edna must come up and stay with

me too. Oh, it will be lovely! I am sure it will. I shall be quite happy. I am glad father insisted upon having the wedding up here; it will be so much quieter than in a fashionable London church with all the rabble at the doors. Dreadful to be stared at by hundreds of people who don't know or care anything about you, and only look at you as part of a show. Here all the people are interested and care a little bit for 'Miss Lettice.' If only Rex were to be here! It seems hard that he should leave home just a fortnight before my wedding."

Norah sighed and relapsed into silence, for it was all settled about Rex's departure by this time. The Squire had given way, Mrs Freer and Edna had wept themselves dry, and were now busily occupied in preparing what Rex insisted upon describing as his "*trousseau*."

"I have one hundred and fifty 'pieces' in my *trousseau*; how many have you in yours?" he asked Lettice one day; and the girls were much impressed at the extensiveness of his preparations, until it was discovered that he counted each sock separately, and took a suit of clothes as representing three of the aforesaid "pieces." Having once given way, the Squire behaved in the most generous manner, and at his suggestion, Rex was to travel overland to Brindisi, spending a month in various places of interest on the Continent. In order to do this and catch the appointed boat, it was necessary to leave Westmoreland at the end of August. Ten days more, and then good-bye to Rex, good-bye to the happy old day which could never come back again! Four days more, three days, two days, one day—the last afternoon arrived, and with a sinking heart Norah went to meet Rex in the drawing-room for the last time for long years to come.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Good Bye!

It was a gloomy afternoon. The rain was felling in a persistent drizzle; the clouds were low and grey. It seemed as if nature itself shared in the depression which settled on the little party gathered together in the drawing-room at Cloudsdale. What merry times they had spent together in this room! What cosy chats there had been round the fireside in winter! what refreshing hours of rest in summer, when the sun blinds were lowered, and the windows stood open to the green lawn! And now they were all over. A melancholy feeling of "last time" settled on each of the beholders as they looked at Lettice with the betrothal ring sparkling on her finger, at Rex, so tall and man-like in his travelling suit of rough grey tweed. To make matters worse, the curate had taken this opportunity to pay a call, so that they were not even alone, and the rain prevented an adjournment to the garden. Norah sat at the extreme end of the room from Rex, trifling with her teacup and spoon, with a feeling of such helpless misery as she had never known before in the course of her short life. The Mouse cried openly, Miss Briggs whisked her handkerchief out of her pocket at intervals of every few minutes and Hilary's forced cheerfulness was hardly less depressing. As for Rex himself, he was perfectly quiet and composed, but his voice had a hard, metallic ring, and his face looked drawn and old. Lettice could not bear to look at him, for it seemed to her that there was more evidence of suffering in his set composure than in all the demonstrative grief of his companions.

Conversation languished over tea, and at last Hilary suggested music as a last resort. If there were music there would be a chance of moving about, and putting an end to these death-like pauses, and Rex would also have an opportunity of speaking to Norah, which no doubt he was longing to do; but so soon as music was suggested, the curate begged eagerly to hear Miss Norah play, and she rose to get her violin with the usual ready acquiescence. Norah had made immense strides during the three last years, and was now a performer of no mean attainments. It was always a treat to hear her play, and this afternoon the wailing notes seemed to have an added tenderness and longing. Lettice bit her lips to keep back the tears, while she watched Rex's face with fascinated attention. He had pushed his chair into the corner when Norah began to play, and shaded his eyes with his hand, and beneath this shelter he gazed at her with the unblinking, concentrated gaze of one who is storing up a memory which must last through long years of separation. How often in the bungalow home in India the scene in this English drawing-room would rise before him, and he would see again the girlish figure in the blue serge dress, the pale face leant lovingly against the violin, the face which was generally so gay and full of life, but which was now all sad and downcast! Lettice followed Rex's example and turned to look at her sister. Dear Norie! there was no one in the world like her! How sweet and gentle she looked! No wonder Rex hated to say good-bye—he would never find another girl like Norah Bertrand.

The curate was loud in his expression of delight when Norah laid down her bow, but Rex neither spoke nor moved, and Hilary in despair called for a song. The curate had a pleasant little tenor pipe of his own, and could play accompaniments from memory, so that he was ready enough to accede to the request. His selection, however, was not very large, and chiefly of the ballad order, and this afternoon the sound of the opening bars brought a flush of nervousness to Hilary's cheeks—"The Emigrant's Farewell!" What in the world had induced the man to make such a choice? An utter want of tact, or a mistaken idea of singing something appropriate to the occasion? It was too late to stop him now, however, and she sat playing with the fringe of the tea-cloth, hardly daring to lift her eyes, as the words rang through the room—

"I'm bidding you a long farewell,
  My Mary kind and true,
But I'll not forget you, darling,
  In the land I'm going to.
They say there's bread and work for all,
  And the son shines always there,
But I'll ne'er forget old Ireland,
  Be it fifty times as fair!"

Could anything be more painful—more disconcerting? As the last notes rang out she darted a quick glance at Rex, and to her horror saw the glimmer of tears in those "masterful" eyes, which had hitherto been so scornfully free from

signs of weakness.

The next moment, before the choruses of “thank you’s” had died away, Rex was on his feet, holding out his hand with an air of defiant indifference.

“I must go; it is getting late. Good-bye, Hilary. Good luck!”

“Oh, good-bye, Rex! I am so very, very sorry—”

“Good-bye, Lettice. You will be an old married woman when I see you again.”

“Good-bye, dear, dear Rex. Take care of yourself. Co–come back soon!”

“Miss Briggs! Mr Barton! Thank you very much. Oh, yes, I shall get on all right! Good-bye, little Mouse—give me a kiss!”

“Good-bye, darling, darling Rex—and I’ve worked a book-marker for you with ‘Forget-me-not’ in red worsted. It’s gone in the post to-day, and you will get it in the morning.”

“Thank you, Mouse. I’ll use it every day of my life. ... Good-bye, Norah—!”

“Good-bye, Rex!”

That was all. A short grasp of the hand, and he was gone. The door banged, footsteps went crunching down the gravel, and Norah stood like a statue of despair in the dim, flagged hall. For one moment only, then Lettice seized her by the arm, and dragged her hurriedly along the passage. Such a flushed, determined Lettice, with sparkling eyes, and quick, decisive tones!

