

# HELEN LAFONE: OR THE FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD.

A TALE OF ENGLISH LIFE.

## CHAPTER XVI.

There was a disagreeable sneeze in her voice. She was in one of her least amiable moods, and she did not care if he saw it.

"You might do worse. I imagine that a governess enjoys her periodical holiday far more than you do your constant round of pleasure-seeking."

"Seeking only? Then you don't think I succeed in finding it?"

"You don't certainly give me that impression just now."

He was both bored and annoyed, and his annoyance was perceptible in his voice. Alice knew she was displeasing him, and with a perverse twist of the lips she went from bad to worse.

"I really believe you are in earnest. Imagine me a governess! I fancy few women would care to have us in their house. There are not many people who can support unfavorable comparisons with equanimity."

She laughed almost insolently as she spoke, and Percival was too much annoyed to speak. After a momentary silence he stretched out his hand for the book on the table, and moving the little ivory marker from the top of the page, said:

"I will read to you if you like while you work."

She laughed again, still the same disagreeable laugh, and she replied:

"I thank you, but I am not going to work, and if you were to read a page of that book I think I should tear it to pieces with irritation, it is so utterly idiotic."

He closed the book and put it on the table again without speaking. She went on:

"I know quite well why you offered to read; you disapproved strongly of what I said just now, and you wanted to let me know it. But we have wandered very far from the point; you recommended me to go away, and I almost thought I should follow your advice. I would go certainly if—"

"She paused. If only, she might have said, 'if you will go too,' but she concluded abruptly, 'if I could.'"

"I really do not see what is to prevent you."

"With whom could I go? Not by myself, and to go with mamma alone would be no change at all. It would be worse than staying at home."

Percival said nothing, and she went on impatiently:

"There, now, I have shocked you again. How can you be, and you know all the time that it is the truth. I see mamma every day, and you must be aware that she is not a very suitable companion for anyone who wants change and cheerful society. I hate people who always think no one should make disparaging remarks about her relations."

Percival said nothing, and she went on impatiently:

"I have a theory of my own certainly, but I do not suppose it would interest you."

"Yes it would, very much; your theories I have noticed have generally something in them."

There was a little curl at the corner of his lip as he replied:

"My theory is that your state of health is the natural result of the life you have been leading. You have had all you wanted, far more than you either wanted or needed—beauty, wealth, position, and popularity. For a time you found it all very delightful, but you have naturally grown tired of it. If you really want my advice and are supposed to follow it, it is this, marry, say a poor, hardworking man, a clergyman if you like, as whose wife you would have plenty to do, something to think about that would be worth thinking about. Or you should find some employment, say hospital work, which would keep you constantly occupied. At the end of each day you would feel honestly tired and satisfied that you had earned the bread you had eaten. I do not think that anything but work will cure you, and those are the only kinds of work which I see open to you—the one and responsibility of your own household, or working for the good of others."

When he had finished speaking he was obliged to bite his lip to hide a smile at the expression which his words had called up on her face. She seemed struck dumb with amazement; she was literally unable to speak. Twice she began, and the words died away upon her lips.

Her surprise was so great that he felt compelled to say something.

"I knew you would think me a brute," he said, half-resignedly.

As he spoke again, she, too, seemed to find her voice.

"What made you speak like that? You advise me to marry—"

She spoke almost breathlessly, and he was surprised to find how she had seized upon that particular point of his lecture.

"Why not?" he asked. "If it is not your intention to marry sometime?"

She saw his surprise, and that she had

gone rather too far, so she went on hastily:

"You advise me to marry a poor clergyman? Honestly, Mr. Moore, did I think you must be out of your mind?"

His surprise was now equal to what her's had been. He looked at her for a moment, and then said:

"Why?"

Race, disappointment and bitterness filled her heart. She could have wept with mortification, and she was hardly conscious of what she said. Seeing the surprise in his face, however, she clasped her hands together in her lap so tightly that her fingers cut into her flesh, and by an extraordinary effort she regulated her self-control sufficiently to say:

"I can imagine no one less suited for such a position than I, and really, with a half laugh, 'if I were disposed to follow hard-working men, I do not know how I should find one, unless I advertised, and your advice, there would still be great difficulties in the way. My life has not led me to make the acquaintance of the poor, when I might not like those who applied. You forget, I concluded, speaking rather slowly, 'I could not marry a man unless I loved him. That is what has always stood in my way.'"

