HELEN LAFONE:

OR

THE FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD.

A TALE OF ENGLISH LIFE.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOST IN THE FOG.

Her words were followed by a short silence, which her companion broke by saying—

"What you say is quite possible, and I see no way of finding out where we are."

"Then what must we do? I suppose you have not a compass."

He shook his head, forgetting that she could not see him, and it was only when she repeated her question that he said—

"I beg your pardon; no, I have not, and even if I had I could not see it."

"I should suggest that we stay here until the fog shifts, she began, "only—"

"That would properly be until morning," he interrupted, "and I would not allow that."

"Our circumstances will soon be beyond your allowing, I daresay," she replied, indulging on her side in a little sarcastic smile, which was, of course, wholly thrown away. "Besides I do not want to stay. You should let me finish speaking. I was going to say I should suggest staying if it were not for the Longworthys: they will be so uneasy, I left word that I should be back soon, this fog has come on, and they will believe me to be lost. I should not care what happened but for them."

"They will think you have sheltered in a cottage."

"They will know I should not; they will think I am alone, and Mrs Longworthy will make herself ill with anxiety. I wish I could let them know."

"But you cannot. Then you are in favor of going on."

"I cannot tell. You know the country better than I do, why do you leave the decision to me? Have you no idea where we are?"

There was no anger in her voice, only patient resignation, as though she had made up her mind to the worst.

"At present I have not," he replied, and in his voice were unmistakable signs of anger, he was so annoyed at his own stupidity. If the mist would only rise a little, I might be able to tell."

As if in answer to his words, a pull of wind blew in thier faces and made as it were a hole in the fog. In the clearing they saw what dimly looked like ghosts of hills looming above them, then the mist closed in again and they saw no more.

"I am afraid that was not much help," said Helen.

"No, but it showed possibilities. I have now hope of the mist clearing altogether."

"A sea mist would not," she replied; "but I am not familiar with your mists here."

They waited for some little time, but the fog did not dispese again. At last Helen said—

"Let us go on; I am cold."

"I can never blame myself enough for this," said Dr Home, as they moved on a little vaguely. "I never felt so angry with myself in my life."

"Do not feel distressed; it was my own fault for being persuaded to come."

"I am afraid you will never trust me again."

"I shall require very strong surety of your being right."

Although neither could see the figure of the other they accompanied their words, when they spoke, with the looks and gestures which we use in the daylight, and which add so much to the mere words we use. Helen's answer sounded rather severe to her companion, who did not see the smile with she spoke, and they plodded on for some time until Helen stood still, saying—

"I am sorry, but I must rest. I can go no further."

"What a fool I am! Why did you not speak sooner?" said the doctor rather vehemently.

"What is the use of giving in before one is obliged," she answered a little faintly. Then after a short pause—

"Have you any brandy with you, doctor?"

He gave her his flask saying—

"I hope I have not dragged you on until you are fainting."

"No, I shall be ready to go on again in a minute, but I must rest a little. I think I will sit down here."

She sank upon the soft, damp heather as she spoke, and he, furious with himself for what had happened, said again—

"I cannot tell what you must think of me. It is of no use attempting to apologize, but I shall never forgive myself, never."

"I wish you would not think of me so much; it will do me no harm, though it is a little uncomfortable and disagreeable just now. It is far worse for you, who may be wanted in the village at this very moment. Even if we have to stay here till morning, it is only a few hours. When we are at home again, we shall look upon this wandering in the fog as an absurd adventure. I see no occasion for alarm or excitement. If only my friends knew that I was safe with you, I could wait for the fog to disperse with the greatest equanimity."

"I knew you were brave, but you have this evening given proof of extraordinary courage. Most women in your position would, I believe, have lost their heads with fear."

She laughed a little as she replied—

"Nay, really, I cannot let you calumniate women that way. Why should I not be calm, when both your and my own common sense tell me there is not the least danger. It is only a new experience, and I like new experiences provided they are not too unpleasant."

"As this one promises to be."

"I did not say that, neither did I mean it. Perhaps if I repeat for the third time that all my anxiety is on behalf of our friends you will believe me. You know the line—

"What I tell you three times is true"

"You choose to laugh at me, he said, sourly.

"Oh, no; though even if I did that would be better than quarrelling, which I believe we were on the point of doing."

"I repeat what I said before," he replied obstinately. "You have given proof of extraordinary courage and presence of mind. If my admiration for you could be increased, the events of this evening would have done it."

"You are very kind," she replied, feeling a little bewildered, and rising to her feet as she spoke. "I had no idea of the exalted position I occupied in your esteem," she went on as lightly as she could.