“Norah! You can’t let him go away like that. You *can’t*! It’s inhuman! The poor boy was crying when Mr Barton was singing. I saw the tears in his eyes. He went away because he could not bear to stay any longer. And you never said a word! Oh run, run!—go out of the side door, and cut across the shrubbery to meet him at the gate. Oh, Norah, quick! It is your last chance! Think! You may never see him again!”

The last words put an end to any hesitation which Norah may have felt. Lettice held the door open, and she rushed out into the drizzling rain, hatless, cloakless, as she was, forgetting everything but that awful suggestion that she might never see Rex again. Down the narrow path, where a few weeks before she and Rex had first discussed the journey to India; across the plot of grass where Geraldine had her garden, and there, at the opening into the carriage drive, stood Rex himself, staring before him with a strained, expectant glance, which gave way to a flash of joy as Norah’s tall figure came in sight.

“I thought you would come! I thought you would not let me go away without a word!” he said, and Norah gave a little sob of emotion.

“What can I say? You know all I feel. I shall think of you all the time, and wish you good luck; and every night when I say my prayers—”

“I know! Thank you, Norah.” Rex turned his head aside quickly, but Norah saw that he was trembling with emotion, and waited in awed suspense for his next words.

“Norah—it is a long time—three years—five years—I can’t tell which it may be. I shall think of you all the time. There never will be anyone else for me; but it will be different with you. You will meet new friends up in London. There will be other fellows—better than I am—who will care for you too. Perhaps when I come back you may be married too!”

“No, Rex, don’t be afraid. I am not like that. I never forget.”

He gripped her hand, but made no answer, and they stood together in a silence which was sweet to both, despite the rain, the gloom, the coming separation. Norah was the first to find her voice.

“You will write home often; and we will send you all the news. The time will soon pass, and you will enjoy the life and the strange new country.” She looked into his face with a flickering smile. ... “They say there’s bread and work for all, and the sun shines always there...”

“But I’ll not forget you, *darling*, be it fifty times as fair!” came the answer, in a strained, hoarse whisper. Poor, shy Rex! Even at the moment of parting it was agony to him to speak that word of endearment, and having said it, he was consumed with embarrassment. Norah was still tingling with delight, when her hand was seized in a painful grip, a gruff “Good-bye, Norah!” sounded in her ears, and she was left alone in the garden path.

She put up her hands to her face and sobbed in helpless misery.

“Oh, Rex, Rex! Five long, long years! Oh, God, be good to my boy—take care of him! Bring him back safe and well!”

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Confession.

“And so you are engaged too, Norah!”

Half an hour had passed since Rex had left Cloudsdale, and Lettice and Norah wore seated in the bedroom which they shared together, Norah still trembling and tearful, Lettice full of wide-eyed interest.

“And so you are engaged too!”

“No, not engaged. There is nothing definite, but I know that he cares for me, and I have promised to wait—”

“It’s the same thing, but—five years! It is a terribly long time! So much may happen before then. You may change your mind!”

“No! I can’t explain, but I simply could not think of anyone else while Rex was alive. It would be all the same if it were fifteen years. You need not pity me, Lettice. I shall keep house for father after you and Hilary are married, and I shall be quite happy. I don’t think anything could make me unhappy again, now that I know Rex cares for me, and that when he comes back—” Norah stopped short, and Lettice drew in her breath with a painful respiration.

“Oh, Norie, I envy you! I wish I felt like that. I could never, never marry Arthur if I had to go out to India, and leave you all behind. Even now— Norah! if I speak out to you, will you keep it to yourself? Will you promise faithfully not to repeat a word to father or Hilary, or anyone else? Will you? Answer, Norah, yes or no!”

“I—I—yes, I promise, Lettice, if you wish it, but wouldn’t it be better—”

“No! no! I can speak to no one else, and not even to you unless you promise not to repeat a single word. Sometimes I am so miserable! I never intended to marry Arthur—never for a moment; but he was very nice to me—and I know you will be shocked, Norah, but I wanted him to go on being attentive, and sometimes I did pretend I liked him a little bit, when he seemed discouraged, or as if he were beginning to care less than he used. Then that day on the river he asked me to marry him, and I said No! I was horrified at the idea, and I tried to refuse him, I really did, but he looked so miserable—I couldn’t bear to see him. I was quite happy for a little time after that, and when he was away I longed for him to come back; but since then father and Miss Carr have been so cross; there have been such worries with the house, and workmen, and dressmakers, that I have felt sometimes as if I would give the world to run away and hide, and never see any of them again!”

Norah sat motionless, gazing at her sister in horrified silence. Her heart beat in quick, painful throbs—even Rex himself was forgotten in the shock of hearing her worst fears confirmed in Lettice’s own words. Unhappy! within three weeks of her marriage, with presents arriving by every post, the wedding breakfast ordered, the guests bidden to the church! It was some time before she could command her voice sufficiently to speak.

“But—Lettice! If you were happy at first, perhaps you are only miserable now because you are tired and overdone. I think even if I were going to marry Rex, I should feel sad the last few weeks when I thought of leaving father and the old home, and all the rest of you. It seems only natural. It would be rather heartless if one felt differently.”

“Do you think so, Norah—do you?” queried Lettice eagerly. “Oh, I am so glad to hear you say that! I have said so to myself over and over again, but I thought I ought to be happy. I have been so wretched. That night when you thought I had toothache—”

“I know. But I was afraid it was that. But, Lettice, if you are not satisfied it is not too late even now. You could tell Mr Newcome.”

But Lettice gave a shriek of dismay. “Oh, never, never! I daren’t even think of it, Norah. The house is ready—all the furniture—my dresses—the wedding presents! I could never, never break it off. Poor Arthur would be broken-hearted, too, and his mother would be so angry; she would never let Madge speak to me again. Oh, no! I feel better already for talking to you. I get nervous, and imagine things that are not true. I shall be very happy—of course I shall be happy. Arthur is so kind—and the house is so pretty. Don’t look so miserable, Norah dear; indeed, indeed, I shall be all right.”

“I hope so; but, Lettice, do think well over it while there is time. It would be terrible to have to break off your engagement now; but, at the worst, all the gossip and upset would be over in two or three months, and if you married it would be for your whole life. Father would be angry, but I would help you. I would stay with you, Lettice, and help you every minute of the time.”

“I know you would, I know you would.” Lettice spoke in a quick, breathless whisper; her eyes were fixed as if she were a prisoner looking through the barred window and trying to summon up courage to escape—then a shudder shook the slight shoulders, and she jumped up, holding out her hands with a gesture of dismay.

