

HELEN LAFONE : OR THE FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD.

A TALE OF ENGLISH LIFE.

CHAPTER XI—CONTINUED.

"I will not marry you." "May I ask why?" he said at last.

"I am sorry I must rob you of even that consolation, which at the same time, allow me to tell you, is generally very unfounded."

"I cannot give you any hope; I know my own mind perfectly well. Let us go home; I am tired, and it is getting cold."

"Where are you going?" "From London I shall go to India. I had made up my mind to that in case I was unsuccessful."

"I am sorry," she said a little impatiently, "but you could not expect me to marry you for no other reason than that you ask me."

"I dare say you are right." They scarcely spoke again, before reaching The Thwaite, and later in the evening it became known that Sir Cuthbert had left for London.

CHAPTER XII. STRIKING THE FIRST BLOW.

Eighteen months passed before Percival and Helen came home to Brantwood, and all that time they spent in travelling about the Continent. This length of time spent abroad was the fulfillment of a long cherished wish of Helen's, and, contrary to the usual experience, the reality surpassed her expectations.

"He is really very fond of her, that is evident," she said as she and her daughter drove home.

"I am really glad she has married so well," pursued the elder lady. "She was a great responsibility with her queer ways, and if you and Gertrude had married first, or she had not at all, there would have been some talk; people are so unchangeable."

"So far there has been no opening for reflections upon your character as a stepmother," said Alice still caustic.

"She is very much improved in every way. I expect she found Percival would not put up with her temper. Yes, she has been very fortunate; it is such a comfort to reflect that one has done one's duty."

Alice made no reply. She scarcely spoke throughout the remainder of the drive, and on reaching home went straight to her room, saying she was tired.

She shut the door and threw herself into a chair. She felt angry and bitter. However she treated other people, she was generally frank with herself, and she did not attempt to deny that she had taken some pains with her dress for this particular call.

He had hardly looked at or spoken to her after the first greetings, and when he had handed her the second cup of coffee, which she had accepted merely that she might take it from his hand, he had hardly let his eyes fall upon her.

He had stood in that attitude sacred to manhood, leaning against the chimney-piece, his hands loosely clasped behind him and his eyes bent upon his wife, following every movement of her small white hands, hearing every word which fell from her lips, and—Alice felt it instinctively—admiring every turn of her head, every motion of her figure.

She bit her lips till the blood came as she remembered it all and realized what she meant. She clenched her hands till the gloves split as she thought of them and pictured what they would be doing at this moment, and for the rest of the evening. They would talk over their visitors, they would separate to dress for dinner, they would dine and spend the evening together, just they two, alone they two.

"Oh, I cannot bear it, I cannot," she cried, spring from her chair and pushing the window open as high as it would go, while she tore open her dress at the throat.

"It is not fair," she whispered as she leaned out almost panting for breath. "What right has she to so much love, while I am left here starving?—If we two had stood here a couple of years ago would anyone have said Helen was going to be happier than I? No one took any notice of Helen, no one spoke to her when I was present. If she had spoken, cried aloud for help in pain, her voice would have been drowned in the noise of people sounding my praise. It is not fair, it is not."

"An eye for an eye," she said. "She cheated and brought shame upon me, and if I can do the same for her, I will."

Mrs Lafone and Alice were among the earliest callers. Alice had just come home. She had spent the season in London and at fashionable watering places, and she was still unmarried. Chances had not been wanting. What was the reason of her remaining unmarried none knew and few even cared to ask.

The last words were almost wailed out, and her head sank upon her breast. Then she raised it again higher than before.

"I thought you spoke, Miss," said the girl, a little intimidated by the young lady's manner.

"Why should I speak when I imagined myself to be alone? What have you come for?"

"It is time for you to dress for dinner, Miss."

"Take my dress off, and another time do not fasten it so ridiculously tight at the throat that I am nearly choked."

"Helen," said Percival one evening about a fortnight after Mrs Lafone and Alice had called, "I have done a thing for which I am sure you will not thank me."

"They were at the dinner table, dessert was before them, and the servants had left the room. Helen sat opposite to her husband, looking wonderfully beautiful in her rich dress, with late, creamy roses in her chestnut hair, and a string of pearls round her slender, white throat.

