

"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 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 for company, 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 all 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 brow 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 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 behind, abashed and sorrowful.

(To be continued.)