“Oh no, no! Don’t talk of anything so dreadful. Arthur is coming on Saturday, and I shall be quite happy. I am dull because I have not seen him for so long, but you will see how bright I am when he is here! I was very weak and foolish to speak as I did, but I can trust you, Norah. You have promised not to tell.”

“Yes, I have promised.” Poor Norah was only too willing to be convinced, and surely what Lettice said was reasonable enough. She would wait, at any rate, until Saturday before making any further attempt to persuade her sister to a step which must bring so much suffering and humiliation in its train.

Two days later the bridegroom arrived. Lettice went to the station to meet him. A very handsome couple they looked as they drove up to the door, Mr Newcome immaculate as ever despite the long, dusty journey, and so large and impressive, that Norah was quite embarrassed by the suggestion that she should address him as “Arthur.” Lettice was all smiles and radiance, much delighted with a necklace of turquoise and diamonds which her lover had brought as his wedding present, and which she exhibited proudly to every member of the household.

Father, brothers and sisters were alike so relieved to see her happiness that they were prepared to welcome Arthur Newcome with open arms, and to acknowledge that their prejudices were unfounded. They listened with smiling faces to his tedious description of his journey north, of previous journeys, or journeys still to come; they tried to show an interest in the items of stale information which he offered in words of studied length and elegance, and with the air of imparting a startling novelty; but alas! it was all in vain. After three days' experience, the unanimous verdict proclaimed that such a well-behaved and withal tiresome and prosy young gentleman had never before worn frock coats, or walked about country lanes in a tall hat and immaculate kid gloves.

"He must be different with Lettice. She could never endure it if he bored her as much as he does us," reiterated Hilary firmly, upon which Raymond's eyes twinkled with mischievous intentions.

"Well—do you know, I should like to feel certain about that!" he said, and forthwith strolled out into the garden through the open doorway.

Lettice and Arthur Newcome were pacing their favourite walk, the narrow shrubbery path which encircled the lawn, and at intervals of every three or four minutes the two figures came into sight as the path opened to drive and tennis ground. Master Raymond strolled across to the first of these openings, leant nonchalantly against a tree, and waited the approach of footsteps. They came—a strong, steady crunching of the gravel, a pattering of quick, uneven little steps, and the sound of a deep bass voice struck on the ear.

"...And further on, in the transept aisle, I came upon a particularly heavy and unattractive cenotaph to the memory of —"

Raymond gasped, and rolled his eyes; then, as the footsteps died away, he sped lightly across the lawn, and ensconced himself at the next point of vantage. The boom of Mr Newcome's big voice came again to his ear. Poor little Lettice was evidently a good listener!

"...The epitaph is in the inflated style of the period—bombastic in character, and supposed to be written by—"

"Bombastic!" echoed Raymond in despair. "I know someone else to whom that epithet would apply uncommonly well. This is worse than I expected! I'll give him one more chance, and then—" But at the third hearing Mr Newcome was discoursing on "allegorical figures and pseudo-classic statues," whereupon Raymond dashed off into the house and horrified his sisters by an account of his experiences.

"What a shame to listen like that! Lettice would be furious if she knew."

"It was for her own good. Poor little soul! I'm sorry for her. What on earth made him choose tombstones as a topic of conversation."

"I know. He has been staying in Canterbury. Lettice told me that he had written to her about the Cathedral," said Norah dolefully. "I wonder if I ought to go and join them! She asked me, and pinched my arm to make me say yes, but I thought Arthur looked as if he didn't want me. Can't we make an excuse and call her in? She looks *so* tired."

"Well, they are the funniest pair of lovers I have ever seen!" said Raymond, nodding his head with a knowing look, as if he had had an extensive knowledge of engaged couples, whereas he had never been in the house with one before. And just at that moment in marched Lettice, her fair face disfigured by a weary, irritable expression.

"I think you are all very unkind! I asked you to come into the garden. It's very mean to leave me all alone, when I have only a f–f–fortnight more at home!" The last word in a burst of tears, and she ran hurriedly upstairs to her own room.

What was to be the end of it all? Her sisters stared at each other with wide, frightened eyes, too miserable and uneasy to speak.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Before the Wedding.

A week before the wedding Miss Carr came down from London, and with her came also Mr Herbert Rayner, who had paid frequent visits to Westmoreland during the last few years, and was now regarded as a family friend who could not be spared on such an historical occasion. His lameness was not any better for the lapse of time, but Hilary's exhortations had taken effect, for he was much less sensitive about his inability to do as the other men did, while as for the rest, he had every reason to be cheerful nowadays, for his writings were so highly praised that Mr Bertrand affected jealousy, and declared that his own sun was eclipsed. There was a very warm friendship between the two men; both declared that they gained inspiration from the other, and Raymond dubbed them "The Mutual Admiration Society," because Mr Bertrand was wont to declare that Rayner was an infinitely finer writer than himself, while Mr Rayner in his turn despaired of accomplishing anything fit to compare with the work of his friend.

With Miss Carr arrived a cart-load of boxes containing bride and bridesmaids' dresses, feathers and furbelows of all descriptions, and a number of presents from acquaintances in London.

The other girls were full of excitement over the opening of these treasures, but Lettice herself was silent and indifferent, and hardly troubled herself to look at the beautiful gifts which were showered upon her. She excused herself on the plea of a chronic head-ache, and lay half the day on a sofa in the schoolroom, while Miss Briggs fed her with beef-tea, and fussed over her in kindly, motherly fashion. Everyone petted her and treated her with consideration, but no one said a word to suggest that she was unhappy in the thought of the coming marriage. It was

too late for that; she had determined to keep to her engagement, and it was only natural to account for her indisposition on the ground of excitement and fatigue. Circumstances combined, moreover, to keep Lettice a good deal apart from the others during these last busy days. Miss Carr's maid was employed making the alterations which were requisite in the dresses from London, so that Lettice was continually being summoned to the sewing-room, and when she was not being "tried on" she had many letters to write acknowledging the gifts which arrived in such numbers.

Hilary was too busy to have any time for confidential talks, and when Norah had a moment's leisure, her thoughts were far away from Westmoreland, journeying over foreign lands with a certain tall young Englishman with grey eyes and a crop of close-cut, curly hair. Even Lettice herself was apt to be forgotten in this all-absorbing occupation!

