

HELEN LAFONE OR THE FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD

A TALE OF ENGLISH LIFE.

CHAPTER VI.—CONTINUED.

"Cannot you get any amusement out of them? That is always my refuge when I am with impossible people. I call my powers of observation and my sense of humor to my aid, and generally find I get on pretty well."

"I shall succeed this time, you must own it is rather amusing watching amusement out of some people of one's self."

"Is it?" with a smile. "Well, I promise to give you very much in my power."

"I almost live on the island on such times; fortunately I never appeared to the people who came here they might be a pleasant excursion by the way of course they could not walk."

"Did anyone expect you to ever walk?"

"A young man once or twice, but he did not know the way, and he was drowned."

"A charming fate, and most encouraging to anyone who wishes to follow his example."

"They were silent for some time, watching the water creeping over the sands in the distance."

"The hours I have spent here!" said Helen. "I do not remember the time when this island was not my favorite haunt. If I ever go away from Osmotherly for long, I should want to take it with me. I could not live without it."

"Why should you go away from Osmotherly?"

"I don't know; things happen," rising to his feet as he spoke. "In ten minutes we shall see the advent of your wonderful wave, and in an hour from that we can go."

"Why be in a hurry? There is plenty of time."

"In half an hour they were off. This time Helen did not row; she sat at her ease and made remarks on the weather and her humor more than ever."

"It was shortly before seven o'clock when they reached the bay of The Thwaite, and Helen said, 'Mamma said this afternoon that it was a long time since you had been to see us, and I was to ask you to come to have dinner with us this evening. Will you come?'"

"Will your mother cross my dress?" said Percival, looking down at himself. "Oh yes, she kneed when we were going and what you would like. Do come."

"You know I am not better," swinging the little side gate open for her as he spoke.

"They walked up the path, which kept drive in silence, and had to sound until they got close to the house; when through the open window they heard a languid ripple of laughter and a girl's voice speaking, without being distinguished what she said."

Helen stopped short. "That is Alice's voice," she said, as she looked up at her companion. "Is it possible she can have come today?"

exchanged. Yes, no one seemed at all surprised; Mrs Lafone went on talking to Mr Herford, and Mr Lafone continued to give his attention to what his daughter was saying. Alice herself merely paused in her flow of words to say, "You know your way, Mr. Moore." He nodded and went away to the library, and Helen left the room immediately afterwards.

It was not until dinner was over that Percival found a really favorable opportunity for looking at Alice. He had sat on the same side of the table at dinner, and so had seen nothing more than the faultless oval of her face and a small shell-like ear. When they were all in the drawing room again he took up his position near the low rocking chair in which she reclined, and taking advantage of a time when she was engaged in conversation with her mother he examined her face closely.

She was marvellously beautiful. In spite of all he had heard and the preparation he had undergone, which had caused him to raise his expectations exceedingly high, when he did see her he was almost ashen. She had the perfect features he had ever seen, she was very tall—as tall as many a man of middle height, and her figure was very finely developed. At present it was perfect, and Percival did not consider that he need concern himself about a future. Her movements were slow and graceful, but somehow missed being so. In complexion she was almost dazzlingly fair; flaxen hair was coiled in masses at the back of her neck and lay in a loose waving fringe upon her forehead. Her skin was snowy white, with a faint, delicate rose flush in the cheeks and eyes of a very dark blue, with brown dashes of brown, lit up and gave light to a face which was otherwise rather pale in expression. At eighteen she was magnificently beautiful; at eight or twenty she would, in spite of her exquisite complexion, be coarse. Percival saw it as well as if he saw her sitting there with the burden of her eight and twenty years upon her.

"She ought to die at five-and-twenty," he thought, eyeing her coldly and critically, "and she would go to the grave with the reputation of being the most beautiful woman of her age. At present her beauty is simply gorgeous, and her white dress suits her perfectly; dead white, too—few women could wear it with impunity."

He began to talk with her but she gave very evident signs that either he nor his conversation possessed the slightest interest for her, and he gave up the attempt and turned to look at Helen. She was sitting at a distant window reading, and the light of the reading lamp showed her face in profile with striking distinctness. Percival tried to look at her as critically as he had Alice. Would any number of years amount of worldly dissipation or untimely sorrow and trouble ever thicken those delicate features or rob them of their spiritual beauty? So long as Helen was happy and well they would preserve their soft roundness, and wear and tear be it worldly or unworlly, would refine them into greater spirituality. He looked from the pale masses of Alice's hair to the burnished clouds of Helen's, from Alice's fringe shaded forehead to Helen's broad, open brow, from which the hair waved freely back to the top of the head, and with the sudden desire to see near her, born of this mental review of his attractions, he rose quickly from his lounging attitude against the mantelpiece, and crossing the room placed himself by Helen's side.

