

MRS. BROTHERTON'S ADVENTURE

A Detective Story, Without the Detective

By SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY

IT was a red-letter day for Mrs. Brotherton, the rich contractor's widow, when she got an invitation to stay a week at Hallaton Hall, Lord Finchampton's place in Wyeshire. Mrs. Brotherton entertained largely at her house in Mayfair, and was gradually getting to know quite a number of good people in society. She imitated, more or less successfully, the grand manner of a smart hostess, and was notorious for wearing on all possible occasions a dazzling array of jewellery. Her diamonds were very fine, and quite a vivid feature of her personality. She would as soon have thought of travelling without a change of dress as without her jewel-case, and her thirty or forty thousand pounds' worth of brilliants accompanied her wherever she went.

The Hallaton visit promised to be one of the events of her life; she made a point of announcing the approaching honour to all her acquaintances.

She felt—although she had too much worldly wisdom to show it—deeply grateful to that smart young society blood, Harvey Bendyshe, a man who seemed to know everybody and to go everywhere. Bendyshe had been for some time one of her principal society supporters.

"I am so glad you are going down to Hallaton, dear lady," Bendyshe said to his hostess, with a touch of subdued enthusiasm. "You'll love the place, and Finchampton is an absolutely charming and perfect host. Yes; I am so glad he has asked you, I wish I was going too; but I was at Hallaton quite lately, and, of course, dear old Finchy has a lot of people to get in during the shooting season."

"I suppose there will be a smart lot there," Mrs. Brotherton murmured.

"Sure to be," Bendyshe answered, "I fancy Lady Scrymgeour is going, and," he added with a laugh, "there will be some dressy women. But one need not give you a hint to be smart, dear lady."

The dear lady replied by a confident smile, which spoke volumes, and Bendyshe after answering as many questions about Hallaton as tact would allow his hostess to ask, took his leave.

It had been arranged that Mrs. Brotherton was to travel down to Hallaton by the 3.45 train from town, arriving at Hallaton Road station, three miles from the Hall, at 5.30. On the morning of her departure, however, she got a wire from Hallaton to say it would be more convenient to meet her at Rustwick, which was the station before Hallaton. At Rustwick accordingly Mrs. Brotherton and her maid alighted in the dark of a November afternoon. A smart liveried servant met her on the platform, asked her if she was for Hallaton Hall, and conducted her through the booking-office to where a carriage and pair were waiting.

"His lordship," said the man as he settled the rugs, "is suffering from a severe attack of gout, and has not left his room to-day."

Mrs. Brotherton was naturally sorry, but, after all, it did not make so very much difference to her; so long as she stayed at Hallaton the illness of her host was no great matter.

"There is a party at Hallaton?" she asked the man. "Oh, yes, ma'am. There are several at the Hall. Lord and Lady Slinfold, Sir Hubert and Lady Wichelo, the Honourable Mr. Dawkins, and Captain Mantering."

"Oh," exclaimed the lady in a gratified tone, as she settled herself in the comfortable brougham.

"His lordship does not wish his illness to make any difference. He hopes to be about again in a day or two."

As the door shut the coachman was giving directions to the porter who had brought out the luggage. It struck Mrs. Brotherton that his voice sounded familiar, but she could not at the moment think whose it reminded her of.

A BLAZE of light, as the hall-door was thrown open, gave the new arrival a hospitable welcome; she was ushered into the drawing-room where she found the house-party assembled. A lady rose and greeted her with an aristocratic drawl.

"How do you do? I'm afraid you have had a terribly cold journey. Will you have some tea? Isn't it sad about poor Lord Finchampton?"

"I hope he is better," Mrs. Brotherton ventured.

"Oh, yes," the lady answered, as she poured out a cup of tea, "it is nothing very serious, only of course it is a bore having to be shut up in one's room, don't you know? Sir Hubert has just been sitting with the poor dear man, and reports him as being very sorry for himself."