The Newcome contingent, and those London friends who were to accompany them, were to come down on the day before the wedding, and to put up at an hotel in Windermere, and every day brought with it a host of preparations which kept the little mistress of the house busy from morning until night.

Hilary showed to advantage under these circumstances. Always brisk, alert and smiling, never worried or unduly anxious, she shared a good deal of Rex's boasted "gift of management," and contrived to keep the house comfortable for the visitors, despite the general disarrangement, and the everlasting arrival of packing-chests and boxes. Hampers of flowers, hampers of fruit, crates of china and glass, rolls of red baize, boxes containing wedding-cake, confectionery, dresses, presents—in they came, one after another, in an unending stream, until to get across from the front door into the dining-room was like running the blockade, and wisps of straw were scattered all over the house. Norah and Hilary swathed themselves in big white aprons and unpacked from morning till night: a more interesting task than it sounds, for the boxes were full of pleasant surprises, and Mr Rayner, Raymond, and their father played the part of "dress circle," and kept everyone laughing with their merry sallies. It was a cheery, bustling time, for everyone was in good spirits and prepared to enjoy the happy-go-lucky, picnic life. Lunch and dinner were movable feasts, held either in dining- or morning-room, or in the garden itself, as proved most convenient, and when afternoon tea was served three days before the wedding, the cups were scattered about on the top of packing-chests in the hall, the cake basket hung on the hat rail, and the teapot was thrust out of reach of harm beneath the oak bench. Lettice was lying down upstairs, but all the rest of the household were gathered together, the visitors provided with chairs in honour of their position, Norah seated on the stairs, Raymond straddle-leg over the banister, Mr Bertrand and Geraldine lowly on buffets, while Hilary was perched on the top of a huge packing chest, enveloped in a pink "pinafore," and looking all the prettier because her brown hair was ruffled a little out of its usual immaculate order.

"I wish we could have tea like this every day!" cried the Mouse, drawing a long breath of enjoyment. "May we have it like this every day, father, instead of properly in the drawing-room?"

"Ah, Mouse, I see you are a Bohemian at heart, for all your quiet ways! I agree with you, my dear, that it would be quite delightful, but the difficulty is that we could not persuade people to shower presents and hampers upon us in the ordinary course of events. It takes a wedding, or some celebration of the kind, to start such a flood of generosity."

"Well, may we have tea like this when Hilary is married?" insisted Geraldine, with a gravity which caused a hearty laugh.

"Ask Hilary, my dear!" said Mr Bertrand mischievously; and Hilary tossed her head and said that one wedding was enough at the time—she had no strength to think of two.

"Indeed, my dear, I wonder you are not laid up as it is," said Miss Carr kindly. "You are on your feet from morning till night, and everyone comes to you for directions; I am afraid you will break down when the excitement is over. There is generally a collapse on these occasions. Have you any idea what you are all going to do after the young couple have departed?"

"Get the house in order, and go to bed for a week," said Hilary brightly, flushing with pleasure at Miss Carr's words of praise, and at the murmur of assent which they had evoked from her companions; but it appeared that other people were more energetically inclined than herself, for both Miss Briggs and Raymond seized the opportunity to air secret plans of their own.

"I wanted to speak to you about that, Mr Bertrand! My sister in Scarborough is most anxious that I should pay her a visit, and take Geraldine with me, and I think the sea air would do us both good."

"And I should like to have some shooting with Ferrars in Scotland. He has asked me so often, and I could just fit it in this year."

Mr Bertrand looked at his two daughters—at Hilary, bright and natty, but with shadows under her eyes which spoke of the fatigue she would not acknowledge; then, with an anxious tenderness at Norah, whose unusual quietness for the last few days he understood better than she suspected.

"Really," he said, "if all the world is going off pleasuring, I don't see any reason why we should be left behind! What do you say, girls—shall we go off for a tour on our own account? I think we deserve a holiday after our hard work and a run on the Continent would do us all good. Helen, what do you say? Will you come and take care of the girls? Rayner, I can't tackle three ladies unassisted. You had better join us, and take care of me!"

"I should certainly not leave the girls to your tender mercies, you scatter-brained man," said Miss Carr, smiling, as though well pleased at the suggestion. "You might forget all about them, as as you did on another memorable occasion, and the consequences would be disastrous. Yes!—if you take plenty of time, and don't rush about from place to place, I should be glad of a change myself. This wedding—"

“It is too good of you to include me. Wouldn’t I like it!” cried Mr Rayner, with a smile which made him look quite young and boyish. “September is lovely in Switzerland. The rush of tourists is over, and the autumn tints are wonderful. But we ought to get off as soon as possible. You will have to give up your week in bed, Miss Hilary!”

“I may as well give up bed altogether, I think, for I shall not sleep a wink for thinking of it. Oh, father dear, you are good! I drink to you!” And Hilary held up her teacup, bowing and smiling, and looking so bright and pretty that it was a pleasure to see her.

“‘Oh, father, father! save me!’”

Well, it was a happy hour, and the memory of it remained all the more vividly because of the contrast which it afforded to the dark days which followed. At twelve o’clock the same evening, Mr Bertrand took up his candle and went the usual tour of inspection through the house. He peered into the drawing-room, fragrant with plants and cut blossoms, into the dining-room, where the village carpenters were already putting up the horse-shoe table; into the pantry, where the more valuable presents were locked away in the great iron safe. All was quiet and secure. He returned to his study, and was just settling down for a quiet read, when the sound of footsteps smote on his ear. He opened the door, and started back at the sight of a white figure which came floating towards him, with flowing locks and outstretched hands.

“What is it?—who is it? What is the matter?—*Lettice*!”

The next moment two arms were clasped round his neck; he felt the heaving of breathless sobs, and an agonised voice called on him by name—

“Oh, father, father! save me! save me! I can’t go on! I can’t marry him! My heart will break—!”

Chapter Twenty Five.

Broken Plans.

The light was still dim the next morning when Hilary woke with a start to find her father standing by her bedside. Even in the first sleepy glance she was struck by the pale distress of his face, and sat up hurriedly, pushing back the hair from her face, and murmuring a confused “What—what—what?”

“My dear, I am sorry to disturb you, but I need your help.” Mr Bertrand seated himself on the edge of the bed, and took the girl’s hands in his. “Hilary, a great trouble has come upon us. Lettice wishes to break off her engagement. She cannot bear the idea of marrying Arthur Newcome. There will be no wedding on Thursday as we expected.”

