

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 points 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 the 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 loathing, 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, Mr. Bertrand insisted that it should be taken by the other visitor. Hilary advanced to the ladder, therefore, 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. With an instinctive understanding of another person's feeling which was a new experience to this self-engrossed little lady, she realised that he would be 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-a-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, have you passed 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-a-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 some one 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 lazier 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 full 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 launched off to treat of Geraldine and her pretty ways.

(To be continued.)