

HELEN LAFONE: OR THE FOES OF A HOUSEHOLD.

A TALE OF ENGLISH LIFE.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN UNEXPECTED CALLER.

It was a few minutes before the dinner hour when Sir Cuthbert came in to the drawing room at Brantwood, and the whole party had already assembled. Everyone looked at him with a feeling of interest—they all knew that he had just come back from India, and some at least guessed why he had gone there. Those few were a little surprised that he came to Brantwood, and watched his meeting with Mrs Moore rather curiously. There was nothing to gratify the feeling. Mrs Moore looked very beautiful; she again wore her pearly-colored dress which became her so well; there was a slight flush on her cheeks, called up perhaps by the anticipation of meeting with her old lover, and her eyes looked deeper and softer than usual. Sir Cuthbert, as we know, a striking looking man, almost an English dark in complexion, a darkness which had been increased by his sojourn in India. His manners were grave and dignified, also, perhaps, a little foreign. Few Englishmen would in the presence of so many people, and with the memory of the past vividly before them, have raised the hand of their hostess to their lips with the chivalrous grace with which Sir Cuthbert performed that little ceremony. Beyond that there was nothing to see. His eyes rested on Mrs Moore's beautiful face with undisguised admiration, but his compliments, if he paid any, were murmured in too low a voice for anyone but herself to hear. After the first greeting he hardly addressed his hostess, but talked a great deal to Percival, of whom he had formerly known very little. The two men seemed to get on.

could not find any plausible reason for going alone. However he had thought it out, it always came back to the same thing; he could not go without Alice. When he thought of a repetition of those few weeks after their marriage, he felt it was beyond his strength; better remain at home and pursue his work alone. It was true that Alice had ceased to annoy him with displays of jealousy, but he felt that they were thoroughly unavailing for one another, and he resolved to keep Sir Cuthbert with them as long as he could. Then he thought of Mr Longworthy's note, and drawing it from his pocket-book he read it again. He could not get rid of a feeling that there was something in it which he could not understand. He had more than once thought of the clergyman with pleasure, and hoped he might some time meet him again; but until today he had never supposed that he owed his acquaintance to anything but chance. Now he began to think otherwise. Little things which had been unnoted at the time came back to his memory and seemed to point to something below the surface. Why had the clergyman come to Osomotherly at all? He remembered their meeting on the road and the alleged reason for his visit. It seemed very plausible, but Percival began to ask himself how he had known that he was the man he wanted? The mere fact of their happening to meet near Brantwood went for nothing. Then there was his willingness to come into the house, and as one thing after another flashed into his mind, his absence of surprise at the fact that so young a man as his host should already be in possession of his second wife. Finally he had begged a flower, not from Alice, but himself. Though before they parted at the station he had applied with perfect courtesy to Percival's hope that they might meet again, he had not asked him to his own house. Now came this note promising a meeting at Brantwood. He thought it all over, utterly in the dark, until such an extraordinary idea struck him that he stopped short in his walk and said aloud—

"Now we can begin to think of enjoyment. They were a great deal together. Percival was just then very busy, and he left his wife and his guest very much to their own devices. Even with Alice warning ringing in his ears he could not conjure up any feeling of distrust or uneasiness. He had perfect confidence in Alice, and it did not occur to him to suspect Sir Cuthbert.

Neither had he any ground for suspicion. Though these two walked and talked and read together, never had any word which Percival might not have overheard, been uttered by either. The change which had taken place in Alice continued. Her manner was marked by a quietness and indifference which seemed almost unnatural. She was perfectly calm, almost subdued. Percival had over and over again expressed concern for her health, and asked if she would like to go away, but she always received the same answer; she was perfectly well and glad to be at peace and free from the strain and exertion of entertaining a house full of visitors.

It was on a chill damp morning that Alice, Percival, and Sir Cuthbert sat over the breakfast table. The table had been opened and its contents sorted and given to their different owners. Each of the party had my letters; Percival's, which related chiefly to business, were the soonest despatched. There was nothing very surprising or attractive in any of them except, as it was the shortest of them all. It ran as follows:—

"Dear Mr Moore, I should be glad if you would appoint a day at your earliest convenience upon which I might call upon you. I have communications of the utmost importance and must to make—Believe me, yours truly,

"RUFERT LONGWORTHY."

Percival meditated on the note in silence. His wife and guest were still reading their letters, and in addition to that, Alice took so little interest in his private concerns that he seldom mentioned them to her. As he read a patient nature he took a small table knife between his fingers and balanced it carefully, while waiting until Alice should pour out the coffee. Sitting opposite to her his eyes fell upon her face and rested there. How she was changed! The once haughty mouth had a downward droop, and the lips were slightly compressed. She was paler than before, and as she suddenly realized that her companions were waiting and it should be her pleasure to supply their wants, she raised her head with a word of apology, and her eyes met those of her husband fixed upon her face. She colored a little and averted her head, but not before he had seen that her eyes were changed too. They were not sad, rather thoughtful and weary, but the old haughty flash was gone. He had no time to think of it just then. Sir Cuthbert folded up the least of his letters and returned it to its envelope with his usual deliberation. Conversation began, and his opportunity was for that time lost.