Hilary stared at him with dazed eyes. Her awakening from sleep had been so sudden, and the news was so overwhelming, that it was some moments before she could grasp its full meaning.

No wedding! But the preparations were made—everything was ready. It could not be stopped at the very last moment. She drew in her breath with a quick, frightened respiration:

“Oh, father! is it true? Is she *sure*? Does she really mean it?”

“I am afraid there is no doubt about that, Hilary. Now that she has summoned up courage to speak, she acknowledges that she has been unhappy all along. She is in great distress, as is only natural. Norah is with her. I put off disturbing you as long as I could, for you have had too much fatigue lately, but I need your help, dear. You must

get up at once. We have some painful duties before us."

"Oh, father—Arthur! What will he—how will you—?"

Mr Bertrand drew a sharp sigh. "I have wired to him to stop all preparations, and come down himself by the early train. He will be here this afternoon. Poor fellow! he has been cruelly used. I am bitterly ashamed. I have told Mary to bring you up a breakfast tray at once, and here she comes; so eat as much as you can before you get up, and then come to me in my study. Be brave! Remember I rely on your help!"

"Yes, father," said Hilary tremblingly; and the next moment Mary entered the room, her rosy face awed and frightened, her ready tongue silenced by the seriousness of the situation.

That breakfast seemed like a hideous nightmare to Hilary. Every moment brought a fresh pang of recollection. In every direction in which her eyes glanced, they lighted upon some object which accentuated her misery—the long dress box, in which the bridesmaids' finery lay ready for use; the pile of letters on the table; the hundred and one etceteras of preparation. Could it be possible that they were all for nothing—that she must now set to work to undo the labour of weeks? And the misery of it all! the humiliation—the dreadful, dreadful publicity! Hilary leapt out of bed in despair, unable to remain idle any longer, dressed with feverish rapidity, and ran downstairs to join her father. As she reached the foot of the staircase, Mr Rayner came forward to meet her. Their hands met in a close, sympathetic grasp, but neither spoke during the moment that it lasted. Then came the sound of a heavy footstep on the tiled floor, and the village joiner crossed the hall on his way to complete the erection of the tables in the dining-room. He touched his cap to Hilary as he passed, and the girl drew back, growing pale to her lips.

"Oh, he must be stopped! I can't do it. It is too dreadful!"

"Leave it to me. It's so seldom I can do anything—do let me help you now. Go to your father, and leave all this to me." He led her forward, unresisting, to the study, where her father greeted her with an exclamation of relief.

"Ah, here you are, dear! Sit down. We must get to work at once on this wretched business. I have sent off notes already to the vicar and the curate, who will stop preparations at the church; the domestic arrangements I must leave to you; and there will be notes to write to all invited guests. Rayner will help, and Raymond also. I will draw up a form which you can copy, but the letters must go off by the afternoon post, so the sooner they are written the better. Newcome will be with us before many hours are over—"

He broke off with a sigh, which Hilary echoed from the depths of an aching heart.

"I will go at once and speak to the servants. I will set them to work to put the house in order, and hide all the preparations out of sight, and then come back here, and get the writing done first of all."

"That's my good girl!" said her father warmly; and they kissed each other with sympathetic affection.

Poor Hilary! She had need of all her courage to enable her to go through that morning's work. The servants received her orders with tears of distress and disappointment Norah came stealing out of the room with the news that Lettice had cried all night long, could not be induced to eat, and lay on her bed icy cold and trembling as if with an ague. Miss Carr was too much upset to be able to leave her bed, and Geraldine's straightforward questions were for once agonising to the listeners.

"Has Lettice been naughty?" she inquired. "Has Mr Newcome been naughty? Will she never wear her pretty dresses? Shall I never wear my dress? What shall we do with all the presents? Shall we have to send back the cake?"

"Oh, Mouse, be quiet, for pity's sake!" cried Hilary in desperation. "If you ask any more questions you must go to bed. It's very naughty and unkind;" at which unexpected reproof Geraldine's eyes filled with tears.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Hilary; I only thought if you didn't want it, perhaps Miss Briggs's sister in Scarborough might like some cake—"

"Come along with me, Mouse, and I'll give you a swing in the garden," said Mr Rayner, coming to the rescue for the twentieth time. His presence was a comfort to every member of the household, and Hilary could never think of that dreadful morning without recalling the quiet, unobtrusive way in which he watched over her, and shielded her from every possible aggravation. When afternoon came, he insisted upon taking her to a quiet little coppice near the gates, so that she should not be in the house at the time of Arthur Newcome's visit; but from their seat among the trees they heard the sound of wheels as the fly turned down the drive, and knew that the dreaded interview was at hand.

"Lettice begged and prayed not to see him, father says, but he insisted that she should go down. He said it was only due to Arthur. Fancy what it must be to the poor, poor fellow, to lose her at the last moment, and to have to go back to London and explain everything to his friends—when the house is ready, and all preparations made. I feel so angry and humiliated that I can't be sorry for Lettice. She deserves all she suffers!"

Mr Rayner did not answer; and they sat in silence for five or ten minutes, at the expiration of which Hilary stole a glance at his face, and ventured a timid question.

"Are *you* sorry?"

"Sorry for your sister? Yes—intensely sorry!"

"You think I am hard—unsympathetic?"

“I think you are hardly in a fit state to understand your own feelings to-day. It has been a great strain, and you have kept up bravely and well.”

Hilary’s lip trembled, and she covered her face with her hands. “Oh, I don’t want to be hard, but it does seem so dreadful! She had a whole month to think over it—and then to bring all this misery upon him at the last moment. I feel *ashamed*! Surely, surely, it is easy to know whether one cares or not. If I were engaged—”

“Yes?”

“Oh, I don’t know—I should never, never promise to marry anyone unless I loved him with my whole heart; but when I did, I’d stick to him if the whole world were against us.”

“I believe you would.” Mr Rayner hesitated at the end of these words as if he were about to say something further, but the hesitation ended in silence, and presently Hilary leapt to her feet and began to pace up and down.

“Oh, let us walk about. I can’t sit still. I am too nervous. If we go along this path we shall not meet anybody, and it will pass the time. I can’t bear to think of what is going on inside the house.” So for the next hour they walked up and down trying in vain to talk upon outside topics, and coming back again and again to the same painful theme. At last the sound of wheels came to their ears again. The fly could be seen wending its way down the country lane, and Hilary lost no time in running home to rejoin her father in his study.

