

"Love you! My precious child! I love every one of you—dearly—dearly! But you"—Mr. Bertrand's voice broke off with an uncontrollable little tremble—"you know there are special reasons why you are dear to me, Lettice. When I look at you I seem to see your mother again as I met her first. Why do you ask such a question? You surely know that I love you, without being told?"

"But I like being told," said Lettice plaintively. "I like people to say nice things, and to be loving and demonstrative. Hilary laughs at me if I am affectionate, and the boys tease. Sometimes I feel so lonely!"

Mr. Bertrand drew his breath in a short, stabbing sigh. He was realising more keenly every day how difficult it was to bring up young girls without a mother's tender care. Hilary, with the strain of hardness and self-seeking which would ruin her disposition unless it were checked in time; beautiful Lettice, longing for love and admiration, and so fatally susceptible to a few flattering words; Norah, with her exceptional talents, and daring, fearless spirit—how was he to manage them all during the most critical years of their lives? "I must speak to Helen Carr. Helen Carr will help me," he said to himself, and sighed with relief at the thought of sharing his burden with the kind-hearted friend of his youth.

It was nearly six o'clock when the travellers drove up to the door of the white house in Kensington, and Miss Carr came into the hall to meet them, looking far less altered by the lapse of three years than her young visitor, who had developed from a delicate girl of fourteen, into a self-possessed young lady of seventeen.

"And this is Hilary. Tut, tut! What do you mean by growing up in this ridiculous manner, child?" Miss Carr pecked the girl's cheek with a formal kiss, and turned to hold out both hands to Mr. Bertrand. "Austin! how good to see you again. This is a pleasure—a real pleasure." There was no doubting the sincerity of the tone, which was one of most affectionate welcome, and the plain old face beneath the white cap was beaming with smiles. Miss Carr had been Austin Bertrand's devoted friend from his youth onwards, one of the earliest believers in his literary powers, and the most gratified by the fame which he had gained. Hilary was left out in the cold for the next ten minutes, while the old lady fussed round her father, inquiring anxiously if he were cold, if he were tired, and pressing all manner of refreshments upon him. Even over dinner itself she received scanty attention. She had put on a pretty blue dress, with a drapery of lace over the shoulders, arranged her hair in a style copied from the latest fashion book, and snapped the gold bangles on her arms, with a result which seemed highly satis-

factory upstairs, but not quite so much so when she entered the drawing-room, for Miss Carr put up her eye-glasses, stared at her fixedly for several moments, and then delivered herself of an expressive grunt. "Deary me! seventeen, are we? Don't be in too great a hurry to grow up, my dear. The time will come when you will be only too thankful to be young!"

At this rate Hilary began to feel that it was not uninterrupted bliss to be in London, and this suspicion was deepened when at nine o'clock her hostess looked at her stolidly, and remarked—

"You are tired, my dear. Go to bed, and have a good night's rest."

Hilary bridled, and held her little head at the angle of injured dignity which her sisters knew so well. Nine o'clock indeed! As if she were a baby!

"Oh, thank you, Miss Carr, but I am not tired. It was such an easy journey. I am not sleepy at all."

"My dear, all young girls ought to get to bed and have their beauty sleep before twelve o'clock. Don't mind me. Your father will manage to entertain me. He and I have always plenty to say to each other."

After such plain speaking as this, it was impossible to object any further. Hilary rose with a flush on her cheeks, kissed her father, and held out a stiff little hand towards Miss Carr. The old lady looked at her, and her face softened. She was beginning to repent, in the characteristic manner to which Norah had referred. Hilary felt herself pulled forward, kissed lovingly on the lips, and heard a kindly tone take the place of the crisp, mocking accents. "Good-night, dearie, good night! We must have some good times while you are here. Sleep well, and to-morrow we will talk things over, and make our plans."

The door shut behind the girl, and the two occupants of the room looked at one another in silence. Miss Carr's expression was self-conscious and apologetic; Mr. Bertrand's twitching with humorous enjoyment.

"Too bad, Helen, too bad! I can't have my poor little lass snubbed like that!"

"My dear Austin, it will do her all the good in the world. What a little Miss Consequence! What have you been about to let the child think so much of herself?"

"Put a woman's responsibilities on her shoulders, I'm afraid, before she was ready to bear it. My dear Helen, that's the very thing about which I am anxious to consult you. These girls of mine are getting on my nerves. I don't know what to do with them. Hilary has the audacity to be seventeen, and for the last eighteen months she has practically done all the housekeeping. Miss Briggs looks after the Mouse—Geraldine, you know; gives lessons to Lettice and Norah, but beyond that she does little else. She is a good, reliable soul and a

great comfort in many ways, but I fear the girls are getting beyond her. We had a conference on New Year's Day, and I find that they are tired of present arrangements, and pining for a change. I promised to think things over, and see what could be done, and I want your advice. Hilary is a conscientious, hard-working little soul. She has been thrust into a responsible position too soon, and it is not her fault if she is a trifle overbearing, poor child. At the same time it will be a terrible misfortune if she grows up hard and unsympathetic. Norah is a vivacious young person, and they tell me she is developing a genius for music. She is afire to go abroad and study, but I think I have settled her for the time being with the promise of the best lessons that the neighbourhood can produce. Lettice—"

"Yes—Lettice?"

"She is a beautiful girl, Helen. You remember what Elma was at her age. Lettice is going to be quite as lovely; but I am more anxious about her than any of the others. She is demonstrative herself, and loves demonstration and flattery and appreciation. It's natural, of course—quite natural—but I don't want her to grow up into a woman who lives only for admiration, and whose head can be turned by the first flattering tongue that comes along. What would be the best thing for a girl with exceptional beauty, and such a disposition as this?"

Miss Carr gave one of her comical grunts. "Small-pox, I should say!" she replied brusquely; then softened into a laugh at the sight of her friend's horrified face. "I see you are like most parents, Austin, all your geese are swans! Norah is a genius, Lettice a beauty, and Hilary a model housewife. You seem to be in a nest of troubles, poor man; but I can't undertake to advise you until I know more of the situation. We will have a pleasant time while you are here—take Miss Consequence about, and let her see a little life; and then, as you're an old friend, I'll sacrifice myself on your behalf, and as soon as the weather is anything like warm, pay you a visit, and see how things are for myself."

"My dear Helen, this is really noble of you. I know your dread of the 'North Country,' and I assure you I appreciate your self-sacrifice. There is no one else in the world who can help me so much as you."

"Well, well, I have an idea; but I won't say anything about it until I know the girls better. Would you be willing to—"

"Yes, what?"

"Nothing at all. What a silly old woman I am to be sure, when I had just said that I wouldn't speak of it. It's something for the good of your girls, Austin, but that's all you will hear about it until I come to Cloudsdale, and see them for myself."

(To be continued.)