

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 propensities 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 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 met."

He was in earnest—horribly in earnest! His voice quivered with emotion, his eyes were shining, and his face, which was usually so 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 question 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 home 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 the first thing 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 or ten 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."

(To be continued.)