He was standing with his arms resting upon the mantelpiece, his head buried in his hands, and when he turned to meet her, it struck the girl with a stab of pain that for the first time he looked old—an old man, tired and worn with the battle of life.

“Well?” she gasped; and he answered with a long-drawn sigh.

“Well—it is over! The most painful scene I have ever gone through in my life. He wouldn’t believe me, poor fellow! Then Lettice came in. He looked at her, and—the light died out of his face. It was very pitiful. He was brave and manly; would not blame her, or hear her blamed. I admired him more than I could have believed possible. He said very little. Stricken to the heart, poor fellow, and I could do nothing for him! He has gone back to town to stop preparations. I would have given my right hand to help him.”

“Father dear! You look so ill! It has been too much strain. What can I do for you now? Let me do something!”

“Send in Rayner to have a smoke with me. How thankful I am that he is here. He is a comfort and strength to us all!”

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Sunny Climes.

The sun was shining over the lake of Thun, and the little steamer was puffing cheerily through the water. Behind lay the picturesque town, with its rushing river, and quaint, old-world buildings; in front lay—ah! what a scene of beauty and grandeur! Surely, it were worth while to travel from the ends of the earth to see this marvellous sight. The blue waters, fringed with brilliant foliage; the trees in their autumn glory, the rowan-berries making patches of scarlet here and there, the solemn pines capping the mountain height, and at the head of the lake—beautiful, dazzling, majestic—the snow-clad range of Eiger, Monck, and Jungfrau.

In all the beautiful world there can be few spots so beautiful as the lake of Thun, as seen upon a glorious September afternoon!

The passengers on board the steamer displayed a special interest in an English party who walked up and down the deck. A father and three daughters; an elderly lady whose relationship it was difficult to guess, and a young man with a clever, sensitive face, who managed his crutches with marvellous agility, and who was obviously neither husband nor brother. The girls themselves received a full share of admiration from the French and German visitors who are in the majority in Switzerland in autumn. The eldest was so neat and dainty, with her pretty English complexion and trim little figure; the tall, dark girl was *spirituelle* and uncommon; while the third had an air *très chic*, and would have been quite *ravissante* if she had been a trifle less pale and *serieuse*, but even the surprising beauty of the scene seemed powerless to bring a smile to her face.

It was chiefly owing to Mr Rayner’s persuasion that Mr Bertrand had left Westmoreland on the very day after that fixed for his daughter’s marriage. The painful duty of returning the wedding presents had been accomplished, and it was so distressing to all concerned to remain in a place where they felt themselves to be the subject of continual gossip, that they were thankful to get away to fresh surroundings. They had travelled straight through to Thun, engaging sleeping-carriages in advance, and had been ensconced for over a week in the hotel on the shores of the lake, taking daily excursions, and resting beneath the broad verandah, while, by common consent, no reference was made to the painful events of the past week.

“If we are going away, we must try to get as much good as we can from the change. What is past, is past. There is no use fretting over it any longer,” Mr Bertrand had said; and Hilary found so little difficulty in following his advice and being radiantly happy, that she felt a pang of remorse when suddenly confronted by Lettice’s pale face, and reminded thereby of her sadness and Arthur Newcome’s suffering.

Lettice had ceased to cry, but she was very silent, and her eyes wore a strained, frightened look which it was sad to see in so young a face. Everyone was studiedly kind to her, but Lettice was sensitive enough to feel the effort which lay behind the kindness. Norah alone was just as loving and whole-hearted as ever. Dear Norah! she had been

shocked and distressed beyond measure, but how loyally she had kept her promise to help “every moment of the time”! During those two first awful days, what a comfort it had been to have her near; to clutch that strong, faithful hand when the others came into the room, and looked on from afar with cold, sad eyes! Norah was the same, but all the rest had changed. They had been grieved, shocked, humiliated by her behaviour, and though she was nominally forgiven, the chill ring of disapproval sounded in every word they spoke, and Lettice faded like a flower deprived of light and sunshine. Instead of gaining strength by the change she grew every day paler, thinner, and more ghost-like, until at last her father became alarmed, and questioned her closely as to her health.

“Does your head ache, Lettice?”

“No, father.”

“Do you sleep well at night?”

“I think—sometimes I do, father. Pretty well.”

“Have you any pain?”

Lettice raised her eyes and looked at him—a look such as a wounded stag might cast at its executioner. She trembled like a leaf, and clasped her hands round his arm in an agony of appeal.

“Oh, father, father! I am *all* pain. I think of it day and night—it never leaves me. I think I shall see it before me all my life.”

“See what, Lettice? What do you mean?”

“*His face*!” quivered Lettice, and was silent. Mr Bertrand knew that she was referring to the stricken look with which Arthur Newcome had left the room where he had received the deathblow to his hopes, and the remembrance brought a cloud across his own face.

“Ay! I don’t wonder at that; but it will only add to our trouble, Lettice, if you fell ill—and we have had enough anxiety.”

He was conscious of not being very sympathetic, but his feeling was so strong on the subject that he could not control his words, and when Lettice spoke again it was with no reference to herself.

“Father, do you think he will ever—forget?—get over it?”

Mr Bertrand hesitated. “With most young men I should have said unhesitatingly—yes! but I think Arthur Newcome will probably remember longer than most, though I sincerely hope he will recover in time. But at the best, Lettice, you have caused him bitter pain and humiliation, and, what is worse, have shaken his faith in women for the rest of his life.”

Lettice gave a little cry of pain. “Oh, father! I want to talk to you. I want to tell you how I feel, but I can’t, while you speak in that hard, dry voice! Don’t you see—don’t you see that you are all killing me with your coldness? I have made you miserable, and have been weak, and foolish, and vain; but, father, father! I have not base wicked, and I have suffered most of all! Why do you break my heart by treating me like a stranger, and freezing me by your cruel, cruel kindness? You are my father—if I have done wrong, won’t you help me to be better in the future? It isn’t as if I were careless of what I have done. You see—you *see* how I suffer!” And she held out her arms with a gesture so wild and heart-broken that her father was startled, and caught her to him with one of his old, fond gestures.

