

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 great 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 is 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. He knows I am a pretty good musician, I don't mean in your sense of the word, 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 as that 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 try 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. It would be quite different."

"Oh yes, quite different. Everything will be different now. You will have gone, and—Lettice! 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 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?"

"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, we 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 flower-beds themselves, in his anxiety to put as much distance between them as possible, here 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" air, 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 take no notice whatever of the indiscretion.

(To be continued.)