Sir Hubert came forward. "All the same he won't hear of our breaking up," he said. "He feels certain he will be about by the day after to-morrow. And in the meantime we are to make ourselves quite at home."

"Certainly," Mrs. Brotherton thought the party were showing no sign of disobeying their host's wish, and she very soon found herself beginning to feel very much at her ease. There was no stiffness among her fellow guests.

Lady Slinfold, whodid the honours, made herself

and all the rest known to Mrs. Brotherton; everyone paid her an amount of attention, which was quite flattering to the good lady, and made her already regard the whole party as her own friends. So the hour passed in free and easy chat till it was time to dress for dinner.

"Have you heard anything about Lord Finchampton?" Mrs. Brotherton asked her maid.

"Well, ma'am," she answered, "I haven't seen anybody much to ask. I don't know where the servants get to here, it is such a funny sort of place."

"What do you mean by a funny sort of place?" her mistress enquired, quite content, however, to be in the house whatever its shortcomings.

"Well, ma'am," the maid answered, "it seems such a curious, rambling old place; more like a farm house than a nobleman's mansion. The place, what I have seen of it, is barely furnished, but then I haven't been able to see much, for most of the doors I pass"

HOMeward BOUND

By Arthur Guiterman.

There's a pine-built lodge in a rocky mountain glen,
In the shaggy-breasted motherland that bore me,
And the west wind calls, and I'm turning home again

To the hills where my heart is gone before me.

Where a lake laughs blue while the dipping
paddles gleam

Where the wild geese are following their leader,
Where the trout leaps up from the silver of the stream

And the buck strikes his horn against a cedar.

—From "The Laughing Muse."

had a notice on them, 'Private,' or 'No admittance,' or 'This door is not to be opened,' and one that I tried just outside here was locked. I should say his lordship must be rather peculiar."

Mrs. Brotherton was quite prepared to accept the explanation; it was hardly to be expected that peers should be like other people; she had heard too many stories of eccentric noblemen to imagine that. And if Hallaton should be different from the ordinary country house of her experience, why it would be so much the more interesting and amusing. So without paying any very serious attention to her maid's observations and comments on their quarters she put on her smartest gown, decked herself with an all too liberal display of diamond ornaments, and went in a high state of contentment down to dinner. She found everybody very smart and very genial. The dinner was excellent and well served, although something was said about the absence of the butler, who was in attendance on the invalid upstairs. As the champagne circulated the party became quite hilariously jovial, and Mrs. Brotherton, no longer awed by the novelty of her surroundings, threw off her rather middle-class restraint, and became as merry as any of them. Her line was certainly to do as others did in that smart set, and these people were very smart indeed. And how delightful it was to become so quickly and easily intimate with regular society folk.

After dinner someone rather tentatively proposed a game of cards.

"Dear old Finchampton hates gambling," said Lady Slinfold with a laugh. "Gets quite three cornered at the sight of a pack of cards, but as he is safe not to come down to-night it is a pity to lose the chance of a game."

"To-night is ours, at any rate," chimed in Sir Hubert Wichelo. "Let's have a flutter now if we have to go back to cribbage or bagatelle or hunt the slipper to-morrow."

EVERYONE seemed to welcome the suggestion, and Mrs. Brotherton could not well stand out.

She did not care for play, having none of the gambler's instinct in her, still in these circumstances when everyone was so nice to her, a stranger, she could not afford to look churlish, and in her elation she felt rather inclined to cast away her natural prudence. After all it would probably only be for one night, and if she did lose a few pounds why she could easily afford it. Accordingly she gaily sat down with the rest and played Chemin de Fer, eventually rising a loser to the tune of some seventy odd pounds.

This rather sobered her and considerably discounted the evening's enjoyment, but everyone was so friendly and sympathetic that she wished to show herself a good loser, and wrote a cheque for her losses without the slightest sign of annoyance or hesitation.

A message came down from their invalid host to bid them all good-night, hoping they had had a pleasant evening, and saying he felt so much better that he looked forward to being with them next night.

