

the need of a companion, and of some fresh interest in life, and nothing could give me more pleasure than to help one of Austin Bertrand's daughters. Well, my dears, I spoke to your father. He did not like the idea at first, as you will understand, but in the end he gave way to my wishes, and it only remained to make my choice. When I use the word 'choice,' you must not imagine that I am consulting merely my own preference. I have honestly tried to study the question from an unselfish point of view—to think which of you would most benefit from the change. One consideration has influenced me of which I can only speak in private, but for the rest I have watched you carefully, and it seems to me that two out of the three have already a definite interest and occupation in their lives, which is wanting in the other case. Lettice has no special work in the house, no pet study to pursue, therefore, my dears, I choose Lettice."

There was a simultaneous exclamation of consternation.

"Lettice!" cried Hilary, and drew in her breath with a pang of bitterest disappointment.

"Lettice! Oh, no, no, no!" cried Norah, throwing her arms round her favourite sister, and trembling with agitation.

"Lettice!" echoed Mr. Bertrand, with a groan of such genuine dismay, that Miss Carr stared at him in discomfort.

"My dear Austin—if it makes you so unhappy—"

"No—no. I gave you my word, and I am not going back. Besides," with a kindly glance at the other two girls, "I should have felt the same whichever way you had decided. Well, that's settled! I am off, now, Heien. We can have our talk later on."

He walked hastily out of the room, and Miss Carr turned back to the girls with a troubled expression.

"My dears, I know you will both feel parting with your sister, but I will do all I can to soften the blow. You can always look forward to meeting at Christmas and midsummer, and I shall ask your father to bring you up in turns to visit us in London. Though Lettice is to be my special charge, I take a deep interest in you both, and shall hope to put many little pleasures in your way. And now, my dears, will you leave us alone for a time. I want to have a little quiet talk with Lettice before we part."

The two girls filed out of the room, and stood in the hall, facing each other in silence. Miss Briggs put her head out of the morning room, with an eager—"Well—who?" and when Norah pointed dolefully towards the drawing-room door, disappeared again with an exclamation of dismay. It was the same all round, Hilary told herself. Everyone was miserable because Lettice had been chosen. Everyone called out in sharp tones of distress, as if disappointed not to hear another name. Mr. Bertrand was too dear and kind for it to be possible to make a charge of favouritism against him, but Lettice's striking likeness to her mother seemed

to give her a special claim to his tenderness, while, as for the rest of the household, Miss Briggs was as wax in Lettice's hands, for the simple reason that she was a solitary woman, and the girl showed her those little outward signs of affection which make up the sweetness of life; while the servants would do twice as much for her as for any other member of the family, because, "bless her pretty face, she had such a way with her!" Hilary felt indescribably chilled and humiliated as she realised how little regret her own departure would have caused in comparison, and when she spied Mr. Rayner's figure crossing the lawn, she shrank back, with uncontrollable repugnance. "You tell him, Norah! I can't. I am going upstairs."

Meanwhile, Lettice herself had not broken down, or shown any signs of the emotion of a few days earlier. She was a creature of moods, but though each mood was intense while it lasted, it lasted, as a rule, for a remarkably short space of time. If she were in tears over a certain subject on Monday, it was ten to one that she had forgotten all about it before Thursday. If she were wild with excitement over a new proposition, she would probably yawn when it was mentioned a second time, and find it difficult to maintain a show of interest. So, in the present case, she had exhausted her distress at the idea of leaving home, while weeping upon her father's shoulders, and ever since then the idea of the life in London, in Miss Carr's grand, beautiful house, had been growing more and more attractive. And to be chosen first—before all the others! It was a position which was full of charm to a girl with a keen love of appreciation.

"Come here, dear," said Miss Carr, tenderly, when the door had shut behind the other two girls; and when Lettice seated herself on the sofa, she took her hands in hers and gazed fixedly into her face. In truth, it would have been difficult to find an object better worth looking at than "lovely Lettice" at that moment. The hair which rippled over her head was no pale, colourless flaxen, but a rich coppery bronze, with half-a-dozen shades of gold in its luxuriant waves; the great grey eyes had delicately marked brows and generous lashes, and the red lips draped in sweetest curves. The old lady's face softened as she gazed, until it looked very sweet and motherly.

"Lettice," she said, softly, "my dear little girl, I hope we shall be happy together! I will do all I can for you. Do you think you can be content—that you can care for me a little bit in return?"

"Yes, oh yes—a great deal!" Lettice's heart was beating so quickly that she hardly knew what she was saying, but it came naturally to her to form pretty speeches, and the glance of the lovely eyes added charm to her words.

"I hope so—I hope so! And now I want to tell you the chief reason why I choose you before either of your sisters. I alluded just now to something which had influenced me, but which I could not mention in public. It is about

this that I want to speak." Miss Carr paused for a few minutes, stroking the girl's soft, flexible hands. "Do you know what is meant by an 'Open Sesame,' my dear?"

"Oh, yes. It is the word which Ali Baba used in the *Arabian Nights*, and that made the doors in the rocks fly open before him."

"Yes, that is right. I see you know all about it. Would you understand what I meant, dear, if I said that God had given you an 'Open Sesame' into other people's hearts and lives?"

Lettice looked up quickly, surprised and awed. "I? No! How have I—?"

"Look in the mirror opposite," said the old lady, gravely, and the girl hung her head in embarrassment.

"No, my dear, there is no need to blush. If you had a talent for music, like Norah, you would not think it necessary to be embarrassed every time it was mentioned, and beauty is a gift from God, just as much as anything else, and ought to be valued accordingly. It is a great power in the world—perhaps a greater power than anything else, and the people who possess it have much responsibility. You are a beautiful girl, Lettice; you will be a beautiful woman; everyone you meet will be attracted to you, and you will have an 'Open Sesame' into their hearts. Do you realise what that means? It means that you will have power over other people's lives; that you will be able to influence them for good or evil; that you can succeed where others fail, and carry sunshine with you wherever you go. But it will also be in your power to cause a great deal of misery. There have been beautiful women in the world whose beauty has brought war and suffering upon whole nations, because they loved themselves most, and sacrificed everything for the gratification of vanity. You are young, Lettice, and have no mother to guide you, so perhaps you have never thought of things in this way before. But when I saw you first, I looked in your face and thought, 'I should like to help this girl; to help her to forget herself, and think of others, so that she may do good and not evil, all the days of her life.'"

The ready tears rose to Lettice's eyes and flowed down her cheeks. She was awed and sobered, but the impression was rather pleasurable than otherwise. "A beautiful woman"—"A power over others"—"sunshine"—"Success"—the phrases rang in her ear, and the sound was musical. "Of course I'll be good. I want to be good; then everyone will like me," she said to herself, while she kissed and clung to Miss Carr, and whispered loving little words of thanks, which charmed the good lady's heart.

For the next three days all was excitement and bustle. Lettice's belongings had to be gathered together and packed, and though Miss Carr would hear of no new purchases, there were a dozen repairs and alterations which seemed absolutely necessary. Mr. Bertrand took his two guests about