"Is that true?" he asked, and she felt instinctively that he took a step towards her. "Is it true that you have not seen?"

"Seen what?" she asked quietly, though her heart had begun to beat very fast.

"Seen that I loved you," he said, speaking fast and vehemently. "I thought a woman knew by instinct when a man loved her and yet you say you have seen nothing.

Again he stepped forward, and again she must have felt that he did so, for she said haughtily—

"Don't come one step nearer, sir."

She must have taken a step backward, for as she finished speaking she uttered a cry, there was a sound of stones rolling down a slope, a splash as if they fell into water, and then dead silence.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GRAPES FROM THORNS.

For a moment the doctor stood silent and stunned, almost waiting to hear Helen's voice again; but as no sound came out of the fog, and all was dark around him, he cried in a voice of agony—

"Mrs Moore! Mrs Moore!"

Echo caught up the words and flung them back to him out of the distance, and that was all the answer he got.

A feeling of horror crept over him, filling his heart with desperation. In this impenetrable fog he could do nothing, could form no idea of what had happened to his companion, save the vague one that she had fallen; and from the time he had heard the stones rolling, he feared she had fallen some distance, down a place at the bottom of which there was water.

He called again, with no more result than than the first time, and after waiting what seemed like hours for her answer, he felt as if he were going out of his mind—the uncertainty was so awful, the feeling that he could do nothing to help her so maddening, and the consciousness that whatever had happened was entirely his fault, so hideous. Since there was nothing to be done, he tried to think. He pressed his hands to his head and tried to picture to himself the whole extent of the moors as he knew them, and to gain in that way some idea of where they were. On what part of the hills was there a place where you might fall some distance and which had a pool of water at the bottom? Before long the truth flashed into his mind. In the heart of the hills, some four miles from Miller's Gate, was an old disused stone quarry, larger and deeper than any which were still worked, and in its hollow was a small deep pool. They must have wandered from the path until they had reached this place. Helen must have been sitting unconsciously on its very brink, and an impetuous word from him had sent her to her destruction. A groan broke from his lips as he remembered how steep and sheer were the sides, with no jutting shelf of rock to break the fall. Whoever slipped at the top could not stay his fall until he reached the bottom, and at the bottom was water.

In the anguish of the thought he felt inclined to spring from the brink; or if he took a few steps forward, he must come to the edge and fall as she had done. Only one thing held him back, the desperate hope that some chance had intervened in Helen's favour; that she was not dead, only stunned, and again he cried out—

"Mrs Moore, answer me for God's sake, if you are alive!"

This time he was answered. A voice, low and faint, and how far beneath him he could not tell, said—

"Dr Holme, is that you?"

"Yes, it is I. Where are you, in heaven's name?"

"I do not know. I fell. I do not think I have fallen to the bottom. I seem to have caught in a tree, but I dare not move for fear of falling again."

"Do not move; whatever you do, do not move. Are you hurt?"

"I can't tell; my back hurts me, but that may be because I am in this position."

"Thank God you are alive," he said, almost with a sob in his voice. "How can I get to you? Tell me."

"Do not attempt to get to me; you would slip, and might fall in a worse place than I have done. Stay where you are."

"It is all I can do, I fear; but I would give a world to help you."

"You cannot. I must stay here till the fog lifts."

"I will not lift before morning now."

She did not answer at once. Presently spoke again.

"Dr. Holme?"

"I am here."

"Do you know this place?"

"I think so," he replied with some hesitation.

"Could I fall further? and if I did, where should I fall to?"

He was silent; he dared not tell her of the water.

"Are you afraid or in danger of falling?" he asked at last, evasively.

"Not that I know of; I only wanted to know," she replied, unwilling, since he could not help her, to tell him of the faintness which was creeping over her again, and that she feared if she fainted to lose her hold.

Before long she spoke again.

"I have an idea."

"What is it? If I could only do something. This inaction is maddening.'

"If you know this place could you not find your way to Miller's Gate and tell them at the Rectory what has happend? I cannot bear to think of their anxiety. You might bring help too. I do not think you can get me up from here by your self."

He had been afraid some such idea would occur to her, and he had not the least intention of leaving her; so when she spoke he laughed bitterly and mirthlessly, saying—

"A splendid idea truly! I can understand your wanting to be rid of me, but I am not going to leave you here alone to lighten the anxiety of all the Longworthys in creation. What if they are anxious? Let them be anxious. It will do them no harm. They have nothing to reproach themselves with."

"What is the use of talking in that way?" came the answer in a faint, weak voice. "You can do me no good by staying here, and you can by going. The longer you wait before going for it the longer I shall have to lie here."