Later in the morning thought of it again. Alice could not be happy, and he rather feared that he had been wanting in attention lately. There were times when he felt that his loss more keenly than at others; when her absence and the recollection of her caused him absolute suffering, and such a time had just now arrived. He was not happy any more than Alice. Every day he found it more difficult to play his part, and he feared that his indifference was visible. The days had begun to drag; formerly that all had been too short, now each day had to be lived through again. He had begun to think of going away for a length of time, but though he turned the plan over in his mind he

whose expression was set and taciturn, and who had a sturdy independent way of holding themselves. As he strolled down the hill from the station he met a man who was different from those he had already seen, though not less sour and moody looking. This man was on horseback, riding slowly along with rather bent head, and so dark and bitter an expression on his face that Percival wondered involuntarily if the whole village had been stricken with a blight; nor did he feel less puzzled when he thought of Mr Longworthy and his courteous high-bred manner. Perhaps, he thought, there were two Miller's Gates, and he had come to the wrong one; so when the man on horseback reached him he stopped to ask—

"Is the clergyman of this place called Longworthy?" There was no change in the expression of the other man's face as he replied—"He is."

"Can you direct me to the Rectory?" The horseman turned slightly in his saddle, and pointed with his whip to where near the church a stack of tall twisted chimneys were visible. "That house with the chimneys is the Rectory," he said, and was going on his way when the other, moved apparently by sudden impulse, said—

"May I ask your name?" "Certainly; my name is Moore."

"The man on horseback made a motion to proceed, and Percival with a good afternoon, which was not returned, walked on. Had he turned he would have seen his informant ride in his horse and look after him, while the cloud on his brow grew darker, and he muttered half audibly—

"So that is her husband, and he has come at last." On the evening of the day after which Mr Longworthy had written to Percival he and his wife and Helen sat together in the Rectory drawing-room. He had just come in and was enjoying a rest and chat before tea. He sat in his favorite arm-chair, and gazed benignly upon the two women, who were both working. Helen was busy with a sock which she was knitting to help Mrs Longworthy, and her small white hands, upon which flashed a golden wedding ring and one or two others, moved with almost incredible rapidity. Mr Longworthy watched her for a little time in silence; then he said—

"I never saw any one work so fast. How do you do it?" "These will be finished soon; they are for present."

"At present?" he echoed. Do you make presents?" "Heaven forbid! I consider presents giving a senseless and insulting custom."

"You are silent for a moment, and then you will learn to think differently as you grow older. Don't you see that that is one of the objects of marriage? We will not take help from others, and yet we cannot do without it, so we link our lives with each other as if by a chain, and when we accept what we ourselves are lacking in. A woman with a character like yours would make an awful number of mistakes if she were unmarried, or married to the wrong man."

yourself; you don't like to think that anything you do is suggested by some one else.

"Is that a great fault?" she asked, looking up at him, who by accident had appointed your house rather than my own as our place of meeting, but I do not think this makes any real difference; perhaps even it is better."

"You are very good. My curiosity got the better of me. Frankly, I could not imagine what you had to tell me."

"No; I do not see how you could have any idea, and I hope you will not be disappointed. It is a story which I thought might interest you—a very curious story, indeed, about a young lady at present staying with my wife and me."

Percival looked surprised and a good deal perplexed. He was thinking of what Mr Longworthy had said in his note—that the communication was to be of importance as well as of interest. "Can I help you or her in any way?" he asked rather slowly.

"I think you will be able to help us both; we have been very undecided. If you will sit down I will tell you all about it."

Percival seated himself. Mr Longworthy took the chair in which, at Helen's request, he had sat the day before, and putting one knee over the other, he began his story.

"Do you happen to remember a railway accident which took place about a year ago? The train was crossing a river, the bridge fell in, and—"

"I have good reason to remember it," said Percival, the frown coming into his forehead which always appeared there when any mention was made of or he thought of that time. "My wife, my first wife was in that train," he concluded exultantly.

It is the only excuse I have, and I fear it is a very lame one."

"I am exceedingly glad to see you," replied the clergyman cordially. "I cannot say it was merely by accident that I appointed your house rather than my own as our place of meeting, but I do not think this makes any real difference; perhaps even it is better."

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Interesting Letter of the

Description of the Masak Museum. "Masak" is the name of the town of the city of C...

Shepherd's note of the city of C... roomy, old built, situated around it, traces by a growing tail-on toward money crowd of awaiting some of Every donkey rejoin...

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