“My poor child! My little Lettice! Heaven knows I have not intended to be cruel to you, dear, but I have been so worried and distressed that I have hardly known what I was about. You must forgive me, dear, and I will help you in every way I can. I do indeed see that you are miserable, poor child; but that I cannot help. It is only right that you should realise—”

“Father, I don’t think you or anyone else can tell how intensely I feel it all. You know I have been a coward all my life—afraid to grieve anyone, always trying to avoid disagreeable things; and now to feel that I have ruined Arthur’s life and wrecked his happiness, goes through my heart like a knife. And his poor, poor face! Father, I am too miserable and ashamed to be sure of anything, but I do believe this will be a lesson to me all my life. I can never, never be so cruel again! I will never marry now, but I will try to be a comfort to you, father dear, and do everything I can to make up for the misery I have caused—only do, do love me a little bit. Don’t everybody stop loving me!”

Mr Bertrand smiled to himself as he stroked the girl’s soft hair. Small fear that he or anyone else would cease caring for lovely, lovable Lettice; but all the same, his smile was more sad than bright.

“I shall always love you, dear,” he said; “but, Lettice, try to think less of people’s love for you, and more of your own love for them. That is the secret of happiness! This constant craving to receive love is not far removed from selfishness, when you go down to the root of things. Try to think of other people first—”

“I will, father—I really will; but don’t lecture me to-day, plea–se! I feel so low and wretched that I can’t stand anything more. I am not—all—all—altogether bad, am I?”

Mr Bertrand laughed despite himself. “No, indeed. Very well, then—no more lectures. We understand each other now, and there are to be no more clouds between us. Off with you into the hotel! Put on your hat and cloak, and we will go for a row on the lake before lunch.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Glad Surprise.

The weather continued so warm and sunny that Mr Bertrand and his party lingered in Thun, day after day, enjoying the Indian summer, and loath to tear themselves away from the lovely surroundings. Lettice remained silent and subdued, but there was no longer any coldness between her and her companions, and her face had lost the strained, despairing expression which had been so painful to behold. The news from London, moreover, was as satisfactory as could be hoped for under the circumstances. A friend of Arthur Newcome's, who was also engaged to be married, had come forward and offered to take the house and furniture at a valuation, while his father had recalled his business manager in America and was sending Arthur to take his place for the next two or three years. Everyone felt that the change would be the best cure which the poor fellow could have, while it was an immense relief to know that there would be no danger of painful encounters in London. Even with this dread removed, Mr Bertrand was in ten minds about his plans for the coming winter. There seemed many reasons why it would be better to remain quietly in Westmoreland for another year. He puzzled over the question in private, and finally confided his difficulty to Mr Rayner, with startling and unexpected results.

"You see, the boys could go on as they are for some time to come; Norah is not over anxious for the change, and I cannot say I am willing to let Lettice go much into society just now. She is so very lovely that she is bound to attract attention, and after this painful business it would be in better taste to keep out of the way until it is forgotten. All things considered, I think I should be wise to give up the idea of coming to town until next winter."

Mr Rayner's face had clouded over while his friend was speaking, and his answer came in dry, irritated tones.

"When you say, 'all things considered,' you forget, of course, that you have entirely overlooked Miss Hilary's feelings in the matter. As your eldest daughter, I should have thought that her wishes might have been consulted; but it appears that all the others are put before her!"

"Hallo, what's this? And pray when did you constitute yourself Hilary's champion?" cried Mr Bertrand, turning round in his seat with a laugh, and an amused expression on his face, which gave place to one of blankest astonishment as he met the flash in his companion's eyes, and heard the firm tone of the answer—

"How long ago? I don't know! But I *am* her champion, now and for ever, if she will have me!"

"Rayner! What is this? You cannot possibly be in earnest?"

Herbert Rayner laughed shortly. No one could look at him for a moment and doubt that he was deeply in earnest, but there was a bitter ring in his laughter which showed that he misunderstood the reason of his friend's surprise.

"I don't wonder that you are astonished! A fine lover I am—am I not, to dare to aspire to a bright young girl?"

"My dear fellow, you misunderstood me. I know to what you refer, but that never even entered my mind. What I can't realise is that you can possibly entertain any feeling of the kind for Hilary. You! If I ever thought of your possible marriage it was always with some clever, charming woman of the world who would help you with your work, and enter into your plans. Hilary is a mere girl. She has no special ability of any kind—"

"No?"

"Not the slightest literary gift!"

"No."

"Absolutely ignorant of your world."

"Yes."

"You are ten years older than she is."

"Yes."

"Well—well—well—"

"Well, Bertrand, we can't argue about these things. There it is, and I can't account for it. I want Hilary, and I don't want the 'clever, charming woman.' She satisfies me, and—"

"Have you spoken to her?"

"Certainly not! I don't know that I should have ever summoned up courage to speak to you, if you had not taken me by surprise. It would be different if I were now as I was ten years ago, but I feared you might think my health an insuperable objection."

"No—no! I can't say that—if you have really set your heart on it. How long has this been going on?"

Mr Rayner smiled—a quick, whimsical smile, which was like a flash of sunshine.

"Well, you have heard the story of the scarlet slippers? That evening, after you left, I went to look for them behind the curtains, and smuggled them downstairs beneath my coat. I don't know what possessed me to do it, but I did, and I have them still!"

Mr Bertrand threw back his head with a burst of laughter.

“Oh, after that! If you have got the length of treasuring worsted slippers, there is no more to be said. Rayner, my dear fellow, I suppose I ought to be distressed, but I believe I am—uncommonly pleased and proud! Little Hilary! It would be delightful to feel that you were one of us. And have you any idea as to whether she cares for you in return?”

“We have always been great friends. I cannot say more. And do you really give me permission to speak to her? Would you give her to me, in spite of my weakness and infirmity? How can I ever express my thanks?”

“If Hilary cares for you, I will put no hindrance in your way; but we must have no more mistakes. I will not allow an engagement until I have satisfied myself as to her feelings. There is one comfort: she knows her own mind uncommonly well, as a rule. You can speak to her when you will...”

Although the conversation lasted for some time longer, the same things were practically repeated over and over again, and when the two gentlemen came in to lunch, the girls and Miss Carr all noticed the unusual radiance of their expressions. The last few weeks had contained so much trouble and worry, that it was quite inspiriting to see

“‘It is to be as he wants.’”

bright faces again, and to hear genuine laughter take the place of the forced “ha, ha!” which had done duty for so long. Even Lettice smiled once or twice in the course of that meal, and Norah’s eyes lost their dreamy, far-away look and twinkled with the old merry expression, while Hilary nodded gaily across the table in answer to her father’s searching look, and chattered away all unsuspecting of the great event which was so close at hand.