"I do not see why such a man as I have described should not win your love as well as any other."

"Perhaps I have as love to win," she replied, apparently on the impulse of the moment.

He raised his eyebrows slightly as he said:

"In that case, of course, there is nothing more to be said. But if you mean—"

"I mean nothing," she interrupted hastily, and looking rather deeply as she spoke. "You always want to dive below people's words and to find hidden meanings in them," she finished rather impatiently.

Percival was too surprised to be able to speak at once, and before he did so, she went on:

"I do not see why I should not be allowed a slip of the tongue as well as other people."

"Certainly not," said Percival, in amazement.

"There is no occasion to immediately attribute sinister motives to me."

"I really must be allowed to protest that I am innocent of attributing any motives at all."

"You say so now, but I know you thought I meant that I was in love with somebody else."

"My dear Miss Lafone, you are crediting, or rather discrediting, me with ideas which never entered my mind."

"Of course you will not own that it was so."

"No one would twist your words into such a sense, and I assure—"

"Please say no more about it. It is very annoying to me to have the subject persisted in this way. This is not the first time I have noticed your fondness for continuing a conversation which has lost all interest for other people."

She spoke almost haughtily, and as she finished she took up her work again and applied herself to it in earnest.

Percival sat silent, chiefly because he was too vexed to speak. He hoped she soon would go into the house and give him an opportunity of leaving her; but she sat still, with apparently no intention of moving, and in perfect silence. The situation was fast becoming ridiculous, when Gertrude appeared upon the scene, attended by Frank Harvey.

She must have been from a distance, and been struck by their attitude, for she began to speak as soon as she came within speaking distance.

"Have you quarrelled?" she asked, demurely, yet with a sparkle of merriment in her eyes.

Gertrude Lafone was a very pretty girl, like Alice, only smaller and slighter. Percival liked her the best of the two girls at The Thwaites. He now rose and ordered her his chair, which, however, she declined, and as no one spoke she went on:

"Tell us if it is a real quarrel, because if it is Frank and I will take a lesson. We have never quarrelled yet, and I have an idea that we should not know how to begin."

"Your sister and I am not on quarrelling terms," said Percival, as Alice remained silent.

Gertrude opened her eyes.

"Not yet? How much longer are you going on before you are? If you were not quarrelling I guess—literally I guess, no connection with the American form—that you have been giving her good advice, a very thankless task, as I can tell you from experience. Alice hates good advice."

Still no word from Alice. She sat with her eyes fixed upon her work and her lips slightly compressed. Percival was standing up twisting about the chair upon which he had been sitting before Gertrude joined them, and saying nothing, chiefly because he had nothing to say.

"I must say," went on Gertrude, who was rather a tease and fond of making Alice the subject of her fun, "that I think good advice would be of immense benefit to you. I have often administered it myself, but truth compels me to say, without any good result. In this case we may hope for more success; if anyone in the world can persuade her to do what she desires, it is you."

She was looking alternately at Alice and Percival as she spoke, but chiefly at Percival, and so she did not see the cloud gathering on her sister's face. She had hardly finished when Miss Lafone rose up, laid her work upon the table, and turning to her said:

"You are both vulgar and impertinent. Gertrude, the most charitable thing I can do will be to go away, and so put it out of your power to commit yourself further."

Having spoken, she turned away and walked towards the house, leaving one

ters in who were very much relieved, and two who were very angry.

"How dare she!" cried Gertrude and Frank in a breath, and Percival, feeling under necessity to stay and explain Alice's daring, walked away, leaving them to pour the expression of their outraged feelings into one another's ears.

He was glad to get away, for he felt honestly bewildered. The more he thought over Alice's strange utterance of the afternoon, the less could he understand them. Of only one thing did he feel sure, and that was at last she was in love with some one, but with whom he could not tell. He passed in mental review all their mutual acquaintances, but could not find any one who seemed to be the right man. At last, after thinking about it nearly all the way home, he gave it up in despair, thinking—

"I suppose we shall know sometime upon whom her choice has fallen. I hope there is nothing queer about it. Alice meanwhile sat in her room pining in despair. All she did seemed of no avail, and she bowed her head upon her hands saying in a whisper—

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