There was a great deal of admiration in Percival's eyes as he looked at her across the small, round dining table, but there was also much amusement that his wife's lips parted in a smile as she replied—

"Is it something very bad? Do let me hear the worst at once?"

"Think of the most disagreeable thing you can, then add another a thousand more times disagreeable to it, and you will begin to approach the truth."

Helen laughed outright as she said— "Think of a number, double it, add four to it, take away—

"Ah, but you must not take away anything. You must go on adding till you can add no more."

"And then double it," her eyes dancing, as she helped herself to some grapes. "But seriously, Percival, what is it?"

"You may well say seriously; we shall be serious enough before long. Lugh and be gay while you can. Gather your roses while you may, so to speak."

"Percival, what is it? How can you go on talking such nonsense before telling me? Afterwards say what you like."

"You hear the naked truth. I have asked Alice here on a visit, to stay."

"Percival! she said almost in a whisper."

"Didn't I tell you it was as bad as it could be?" he began in a tone of earnest, self justification. "I prepared you; you can't say that I did not give you full warning."

"I said, first imagine the worst, and then pile another on top of it." You know I did, Helen; you were trying to get out of it."

"Well," with a sigh of resignation, "tell me all about it; let me hear the very worst. When did you see her? What put it into your head?"

"It was when I was out this afternoon. I was riding to the Lower Ford Farm, and I met Alice, also riding. I asked her where she was going to, and she said she did not know."

He paused a moment, but as his wife said nothing he went on.

"I said 'Oh,' but as she made no move to go on I could only suggest we should ride together."

"Of course."

"You see I could not do less, and as we could not ride in silence we began to talk. We kept first to general subjects, and she asked no end of questions about the places we went to when we were away. She seemed to have been to most of them, but she did not seem to remember much about anything except the hotels. She always asked me at which hotel we stayed, and if it did not happen to be the same one at which she had been I could see she thought we had put up with very inferior accommodation. She also wanted to know if you really enjoyed it all, and I said I flattered myself you had. Then she sighed and said she seemed to have seen everything; nothing gave her any real pleasure."

"Dear me! Now what answer did you make to these interesting communications?"

"Not a sincere one I am afraid. I put on a gentle and sympathetic manner, and said it was indeed sad to see one so young sacrificed with pleasure. I then threw in, just as a finish off, that one reason why you and I got on so well was because we were both innocent enough to get a good deal of enjoyment and instruction out of our travels."

"I am sure she would hate you after that. I know exactly how you would say it."

"I don't know; if she did she concealed it very well, for after a little more conversation of the same kind she said that it was very dull at The Thwaite just now, and would she be intruding if she offered to pay us a visit."

"Well?"

"No; I do not see what else you could have done; but it is annoying. You know we had agreed to have no one here this autumn; we want a little quiet after eighteen months of hotel life. Did you name a day?"

"No; I thought you had better arrange that. But not only have her at your own convenience."

"I must write and do my duty, I suppose."

"Yes; do your duty in the same spirit of self-sacrifice in which I have done mine."

"Did she give no reason for wanting to come?"

"She said something about it would be so quaint to see Helen in her own house, but I was so annoyed at the whole affair and the way she had let me in that I hardly noticed what she said afterwards. You know had you been with me this would not have happened, I am sure, and I asked you to come."

"I know," said his wife, looking rather conscience stricken, "but I could not."

"You never will go between lunch and afternoon tea, and this is the result," he said in such severe tones that she looked in his eyes as necessary to believe them.

"I will go and write now," said his wife, rising. "It is too late for tonight's post, but it will be so much done."

The note was written, and brought a very amiable reply from Alice, which annoyed Helen almost more than all the rest of the business, but she prepared to receive her sister with all outward signs of hospitality and goodwill.

"I cannot imagine," said Percival, as he twirled the note between his fingers, "why she wants to come at all. It is absurd to suppose that there is anything attractive here; she does not like you, and is no friend of mine. If it were not too monstrous an idea to entertain I should say she had done it out of spite," and as he spoke he crushed the sheet of writing paper into and flung it into the fire.

Helen said nothing. Ever since Percival had told her of Alice's projected visit she had been trying to find a reason for it, and had finally found one so little satisfactory that she could not suggest it to her husband. Presently she said—

"I am giving her the largest bedroom in the house, and I have fitted up that little place opening out of it as a sitting room. She may take the hint or she may not."

