

presided over the tea-table, her blue cambric dress fitting closely to the lines 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 turn back 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 in 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?" "Whom to?" "When?"

"Where?" "What does she say?"

"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 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?"

"O, 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?"

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"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 say 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 NOKAH, 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 in 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 being engaged, 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 only 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 Cloundsdale 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."

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

"Hun.ph! 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 possessed her to accept him at all?"

"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, fancy having Arthur Newcome as a brother-in-law! We used to call him, 'Child's guide to Knowledge,' when he was at Windermere that 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 looking forward to having Lettice with us 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. The others looked after her in sympathetic silence, but 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