"What are you reading?" he asked. "Wordsworth."

"You saturate your mind with Wordsworth, you have him at your finger ends. You ought to join the Wordsworth Society."

"Is there one? I dislike societies. I like to study in my own way at my own time."

"I know you have an unbounded admiration for your own methods. Your self-confidence is stupendous. You would not try to shake it, because I know I could not."

"I suppose no man can violate his nature," she quoted, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Now you take to quoting; that is another of your little ways when you have got the worst of it."

"You ought not now to be surprised at my 'little ways.' Surely you know by this time that I am full of them."

He said nothing, and presently went on— "How do you like Alice?"

"She is very beautiful."

"No more?"

"I think no more."

"Is that a return quotation?" she

said, smiling again, partly because his words pleased her. Then, as he said nothing, "Why don't you go and talk to her?" "She will not talk to me."

"Then you have tried?" "A little; but she is like a very beautiful statue, and I have seldom seen a statue which made me wish it was alive and able to talk to me."

"I suppose that means you did not find her interesting."

"I suppose so."

"Naturally, you think you have not interested her?"

"I dare scarcely flatter myself that I have been fortunate enough to do so. Their eyes met and they both smiled. Helen's smile became a laugh, a low, musical little laugh which nobody seemed to notice, and she said— "Do not be too humble; humility may suit some people; it would make others look absurd."

Soon after this Percival went away. Sometime after he had gone, Alice said— "What were you and Mr Moore talking about, Helen? You seemed perfectly absorbed."

"Did you notice us? We were talking about Wordsworth's part of the time."

"I thought Wordsworth was rather solemn. Were you talking about him when you laughed?"

"Did you hear me laugh? Then we were talking about somebody else."

Alice shrugged her shoulders, saying— "I thought he seemed rather stupid. I must see what I can do for him the next time he comes."

CHAPTER VII.

ALICE.

Helen's prediction was verified. After Alice's return The Thwaite became a different house. All through the summer Percival had been almost the only visitor there; the few others were friends and contemporaries of Mr and Mrs Lafone, or from time to time some girls, friends, not of Helen, but her younger sister—girls in whom Percival had been able neither to feel nor to feign the slightest interest. They were all so much alike, a deadly monotony ran through their dress, manners and conversation. Alice's presence in the house effected a kind of revolution; people came to stay, and those in the neighborhood visited more frequently; garden parties and other festivities took place.

Under these circumstances, he saw very little of Alice. She was always in request, always surrounded by a crowd of admirers, and he failed to discover any pleasure in being one in a multitude. After having been singled out by Helen he resented the thought of being only one in a crowd to Alice. That he was only one in a crowd would have been clear to anyone who had taken the trouble to watch her behavior to him. She took little notice of him, seldom speaking, and then only in the same way as everybody else. She singled him from the rest neither through partial indifference nor undue attention.

Though she exercised no fascination over him he could not be blind to her beauty, he could not help admiring her as she swept about the garden or up and down the large rooms of The Thwaite, rooms which seemed as if they had been built and furnished for the express purpose of showing off such beauty as hers.

In the indiscriminate admiration and attention which Alice excited his own less obtrusive devotion to Helen passed unnoticed. She was not in such request as her sister, and they contrived to pass much time together, and to enjoy many long private conversations in the heart of the crowd. One day Helen said— "You still think Alice no more than beautiful?"

He shrugged his shoulders, saying— "I worship from afar. You must see for yourself that I have a small chance of improving our acquaintance."

"She is very much admired, is she not? I often look at her and wonder how it is possible to be so beautiful. Who would suppose that she is two years younger than I am?"

"Intellectually you are much more than two years her senior. I do not imagine she has more than average intelligence."

"Perhaps not, but among the people who form the world that probably counts to her advantage. Still, how do you know she is not clever, since you never speak to her?"

"There are many things about her that make me think so. If we were to have half an hour's conversation I would bring you a hundred proofs."

"Only have a little patience. You will not have long to complain that she will not talk to you."

"Did I complain? But you speak in riddles. Explain yourself."

"So far at any rate you do not feel any interest in Alice. Is it not so?"

"Perfectly."

"She saw that at once. She is very quick in reading people's impressions when they concern herself, and she is fighting you with your own weapons. You are indifferent, so she is indifferent. By and bye, if you don't change, she will, and then you will be forced to occupy yourself with her."

"What makes you say that?" he asked, after a pause. "Because I know it. She must have every one at her feet, and if they will not come of their own accord, they must be made to."

He laughed rather lazily as he answered. "Could you not hint to your sister that she is giving herself some useless trouble which I would be glad to spare her?"