"I will not leave you, however you argue. Some one may pass by."

"Is there a road past here, or any house in the neighborhood?"

"No," was his unwilling answer.

"Then how could anyone pass? I know you will feel better if you have something to do, and it would relieve me immensely."

"I will not leave you," he repeated doggedly; "you might die while I was away."

"Why more than when you are here? And you could do nothing for me if I did. Besides, I am not going to do any such thing; why should I?"

He made no answer; he would not tell her that if her present hold gave way, and she fell any further, she must of necessity be killed."

There was silence for some time after this: cold, and the discomfort of her position, caused Helen to tremble so violently that she knew her voice would be misleading if she spoke, so for that reason she was silent; she was also seeking fresh means of persuading her companion to go. Dr Holme scarcely dared to speak. Now that the momentary impulse which had prompted him to speak passed, he not conceive how he could so far forget himself as to say what he had done in such a place and at such a time. Added to this he was firmly resolved not to go away, so he kept silent. But Helen did not speak for so long that at last he said,

"Mrs Moore?'

"Yes."

"I feared you had fainted again."

"No; I wish I knew what time it is."

"I am sorry I cannot tell you, but I have no more matches."

"You will not go?"

"No," he repeated, obstinately.

"Then you are a coward," said Helen, almost sharply.

Even in the darkness he felt his face burn and tingle as if someone had given him a blow on his cheek, and he said hotly—

"What do you mean?"

"You were a coward to speak the words which led to my fall, and after having pretended you were going mad because you could not help me, when I point out a way you refuse to take it. I believe you dare not go for fear of meeting with a similar accident elsewhere; you are a miserable coward."

"That," he said drearily, "is your last resource; you can say nothing worse. But, taunt me as you like, I will not leave you. God knows my life is not so attractive that I should shrink from risking it at your bidding. I prefer to risk my reputation, and will not leave you."

"Then do not speak to me again."

"As you will."

These were the last words which passed between them on the subject. Dr Holme had been seated on the heather; he presently rose and began to walk to and fro ten paces each way, which he counted out loud, partly that he might not go too far, and a partly from an obstinate wish that Helen, though she would not speak to him, should yet know he was there. Helen was silent because she could not speak. As her recollection of what had led to her fall became clearer she felt a growing horror of her companion, and she began presently to feel as if her mind was wandering. In addition she had an almost irresistable desire to give way to hysterical crying, and the effort she made to restrain her tears wearied her. She did not speak, therefore, because she could not.

So the long hours passed slowly and imperceptibly by, and at last a fresh breeze blew in Helen's face, the mist began to disperse in light, white wreaths and the surrounding hills and nearer objects became visible, first dimly, then more clearly as the daylight strengthened.

But Helen was past seeing the change or noticing anything. She did not know that Dr Holme had called to her more than once, and receiving no reply, had passed his time in agony of doubt and terror. As soon as there was sufficient light to inspire him with any hope of success he was making his way down to her. She was first conscious of it when she heard his voice close to her saying—

"Thank Heaven you could not see."

Her position was indeed terrifying. The old quarry was so large and deep, it had the appearance of a precipice seen from above. It was almost like a basin scooped out in the hillside, from which a rough cart track led straight over the moor to Miller's Gate. It was so long since the quarry had been closed that under the influence of wind and weather the stone and sand had grown almost black. The sides of the quarry came steep and straight to the bottom, in which, as before said, lay a small deep pool, black, as it was fed almost wholly by rain, and so sheltered by the steep slopes which rose above it on all sides, that even in the wildest northwest gale that ever tore furiously over these bleak, wind-swept hills it was scarcely ruffled.

Only in one place was the quarry clothed with any vegetation. A stream of water trickling from the moor had channelled a narrow furrow down the surface of the slope, and by its side grew grass and rank weeds and a few alder bushes. One of those bushes had reached some size, and its slender, springy branches had checked Helen's fall, holding her almost as on a couch, though had she not been brave and prudent enough to bear the weary pain of her uncomfortable position the branches must have given way, and there would have been nothing to stop her in her fall into the still black pool below.

Very carefully and cautiously did the doctor set about his task of releasing Helen. Neither spoke until he said—

"Do not look below you, Mrs Moore."

"I have seen the water," was all her answer, and she did not look at him as she spoke.

It was a long and dangerous task for one man, but in time he reached the moor again with Helen in his arms. Then she first spoke—

"Put me down."

He laid her on the heather and knelt by her, chafing her hands. He was very much alarmed by the look on her face. She lay perfectly still, with wide open eyes looking up into the clear blue sky; for it was an exquisite morning, and the only reminder of the last night's fog was a light silvery mist which hung over the hills.

