

# The Storyteller.

## MRS. LOMER'S LADY-HELP.

### PART I.

'HAVE you noticed anything particular about the lady-help, James?'

General Lomer lowered the *Times* and gazed blankly at the speaker.

'Well, my dear,' he replied, with that caution which forty years' experience of matrimony had taught him to be decidedly the better part of valour, 'she struck me as rather—er—rather prepossessing in appearance, if that is what you mean?'

'Prepossessing?' echoed Mrs. Lomer sharply. 'She is a remarkably handsome young woman, and I should have thought that even you would have been sufficiently observant to notice the fact.'

The general retired behind his newspaper, a distinct twinkle in his benevolent blue eyes.

'Well,' he observed from the other side of that friendly screen, 'and what then? Does that disqualify her for service in your opinion?'

'It would in the eyes of some people,' returned his wife in a meditative tone. 'Perhaps here it will not matter so much, so long—meaningly—as you remember her position and do not pay her the extravagant compliments which you appear to think necessary in the case of every pretty girl you meet, but—'

'I, my dear!' ejaculated General Lomer in a tone of outraged virtue.

'Yes, you! But the worst of it is,' she continued calmly, totally ignoring the interruption, 'that this Miss Chester is by way of being a lady. Her father was a clergyman with a large family and a small income—the two usually go together somehow—and she may be inclined to give herself airs.'

'Oh, let us trust not,' said the general, casting a furtive glance at his neglected paper. 'And you would have a lady-help you know, my dear,' he added in a somewhat apologetic manner.

'I had to make some change; our last parlour-maid was enough to try the patience of a—of an archangel, and Mrs. Fanshawe appeared to have found such a treasure. To be sure, she was only a farmer's daughter, with a snub nose and freckles, but—'

'A telegram has just come,' said a pleasantly modulated voice, and the lady-help, in a nice-fitting black gown and the daintiest thing in caps, made her appearance at the door.

Mrs. Lomer took the missive with a murmured word of thanks, while her husband discreetly effaced himself behind the advertisement sheet of the *Times*.

'Good heavens, James! what am I to do?'

'What the—what in the world is the matter?' exclaimed the thoroughly alarmed general, as this pathetic appeal issued from his wife's lips. 'Is anything wrong with Frank?'

'He is coming home to-morrow,' was the reply, in a tone which would have boded a Lady Macbeth after the murder of her guest.

Her listener stared at her in blank bewilderment.

'Frank coming to-morrow? Why bless my soul, what has upset you? Don't you want him to come, eh?'

Mrs. Lomer rose from her chair with an air in which resignation and dignity were beautifully blended, and moved slowly towards the door.

'You do not appear to grasp the situation, James,' she said. 'I am thinking of the lady-help.'

And then she swept out of the room, leaving its occupant gazing after her retreating figure with an utterly stupid expression.

Meanwhile the object of these varied emotions was upstairs in her bedroom looking at herself in the glass. It was a charming picture which she saw reflected, but somehow the sight failed to give her entire satisfaction.

'What a trouble it will be,' she murmured to herself as she carefully arranged the little golden-brown curls on her forehead. 'And how will it all end? Being a lady-help is not all cakes and ale, especially when—' and here she gave a faint sigh and turned away from the mirror. Ruth Chester, as her employer had described her, was the daughter of a clergyman with a small income. She was also a recent convert to Catholicism, which latter fact had conduced to render the atmosphere of her father's ivy-covered Rectory rather warmer than was agreeable to her feelings. Hence her present position as Mrs. Lomer's lady-help.

She had no taste for the majority of the other occupations open to her sex. The duties of a governess or a companion were equally abhorrent to her active nature, but she was gifted with the art of arranging dinner tables, and grouping flowers, and, on the whole, the situation of lady-help seemed the one for which she possessed the most capacity.

There were also other reasons.

'I must not stay moaning up here,' she reflected, and at that moment Mrs. Lomer's bell rang in the usual peremptory manner.

'My son is coming to-morrow,' remarked that lady when Ruth answered her summons. 'Will you see that his room is prepared for him? It is the one at the end of the passage looking out on the garden.' And tell Jane to be very careful that the sheets are well dried.'

'Certainly,' replied Ruth.

There was an amused gleam in her hazel eyes, but the rest of her countenance was expressive of nothing more than the respectful decorum of the well-trained domestic.

Her mistress and the situation generally appealed to her sense of humour, but she 'knew her place,' and had acquired the art of concealing the fact.

