

woman, like myself. The boys are at school, I suppose—but the little one—my baby—Geraldine?”

“Quite well, sank you, how are you?” said the Mouse, coming forward from her hiding-place, and holding out her tiny hand, with a sweet-faced gravity which was too much for the good lady’s composure. Down went the teacup on the table, and Geraldine was folded in a hearty embrace. “Bless your innocent face! I’m well, my darling—a great deal better for seeing you. You don’t remember me, do you?”

The Mouse put her head on one side as if considering how to answer truthfully, without hurting the visitor’s feelings. “I sink I don’t,” she said slowly, “only p’raps I shall by-and-by; I’m very pleased to see you.”

“There now! What do you think of that? She couldn’t possibly belong to anyone in the world but you, Austin,” cried Miss Carr in triumph; and Mr. Rayner held out his hand to the child with a smile that showed that the Mouse had added yet another to the long list of her adorers.

It was not until dinner was over and the whole party had strolled into the garden, that Hilary had a chance of a quiet talk with Mr. Rayner, but when her father and Miss Carr began to pace up and down the lawn, he came up to her with a gesture of invitation.

“Won’t you sit down for a few minutes on this seat?” Then, with a smile of friendly interest, “Well, how goes it?—How does it?”

Hilary drew in her breath with a gasp of pleasure. She had not realised when in London how greatly she had been touched and impressed by her meetings with the crippled author; it was only after she had returned to the quiet of the country home that she had found her thoughts returning to him again and again, with a longing to confide her troubles in his ear; to ask his advice, and to see the kindly sympathy on his face. The deep, rich tone of his voice as he said that, “How goes it?” filled her with delighted realisation that the long-looked for time had arrived.

“Oh, pretty well—better and worse! I have been making discoveries.”

“About?”

“Myself, I think!” and Hilary stretched out her hands with a little gesture of distaste, which was both graceful and natural.

Mr. Rayner looked at her fixedly beneath bent brows. “Poor little Two Shoes!” he said, gravely. “So soon! It hurts, Two Shoes, but it’s good in the end. Growing pains, you know!”

“Yes!” said Hilary softly. It was good to find someone who understood without asking questions, or forcing confidence. “And you?” she asked presently, raising her eyes to his with a smile of inquiry, “what have you been doing?”

“I?—oh! Making discoveries also, I fear; among others, the disagreeable one that I can no longer work as I used, or as other men work, and must be satisfied to be left behind in the race. But we are getting melancholy, and it’s a

shame even to think of disagreeable subjects in a place like this. What a perfect view! I should never tire of looking at those mountains.”

“Aren’t they beautiful? That is Coniston Old Man right before us, and those are the Langdale Pikes over there to the right. I like them best of all; they stand out so well and, in winter, when they are covered with snow, they look quite awful. Oh, I am so glad you have come! We generally have good weather in June, and we will have such lovely drives.”

Meantime Mr. Bertrand and Miss Carr were having an animated conversation.

“What do you think of my three little girls?” had been his first question, and Miss Carr laughed derisively as she answered—

“Little girls, indeed! They will be grown-up women before you know where you are, Austin. I like that young Norah. There is something very taking about her bright, little face. Miss Consequence has improved, I think; not quite so well pleased with herself, which means more pleasing to other people. She looks well in that white dress. As for Miss Lettice, she is quite unnecessarily good-looking.”

“Isn’t she lovely?” queried Mr. Bertrand eagerly. “And you will find her just as sweet as she looks. They have been very good and contented all spring, but it has been in the expectation of your visit, and the changes which you were to make. We are looking to you to solve all our difficulties.”

“Very kind of you, I am sure. It’s not an easy position to fill. The difficulty, so far as I can see, is compressed into the next three years. After that you will have to face it, Austin, and come back to town. You can keep on this house for a summer place, if you wish, but the boys will be turning out into the world by then, and you ought to be in town to keep a home for them. Hilary will be twenty-one, the other two not far behind, and it is not fair to keep girls of that age in this out-of-the-way spot all the year round, when it can be avoided. For the next three years you can go on very well as you are—after that—”

“I’m afraid so! I’m afraid you are right. I’ve thought so myself,” said Mr. Bertrand dolefully. “I can’t say I look forward to the prospect, but if it must be done, it must. I must make the most of my three last years. And, meantime, you think the girls are all right as they are. I need make no change?”

Miss Carr pressed her lips together without speaking, while they paced slowly up and down the lawn. “I think,” she said, slowly, at last, “that three girls are rather too many in a house like this. You have Miss Briggs to look after Geraldine, and three servants to do the work. There cannot be enough occupation or interest to keep three young people content and happy. I have thought several times during the spring, Austin, that it would be a good plan if you lent one of your daughters to me for a year or two.”

“My dear Helen! A year or two! One of my girls!”

“Yes—yes! I knew that you would work yourself up into a state of excitement. What a boy you are, Austin. Listen quietly, and try to be reasonable. If you send one of the girls to me, I will see that she finishes her education under the best masters; that she makes her entrance into society at the right time, and has friends of whom you would approve. It would be a great advantage—”

“I know it, I feel it, and I am deeply grateful, Helen; but it can’t be done. I can’t separate myself from my children.”

“You manage to exist without your boys for nine months of the year, and I would never wish to separate you. She could come home for Christmas and a couple of months in summer, and you yourself are in town half-a-dozen times in the course of the year. You could always stay at my house.”

“Yes, yes; it’s all true; but I don’t like it, Helen, and—”

“And you think only of yourself. It never occurs to you that I have not a soul belonging to me in that big, lonely house, and that it might be a comfort to me to have a bright young girl—”

Mr. Bertrand stopped short in the middle of the lawn and stared into his companion’s face. There was an unusual flush on her cheeks, and her eyes glistened with tears.

“O, my dear Helena!” he cried. “I am a selfish wretch. I never thought of that. Of course, if you put it in that light, I can say no more! My dear old friend—I accept your offer with thanks. You have done so much for me, that I can refuse you nothing. It will be a life-long advantage to the child, and I know you will make her happy!”

“I will, indeed; and you may trust me, Austin, to consider more than mere happiness. I will do my best to make her such a woman as her dear mother was before her.”

“I know you will. Thank you, Helen. And which—which—?”

“Nay, I am not going to tell you that,” Miss Carr had brushed the tears from her eyes, and with them all signs of her unusual emotion. She was herself again—sharp, decisive, matter-of-fact. “I must have my choice, of course; but I will take a week to make up my mind. And she must be left entirely in my hands for the time being, remember! I shall look after her clothes, education, pleasuring, as if she were my own child. There must be no interference.”

“Obstinate woman! Who would dare to enter the lists against you?” cried Mr. Bertrand between a laugh and a sigh. “Heigho! Which of my little lasses am I going to lose? Whichever it is, I shall feel she is the last I could spare, and shall bear you a grudge for your choice. Can’t you give me a hint?”

“No! and I wouldn’t if I could. I’ll tell you when I am ready,” said Miss Carr, coolly. And that settled the question for the time being.

(To be continued.)