When Mr Rayner asked her to take her work to the seat overlooking the lake, in the afternoon, she said, “Won’t you come too, Lettice?” and tripped after him, humming a lively air.

It was a very different Hilary who returned to the hotel two hours later, and went to join her father on the verandah. Her face was pale and serious; she looked older and more womanlike; but there was a steady light of happiness in her eyes which told its own tale.

“Well, Hilary,” he asked gravely, “and what is it to be?”

“There is no doubt about that, father! It is to be as he wants—now and always!”

“I thought as much. But you must realise what you are doing, dear. When most girls are married they look forward to having a strong man’s arm between them and the world; they expect to be shielded from trouble; but if you marry Rayner, this will not be your lot. You will have to watch over him, to spare him fatigue and anxiety, and take the burden on your own shoulders, for he is a man who will require constant care.”

“I know that. It is what I long to do. I should be so happy looking after him.”

“And perhaps—it seems brutal to mention it, but the possibility must be faced—he might not be spared to you for many years! A delicate fellow like that—”

“Strong men die unexpectedly, father, as well as weakly ones. Everyone has to run that risk. I would rather be his wife even for two or three years than marry any other man. And I will nurse him so well—take such good care—”

“Ah, I see your mind is made up! Well, dear, some people would think I was doing a foolish thing in consenting to this engagement, but I *do* consent. I do more than that, I rejoice with all my heart in your happiness, and in my own happiness, for it will be a joy to every one of us. Rayner will be a son-in-law worth having, and a husband of whom any woman might be proud. Ah, well! this is something like an engagement! That other unhappy affair was nothing but trouble from first to last. You know your mind, my dear, and are not likely to change.”

“Never!” said Hilary. And her eyes flashed with a bright, determined look, at which her father smiled.

“That’s good hearing! Well, dear, we will have another talk later on, but now we had better go and join the others. They are curious to know what we are whispering about over here.”

Miss Carr had come out of the hotel after her afternoon nap, and was seated on the verandah beside the two younger girls. Mr Rayner had joined them, and was listening with mischievous enjoyment to their speculations about Hilary’s conference with her father.

“How interested they seem! Now he is kissing her. Why don’t they come over here and tell us all about it?” cried Norah; and, as if anxious to gratify her curiosity, Mr Bertrand came towards the verandah at that very moment, and presenting Hilary to them with a flourishing hand, cried roguishly—

“Allow me to introduce to you the future Mrs Herbert Rayner!”

The excitement, joy, and astonishment of the next few minutes can be better imagined than described. Miss Carr shed tears into her teacup; the girls repeated incoherently that they had always expected it, and that they had never expected it; and Mr Bertrand was as mischievous in his teasing ways as Raymond himself could have been under the circumstances; but the lovers were too happy to be disturbed by his sallies. It was both beautiful and touching to see Mr Rayner’s quiet radiance, and to watch how his eyes lightened whenever they lit on Hilary’s face, while to see that self-possessed young lady looking shy and embarrassed was something new indeed in the annals of the family! Shy she was, however, beyond possibility of doubt, hardly daring to look in Mr Rayner’s direction, and refusing outright to address him by his Christian name for the edification of the listeners.

“What is there to be frightened at? I am not frightened! Herbert, do you take sugar, Herbert? Will you have two lumps, Herbert?” cried Lettice saucily, and everyone smiled, pleased to see the lovely face lighted up by the old merry smile, and to hear a joke from the lips which had drooped so sadly.

“Will you put me in a story, Herbert, if I’m very good, and promise not to tease?” said Norah, determined not to be outdone; and the new brother looked at her with admiring eyes.

“I think I rather enjoy being teased, do you know; it is so very new and satisfactory! But I shall certainly make a heroine of you some fine day, Norah, when I have manufactured a hero worthy of the occasion!”

Norah’s laugh rang out merrily, but as she turned her head to look at the distant mountains, a little film of moisture dimmed her eyes. Impossible to see two people so happy together as Herbert and Hilary, and not think of the long years which must pass before such a joy came to herself. But Rex was true—he would not change; he was worth all the waiting—

“Well, Helen,” said Mr Bertrand to his faithful old friend as the young people moved off at last and left them alone together. “Well, Helen, and what do you think of this latest development? Are you satisfied? Have I been wise?—Do you think he is the right man for her?”

Miss Carr looked at him with a little flash of disdain.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that Hilary has improved so wonderfully during the last few years, that there is now some chance of her being *almost* good enough for him! My dear Austin, he is a king among men! Hilary may be a proud woman that his choice has fallen upon her. They will be very happy.”

“I trust, I think they will! It seems strange that it should be Hilary, who was always so careful of her own interests, who should have chosen to marry a delicate, crippled fellow who must be more or less of a care all his days; but I believe it will make a splendid woman of her, draw out all the tenderness of her nature, and soften her as nothing else could have done. Yes! I am thoroughly happy about it, more especially as it has the honour of your distinguished approval. These engagements come thick and fast upon us, Helen. Let us hope there will be a breathing time now for some time to come. Lettice is bound to marry sooner or later, but we will pray for ‘later,’ and as for Norah, I suppose her future is practically settled. Poor child! it will be a long waiting, but Rex is a fine lad, and is bound to succeed. He knows his own mind, too, and will not be likely to change; while Norah—”

“Yes, she is one of the steadfast ones, but she is only a child, Austin, and will be none the worse for the time of waiting.”

“And I cannot regret it, since through it I shall be able to keep one of my little lasses with me for some years at least. I shall be a lonely man when they all take flight! ... Come, it is getting chilly. Let us go into the house.”

| Chapter 1 | | Chapter 2 | | Chapter 3 | | Chapter 4 | | Chapter 5 | | Chapter 6 | | Chapter 7 | | Chapter 8 | | Chapter 9 | | Chapter 10 | | Chapter 11 | | Chapter 12 | | Chapter 13 | | Chapter 14 | | Chapter 15 | | Chapter 16 | | Chapter 17 | | Chapter 18 | | Chapter 19 | | Chapter 20 | | Chapter 21 | | Chapter 22 | | Chapter 23 | | Chapter 24 | | Chapter 25 | | Chapter 26 | | Chapter 27 |

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