"It would be of no use; she would not believe me. She would put it down to jealousy."

This time she laughed heartily. "There is an idea! Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. I know Alice very well. She has the most honest contempt for my attractions—for want of a better word—and so far, I must confess, she had every reason for her contempt. She knows nothing of our engagement, and before you came the only man who showed any preference for me was one whose regard was not flattering."

"Poor Helen!" turning and looking at her with eyes full of amusement. "I do not wonder you were discontented with your life. Neglected by all these fascinating creatures, you must indeed have felt that your life was missed. I pity you, from the bottom of my heart I pity you. What a miserable makeshift you have had to content yourself with at last."

"True; still, the makeshift has its good points. Long continued intercourse with these people (nodding towards the house) would be as enervating as living in a hothouse. The society of the makeshift serves as a tonic. In fact," suddenly changing her tone, "coming from them to you is like passing from a scented, heated drawing room full of musk and heliotrope, to the open sea shore, where a strong, bracing wind full of the smell of the sea blows upon your face."

"Sir Cuthbert Maitland seems to admire your sister very much."

"Yes, I wish she would marry him, but she does not appear to care for him."

"Why do you wish she would marry him?"

"Because I think they are suited to one another, and you must confess they look very well together."

"Yes, he is dark and she is the fairest woman I think I ever saw; they are almost equal in height, and they have the same slow way of moving about. Yes, I think they ought to marry; perhaps they will."

"I do not believe she cares for him at all; and though Alice lives altogether among people who don't consider love a necessary adjunct to marriage, I don't think she will marry any one but the man she loves."

"Her character seems a little complicated."

"It is; she is not just like the ordinary girls one meets in society. For one thing, she has not learned to subdue her own personal wishes. If she sets heart on anything she never rests until she has got at it—somehow!"

"Somehow! That seems to imply that she is not very scrupulous as to the means she employs."

"I do not think she would be scrupulous if she wanted anything very much, and it seemed quite unobtainable."

"You give her a strange character, and you seem to know her very well."

Helen shrugged her shoulders. "The child is father to the man. I was brought up with Alice; we passed years together in the schoolroom. There is no place for studying character like the schoolroom."

The Sir Cuthbert Maitland of whom they had spoken was a man, staying not at The Thwaite, but one of the neighboring houses, and some people said that had it not been for Alice Lafone he would not have been there, for it was known among his friends that a country house, filled with people gathered together from all parts of the kingdom, was his pet aversion. He was a man of between thirty and forty years of age, and of a commanding presence, without being particularly tall. His features were good, though he was not exactly handsome, and his manners were so quiet as to be almost severe. He was alone in the world, possessing absolutely no relations. Perhaps it was the consciousness of being the last member of an old and honorable family which gave his whole person a little tinge of melancholy which was attractive in the eyes of most women. He was exceedingly delicate, and his hair was already slightly grey. His admiration of Alice was very marked, and she did not apparently care for him in the least, though as she did not single anyone out as the object of her particular respect, he was as yet spared the pangs of jealousy.

or, so he thought, to the outpourings of a young man who was seated near her, and who by his gestures of a few words which he caught, Percival judged to be describing to her an exciting day on the moors.

"Poor Helen," thought Percival with a smile, "I can at any rate excuse her from that," and a few steps brought him to her side.

Her face lighted up as she saw him, and she bit her lip to hide a smile, as having shaken hands with both her and her companion, he said carefully— "Did you not hear Miss Lafone asking for you, Lang?"

With a hurried apology the young man was gone, and they were left to themselves in their obscure corner.

"How could you?" asked Helen, as he took the chair just left vacant by Mr Lang.

"All's fair, you know; besides, confess, you are very grateful to me."

"I am grateful; he was such a bore."

"And you are such a hypocrite."

"Everybody is a hypocrite on an occasion like this."

"Of course. But I came here with a purpose tonight. Do you know Dr Hazlitt is ill?"

"No," she replied, looking at him and feeling startled and uneasy. She never remembered hearing of Dr Hazlitt ill before. "What is the matter with him?" she went on.

"A seizure—paralytic, I believe it happened this evening."

"When did you hear? Have you seen him? Is he very ill?" she asked, pouring out her questions one after the other.

"I heard on my way here—I had to call about something—it happened about an hour before. He was in bed; and I think it will be a very long time before he gets up again."

He said the last words slowly as if to himself. Helen felt a stab at her heart as she heard them, and remembered that her friend was no longer a young man. She half rose from her chair, saying— "He will be alone; I should like to go to him."

"You can't go tonight," he said, laying his hand upon her arm. "He is all right for tonight, but I was going to ask if you will go to him tomorrow?"