Presently she sat up and pressed her hands once or twice to her head; then she said—

"Let me have your flask again."

He gave it to her in silence, rather wondering what she was going to do with it. With a trembling hand she poured some brandy into the cup, and after looking at it with an expression of distaste upon her face, she drank it straight off.

The fiery spirit burned her mouth and throat, but it had the desired effect; in a few moments she rose to her feet and looked around her.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, speaking for the first time.

"My umbrella," she replied. "I had not got it in my hand when I fell."

"Why do you want it? it is not going to rain. You had better let me take you home at once."

"I shall walk better with it to help me," she said.

"Walk?" he repeated; "you don't suppose that after what you have gone through I am going to let you walk four miles? I shall carry you."

"You will not dare to touch me," she said, looking straight into his face. "Be good enough to look for my umbrella."

He soon found it—the light was glinting on the silver handle; and having given it to her, they set off on their walk. He never in his life forgot that walk. They were two hours in walking the four miles, and during those two hours scarcely a word was exchanged between them. They walked in perfect silence until doctor, unable longer to bear the slow, halting pace, and seriously alarmed by the expression Helen's face had taken, again begged her to allow him to take her in his arms. Her reply was the same as before—

"You will not touch me."

How easy for a strong man like himself to have taken her up in his arms without a word and carried her the rest of the way. Yet he did not do it.

At last they reached the Rectory. Helen's face had been getting whiter and whiter, but she walked along the garden; it was only on the doorstep that she gave way, her figure bent and swayed, and she would have fallen if the doctor had not caught her in his arms.

The Longworthys were just finishing a rather vain attempt to breakfast when the dining-room door opened to admit Dr. Holme and his burden. Mrs Longworthy looked pale and ill, and her husband's face was very grave, almost stern, with suppressed emotion.

Their first idea was that the doctor had found Helen. It was Mr Longworthy who, while his wife and the doctor were trying to restore her to consciousness, noticed anything extraordinary in his friend's face and manner. Even while he was trying to account for it to himself the doctor rose from his stooping attitude, and said to Mrs Longworthy—

"Its of no use trying anything now. I will carry her upstairs, and you must put her to bed; then I will see her again. In the meantime I will tell your husband the whole story."

"But Mr Longworthy steped before him with a quiet "Allow me," and, taking Helen in his arms went swiftly upstairs to his room, followed by his wife.

When he came down again he closed the door saying—

"Now, doctor, let me give you a cup of coffee before you begin; you look as if you needed it. You might have been out all night too."

"If you will allow me," said the doctor, with some constraint, "I should prefer to tell you my tale before accepting your hospitality."

The rector's face became very grave again as he put down the cup which he held in his hand and said—

"Before or after, whichever you please."

It was not a long story. In a quarter of an hour, as Fanny came downstairs to ask him to see Mrs Moore again, she heard him say—

"It is necessary now that I should see Mrs Moore, or it may be impossible to avert very grave consequences; but, if later, she should prefer anyone else to attend her I have forfeited all right to object."

Wondering, she paused, and heard her master very gravely—

"It will ascertain her pleasure in the matter."

It was some days before Helen could come downstairs again. She had been nursed through a short but severe illness with the utmost care and affection. She had been hardly conscious enough to make any objection to the presence of Dr. Holme, so he had continued at his position. Now she could do without him, and for four days he had not been at the house. In was in the morning, some time after breakfast, and the rector and Helen were alone together. He was getting ready to go out as usual, when Helen looked up at him and said,

"Mr. Longworthy, is your business this morning very urgent?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Could you believe that just for once I want you more than all the poor people in Miller's Gate?"

He smiled only as he replied,

"I fear you are a delusion, Helen. You know that when you want me my business is never urgent, that I have always time for you."

"Yes, I know it. Well, may I talk to you this morning?"

"Come into my study with me now. We shall not be interrupted there."

They went into the pretty, cosy, untidy little room which was given up entirely to the indulgence of Mr. Longworthy's disorderly habits. He stirred the fire, pulled up a chair to the hearth for his companion, and himself stood with his back to the chimney piece.

"Now, then," he said.

"You sit down, too; you look so tall and priestly standing there. No, not priestly either; even in your long black coat which you wear out of doors you never look priestly."

"Surely that is a pity. Ought not every man to look his profession?'

"Perhaps you do, for you always look so human. I suppose that is why you have got on so well with the people here. No doubt a priest ought to be an essentially human man, but he very seldom is."

"Are you sure of that?"