'What time will he arrive?' she asked.

'He will be here to dinner,' replied Mrs. Lomer. 'And please arrange the table prettily, and I should be glad if you would teach Cook that French entrée you mentioned the other day. My son is rather particular about his dinners.'

'It certainly is a comfort to have someone with an artistic eye for colour, and a knowledge of cooking into the bargain,' reflected Mrs. Lomer, when the lady-help had undertaken everything requested of her and left the room.

'But—I am sorry she is a lady, it makes everything so awkward. There is something about her, too, which I cannot quite make out, and—I do wish she were not quite so good-looking. Frank is so susceptible.'

### PART II.

The following day Frank Lomer, Lieutenant in the Blue Dragoons, made his appearance on the scene, and was more than a little astonished at the coldness of the welcome he received from his mother.

'You seem to get a great deal of leave, Frank,' she remarked, when the family were assembled in the drawing room before dinner.

'Oh, well, I do contrive to screw a decent amount out of the chief,' replied her son.

He was a good-looking young fellow of five or six and twenty, tall, and well groomed, and fully aware of his own personal advantages.

'Have you any objection?' he added.

'Always glad to see you, my boy,' interposed his father hastily.

His wife's countenance was an open book, wherein he could read threatenings of a coming storm.

'Of course we are glad to see you,' said Mrs. Lomer, with a suspicion of iciness in her voice. 'But that is not the point.'

Here, greatly to General Lomer's relief, the announcement of dinner caused a diversion, and in a few minutes the trio were seated at an artistically decorated table. The lady-help, however, was conspicuous by her absence.

'Where is Miss Chester?' inquired Mrs. Lomer, as the housemaid placed the soup tureen before her.

'She is taken very poorly, please, ma'am, and sends her apologies, and hopes you will excuse her this evening.'

A half-astonished, half-relieved expression crossed Mrs. Lomer's features.

'It must have been a very sudden illness,' she observed. 'She was evidently well enough to arrange the flowers.'

'It was very sudden, ma'am. She was taken bad about half an hour ago.'

'Well, see that she has everything she requires,' said Mrs. Lomer.

She was aware that she had secured a treasure in her lady-help, and was fully prepared to treat her with kindness and consideration, but at the same time she was decidedly relieved by the fact of her non-appearance.

'We have set up a new institution since you were here last, Frank,' observed General Lomer, when the servant had taken her final departure.

'What is that?' asked his son, languidly. His usually cheery countenance had become somewhat clouded, and there was a slight frown, born of perplexity, on his broad, sun-tanned forehead.

'A lady-help, my boy, nothing less! and a deuced handsome girl into the bargain. She—'

'I will trouble you for a little pork, James,' interposed his wife, in a tone of warning, whereupon the general, seeing 'breakers ahead,' hastily changed the subject.

Greatly to his mother's relief Frank showed no sign of being at all interested in his father's communication, and when they rose from the table he excused himself, on the plea of a headache, and said he would go and have a quiet smoke in the garden.

'That boy has got something on his mind,' remarked Mrs. Lomer to her husband, when they reached the drawing room.

'I am sure I hope not,' was the alarmed reply. 'That always means money, and I have none to throw away at present.'

'I do not think it is money; I fancy it is worse; it is a woman.'

'Oh, he will get over that,' returned the general, in a jaunty manner. 'I had been in and out of love a dozen times when I was his age.'

'It was not at all to your credit, then,' said his wife, coldly. 'But,' she continued, 'if Frank has got himself entangled with anyone unsuitable it will be a very serious affair. He must marry money.'

'Oh, well, my dear,' said her husband, 'there is no use in worrying yourself until you know for certain whether he is entangled, and,' with a subdued chuckle, 'in any case the entanglement will act as an antidote against the attractions of the lady-help.'

'It is impossible to discuss any sensible subject with you, James,' remarked his wife, in a tone of resignation. And she leaned back in her chair with a sigh and buried herself in the pages of the *Portnightly*.

Mrs. Lomer regarded herself and her surroundings from a literal and highly serious point of view. She was, moreover, one of those women who conceal a warm heart and various other excellent qualities under a cold, unprepossessing exterior and a somewhat sarcastic tongue. The mask of reserve, which she wore perpetually, had become moulded to her features so that it was almost impossible to raise it, and consequently the people who knew her and valued her at her real worth could be counted on the fingers of one hand. And her own son was not amongst that number.

From the days of his curly-headed boyhood he had stood in awe of his impervious, dignified mother, whose smiles were so rare, and