That was a satisfactory announcement, and the party broke up for the night in good spirits. It was late, and Mrs. Brotherton felt unusually tired, so tired that she almost fell asleep before she was undressed.

It had been agreed that breakfast was to be later than usual next morning; all the same Mrs. Brotherton was fairly horrified when she was roused from a deep slumber to be told by her maid that it was nearly ten o'clock.

"Ten o'clock!" she cried, almost in dismay, "why on earth didn't you call me sooner, Fisher?"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am," the maid replied, "but I overslept myself, too, and only woke half an hour ago with a splitting headache."

"Haven't you brought tea?" her mistress asked in no very good humour.

"I HAVE just been down for it, ma'am," Fisher answered, "but I can't find anyone about."

There is only a deaf old woman downstairs, who doesn't seem to know anything about the house; so, as it was late, I thought I had better come and tell you at once."

"It is very extraordinary," Mrs. Brotherton exclaimed in a mystified tone.

"Yes, ma'am, it is, and I can't make it out at all," Fisher said significantly. "It is my belief there is something wrong here."

"Wrong? Here, at Lord Finchampton's? How can there be?" the lady cried, almost scandalized at the monstrous idea. "I don't know what you mean by saying the house is deserted. His lordship must be here; he can't move from his room."

"Well," Fisher persisted, "it is very queer; that is all I can say; there is no one to be seen or heard in the place except a deaf old woman. I don't know where his lordship—"

"Never mind, that will do," Mrs. Brotherton interrupted, angry at the suspicion which was beginning to force itself upon her. "Let me get dressed quickly, and see what it all means. You must be absurdly mistaken."

"I hope I may be, ma'am," the maid responded in no very convinced tone.

As Mrs. Brotherton made an unusually hurried toilet she could not help an uncomfortable conviction as she looked out of the window that the view did not exactly suggest the grounds surrounding a nobleman's country seat. The garden, if such it might be called, was unkempt, and more suggestive of farm lands than of an historic park.

The idea made her more anxious than ever to get down quickly, and her dressing was soon accomplished.

SHE hurried downstairs. On her way the absence of all sign of life struck chill and gave a sense of vague apprehension. She went straight to the dining-room, and gave a gasp of dismay at the sight she saw. The grate contained the burnt-out ashes of last night's fire; the table was bare; not a sign of breakfast. Mrs. Brotherton turned, and went off to seek another room where breakfast might be laid. The drawing-room was empty, and with a dead fire in the grate. What a common tawdry room it looked in the cold morning light! Mrs. Brotherton hurried from room to room, only to find each one deserted, and most of them unfurnished. In desperation she returned to the dining-room, and sharply rang the bell. After some delay, the deaf old woman appeared. No satisfaction was to be got from her; she seemed to know nothing of the arrangements of the house, and in fact was hopelessly stupid. She knew nothing of the people who were in the house overnight, as she herself only came in as caretaker that morning. Yes; she thought there was some tea in the house, and she would get the lady a cup and some bread and butter.

By this time Mrs. Brotherton, with all her optimism, had become convinced that something was seriously wrong. But what could it be? What was the explanation? What had happened since last night when everything had been so delightful? Certainly when she drove up to the house the evening before the darkness had prevented her noticing its rather dilapidated surroundings. She now opened the door, and went out to take a survey of the house.

The sight was by no means reassuring. Could this low, rambling style of building, with its farm-like outhouses and general air of neglect, be the stately Hallaton of which she had heard so much? It all seemed then like a nightmare, and yet when she recalled the incidents of the previous evening she could not realize that there had been a hideous mistake or deception. It was all very extraordinary and mysterious, but at any rate she must have her breakfast before probing it further. She went indoors rather inclined now to come to the uncomfortable and humiliating conclusion that she had been the victim of an elaborate practical joke. Her frugal meal was ready, and she sat down in bitterness of spirit to make the best of the situation.

She had scarcely taken half a dozen sips when

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