"No; as usual, I spoke without thinking. Before I go I shall ask you to give me a receipt for not doing, and saying, and thinging the first thing that comes into my head; it has been my misfortune and the origin of my misfortunes all my life."

He at once noticed the latter part of what she said, but he only replied—

"If you are troubled with the thought that you make mistakes both in action and judgment, remember that it is because you are full of life, and it is better in all cases to be alive than dead. You know the saying that a live mouse is worth more than a dead lion. We are disinclined to accept its truth until we remember that what makes it true is that in every living thing, however small and insignificant, by which," with a humorous smile, "I have no intention of indicating you, there are infinite possibilities, and that more may be done with and hoped from the smallest living possibity than greatest dead fact in the world. There is a long sermon for you, and as sermons are very dreary things, I will tell you at the end that you are very hopeful, and possess boundless possibilities."

She smiled as he spoke and said—

"Whatever good advice you give me—and your advice is always good, though I have sometimes shut my eyes to it at the time—you always wind up with a compliment. I should hardly have thought you approved of compliments."

"A compliment in the true sense is the truth put in its most attractive form; because it is a mistake to imagine that truth possesses inherent ugliness; it is often exceedingly beautiful. Compliments which go beyond the truth are only flattery, and all flattery is nauseous."

"She was silent for a moment, and than went on—

"But I did not ask you to give up your time to me only to tell you that I generally act upon impulse and then regret it. I wanted to tell you that, during and since this last illness I have been thinking, and I see that I ought not to stay here any longer. I must go back to my husband."

"For the moment," said the rector, "we will put all personal feelings aside, and so I tell you candidly that I am more glad than I can say to hear this."

"If you will be generous enough to overlook the apparent want of confidence, I should prefer not to give you my reason for it, she said, with rather heightened color and a little hesitation.

He did not reply at once—he was looking thoughtfully into the fire, and she, misunderstanding him, said—

"If you wish it I will tell you, but it is not——"

"My dear child," he interrupted, lightly covering her hand with his own as he spoke, "do not misunderstand me. I was considering whether I ought to tell you, and I think I ought, that I know your reason. Holme told me at once. Am I not right?"

She said nothing, and he went on—

"I hope you are not annoyed."

"No; I am glad he told you, I would not have done so, partly for his sake and partly because it was such a hateful thing I cannot bear to think of it. But I am glad you know. I think you had a right to know."

"It was an unpardonable error on his part; but I fear we were partly to blame. No; I do not mean in that way," he went on hastily, as he saw the look which her face took. "Personally, of course, no particle of blame could attach to you; but we, Mabel and I, ought to have remembered that Holme did not know your story; while your husband was constantly in your mind and your return to him only a question of time, all he knew was your name, and that you stayed on here, and seemed to have neither friends nor husband. We took too much for granted."

"I cannot see that he had any excuse at all. He might have known, he might have made inquiries, and to speak at such at time, in such a place, the want of respect——"

She paused; indignation and wounded pride choked her voice. After a pause she went on more quietly—

"We will not speak of it, but now you can understand that it is imperative I should go back to my husband."

"Certainly; try if that thought cannot make you feel more forgivingly to Holme. He is now lonely and embittered beyond description; he will never get over this, and never forgive himself; but what he said has decided you to do what all along you felt you ought to do."

"I daresay there is something in what you say, and perhaps I shall see it sometime, but at present I cannot."

"What do you think of doing?"

"It was about that I wanted to speak. If you will add another kindness to the many, many you have shown me, I thought if you would write to Percival and tell him you want to see him—offer to go to Brantwood, and there tell him everything before he sees me. Will you do that? Do you mind? Is there any other way you would prefer?"

"That will do very well; I will write by to-night's post."

"I cannot thank you."

"Now that we have arranged that," he said, after a short pause, "let us turn to the personal part. I am very glad you have decided to do this, though I felt sure you would, your instinct is so true. For the rest, it will be very, very hard to part with you; you have grown into our lives."

"I can never feel wholly sorry all this happened; but for it I should never have known you and Mrs. Longworthy."

"A misfortune must be great indeed if it is not wiped out by the gain of a friend."

"Now I will not keep you longer," she said, rising. "I feel much better—the usual effect of a talk with you."

"Is that compliment or flattery?" opening the door for her as he spoke.

"That I leave to you to decide."

* * * * *

"Read this, Helen, and tell me if it will do?" said the rector, coming in to tea with a letter in his hand, and as she handed it back to him signifying her approval, he went on—

"I am going to post it myself; it is not to be trusted to Fanny. Stay, is the address correct?'

She took the envelope and read—

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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