"Most decidedly not, in my opinion. She is not the kind of woman to make use of a private sitting-room when she is away from home."

"Still, it will be there if she does care to use it."

"Do not busy yourself up with false hopes. Remember that little saying which you once came across and found so true. 'Things are what they are, and the consequence of them will be what they will be.' Alice is coming, and we shall have the full benefit of her society as long as she is here. We can only hope that she will soon get tired of a dull, old married couple like ourselves and leave us to our own devices again."

Helen did not reply, and after a pause Percival went on—

"Each time I have seen Alice since we came home she has called me Mr Moore. Surely that is unnecessary. I always call her Alice. Why does she do it, do you suppose?"

"She has odd ideas at times. I suppose she and I are not sisters she does not look upon you as her brother-in-law," said his wife with an effort.

Percival raised his eyebrow.

"Isn't that a little far-fetched? If she continues I shall have to change to Miss Lafone."

"No, don't," said Helen impulsively.

"Whatever she does do not you change; it would be absurd. I should not like people to hear it, they would think we had gone mad."

Percival attached too little importance to the matter to say any more about it, and the subject dropped.

The following day Alice came. Her boxes were brought in the morning, and their size and number filled Helen with dismay, causing her to groan inwardly, though she made no remark upon them. Alice herself rode over just before

dinner, and as she was alone, her horse had to be put up. It was rather like an installation, Helen thought; but she made Alice welcome, sent her tea to her bedroom, and behaved, as Percival told her later on, like an arch hypocrite.

"I cannot help it," she said, "the less I feel that Alice is welcome, the more pomp and circumstance I must put into my reception and treatment of her. If she were really my friend I should behave with much less ceremony."

When Helen had gone away and Alice was alone in her room, she sat down and drew her breath. This was the beginning of the campaign which she had planned with much care and thought, and she was anxious that all should go well. First she examined the room in which she sat; it was large and lofty, and well lighted; she could not complain that Helen had taken advantage of her being a relative to give her inferior accommodation. The room was exquisitely furnished in the most modern style; everything that could possibly be imagined as adding to the comfort and convenience of the occupant was there. There were two doors in the room in addition to the one by which she had come in; one led into an almost extravagantly large and luxurious dressing room, the other into a tastefully furnished little sitting-room with a lovely view from the oriel window. Alice had repressed a smile when Helen called her attention to the room. As before said, she was very quick at reading people's thoughts when they concerned herself, and she had instantly guessed Helen's object in showing her the room.

Having satisfied herself that her surroundings indoors were all that could be desired, she went to the window and looked out. Brantwood stood on high ground and commanded a magnificent view. Even she was for a moment lost in admiration of the beauty of the scene. The tide was out, and the sun was setting; the sands glittered almost like gold in the brilliant evening light. Here and there a little pool left by the retreating waters caught and threw back the radiance above, and had the appearance of a patch of molten gold or silver. A flock of seagulls wheeled over the sands, and settled down with harsh, melancholy cries. With awkward gait they stepped along, dipping their heads from time to time. There with one accord they rose and flew off to a more hospitable part of the shore. Below her window the flowers bedded in the breeze; the flower beds were a blaze of color, and fragrant with the scent of many sweet, old-fashioned flowers; the lawns were like stretches of emerald moss. A climbing St. John rose nodded in at the open window; just below a purple clematis spread its broad, rich blossoms. She looked at it all, and then turned away with a dark look upon her beautiful face. Her eyes glittered and she set her teeth as she muttered—

"All this ought to have been mine, and might have been mine but for her double-dealing, and I bide my time if you may be sure. I made a false calculation when she had her engagement until I had grown to be her rival. She is my first rival, and she shall be my last. The day when she comes to me, and begs me to spare her husband to her, will be the sweetest of my life."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

I have been afflicted with catarrh for 20 years. It became chronic and there was a constant dropping of mucus matter. It extended to my throat causing hoarseness and great difficulty in speaking, indeed for years I was unable to speak more than thirty minutes and often this with great difficulty. Also, to a great extent, lost the sense of hearing in the left ear, and of taste. By the use of Ely's Cream Balm droppings of mucus has ceased and my voice and hearing has greatly improved.—Jas. W. Davidson, Attorney at Law, Monmouth, Ill.

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