"How could you ask?" she said reproachfully. "You must know I shall go as early as I can in the morning."

"But will your people let you go? Can you be spared?"

"There is no question of sparing. I shall never be missed, and for myself I shall be glad enough to get away from all these people."

They were silent for a moment, then she went on— "You said he was very ill, Percival, but he will get better; he is not so ill."

She raised her eyes to his face as she spoke, and there was an appealing tone in her voice, at which Percival smiled involuntarily, as though he held the old man's life in his hand.

"I cannot tell, dear," he said gravely. "It is too early to say yet, but we will hope for the best."

"Of course," she replied mechanically, as though she did not know what she was saying, and she looked away from him out of the window by which she was sitting, and of which the blind had not been drawn down, into the darkness of the night.

"I will call on my way home and tell him so," he said breaking in upon her meditations.

"That I will come? yes; has he asked for me?"

"He asked for you this evening, and I told him I would send you."

"I should so like to go tonight," she said sighing, "you could take me as you go home."

"My dear, it is impossible. I am going now, and I will tell him to expect you tomorrow."

"Say I am going to stay till—till he is better," she finished firmly. "Do go, Percival, go at once; good night."

She pressed his hand, then almost pushed it away from her as though bidding him make haste. They had been talking under cover of the music which was going on, and as he turned to go, Alice's voice came clear and ringing to where they stood together.

"Mr Moore, I am told you sing 'Adelaide' very well. Will you let us hear it now?"

It was almost the first time she had addressed him—certainly the first time she had asked him to do anything for her, and she was scarcely prepared for his answer.

"I regret infinitely that I cannot do what you wish, but I am forced to leave this moment, and cannot delay."

The colour flashed into her face, and she involuntarily drew up her white throat, but she asked again. "It is not very long. Could you not spare those few minutes?"

He half smiled as Helen's words came into his mind— "Perfectly."

"Go at once; good night," and he repeated.

"I am more sorry than I can say to appear ungracious, but my business admits of no delay. Another time if you are good enough to command me, I shall hope to be at your service."

He was gone, and Alice was left to

For it was a very sad task which she had taken upon herself—to nurse through his last illness the friend of her whole life, whose kindness had been unflinching and whose sympathy always ready.

During these weeks Percival went more to the Thwaite, rather against his will, since Helen was not there, and yet not without curiosity and interest. He could no longer complain of being one in a crowd. Alice's mood seemed to have changed; a dozen times a day he was made to feel that he was the object of her special interest.

On this particular afternoon she had almost insisted upon his coming to the house, and he had come, very much against his will, for it had been his intention to relieve Helen at her post, and to send her out for a walk. Alice, however, contrived to arrange things so that he could no longer refuse her request, and so in the course of the afternoon he found himself strolling in the garden alone with Alice, in a very bad temper.

"Do you know, Mr Moore," she was saying as she walked slowly by his side, her majestic height allowing her to keep perfect step with him, "what first made me take an interest in you, and think you must be different from other men?"

"I would not presume to distinguish one from another among the many good reasons you must have had."

"Ah, you are sarcastic," smiling straight into his face, and letting him have a glimpse of the transparent depths of her blue eyes. "Do not give yourself that trouble. I never see the point of a sarcasm unless I choose, and if I choose not to show that I have seen it, I defy anyone to find it out. I want to tell you this, and I shall tell you, however sarcastic you choose to be."

"I should never think of being sarcastic with you. If you have anything to say, may I beg of you to say it now, and in a few minutes I must go, and it would grieve me to have to interrupt you."

"Why do you want to go?" she asked almost impatiently. "I have noticed that whenever I want to talk to you always begin to say you must go. Where do you go to, and what do you do when you get there?"

"I can hardly expect that with all your kind indulgence for my many failings, you could support the rental of a long list of business engagements."

He spoke in a half bantering tone, but Helen would have detected a shade of impatience in it. Alice, besides, being devoid of the feeling which made it so easy for Helen to read Percival's moods, had not so fine an instinct, and she went on— "It is a matter of business we will say no more about it. What I was going to say is that you made me think you must be different from other men because you never paid me any compliments. Did you know?"

In spite of his annoyance, and the fact that he was beginning to feel bored, he could not help smiling, and his tone was a little more cordial as he replied— "I do not pay compliments in the instinctive, unconscious way in which I breathe and move. I was perfectly aware that I had not yet exerted myself on your behalf."

"How simply you say it, as if it were not a matter of course to pay compliments. I wish some of the men I know thought so. If you knew the ridiculous platitudes I am sometimes compelled to

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Prior to his death Austin L. Budd was past teacher of the Huron Signal and leader of...