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# ALMOST

By LADY FRANCIS CECIL

QUITE contrary to her usual custom Miss Phoebe de Lisle returned to her house in Park-lane exactly at the hour she had said she would do, namely, 4.30 p.m.

Those few of her acquaintance who were not also her friends were wont to say Phoebe's lack of punctuality constituted a grave defect, whilst the rest averred it was the necessary drawback to show she was but human, as otherwise she would have been too perfect to live—but without fully agreeing with either side, I must confess that her precision this June afternoon was rare.

She stepped out of her Landaulette rather hurriedly—but, once in the hall, dawdled about in a somewhat aimless fashion—picked up a letter or two from the slab—fidgetted with some of the cards left during the afternoon, half before a sentence, stopped, met the expectant gaze of the butler respectfully fixed on her and, finally, said very quickly, and in one breath, "If Colonel Everard comes to tea, say I am not at home—" and passed up the staircase.

Now for the last hour—or to be quite accurate, for the last hour and thirty-five minutes, she had been revolving in her mind some form of words which would convey her wish that if Colonel Everard called, other visitors were to be denied, but when it came to the point all courage forsook her—the pre-arranged phrase dropped from her mind, and she blurted out the above infelicitous order, which Simmonds in due course transmitted to the footman, in a slightly accentuated form. "Miss de Lisle is not at home if Colonel Everard comes at tea-time, so don't you forget it, Alfred."

Half an hour later, in sublime ignorance of the juggling of fate downstairs, Phoebe de Lisle stood in her cool, pretty drawing-room taking an anxious look round to see that everything was at its best. The sunlight filtered softly through the window awnings on the rose coloured and sea green, and bell-tropes cushions, on the countless silver knick-knacks which glistened on table and overmantel, on great masses of mignonette in shallow bowls, of old Savona pottery, on quaint bits of embroidery, on velvet bound editions de luxe, on rare Bartolozzi prints, on priceless water-colour drawings, on the tea equipage of delicate Salopian china and antique silver, the china teapot ready beside the bubbling kettle, for she invariably made her own tea, and lastly, among many other things on a slender Venetian goblet, in which stood four or five velvety "General Jacqueminot" roses, their stems lightly joined by a knot of ribbon, from which hung a slip of paper, on which was written "from C.E. in remembrance."

Upon all these things, touched by the sunlight, and upon innumerable others, equally beautiful, which lay in the cool shadows, did Phoebe de Lisle look, and behold it was all very good, bespeaking wealth and "cultured ease," and artistic perceptions. "Better if she go abider!" The phrase, as a question, passed through her mind, and she coloured up all over her delicate face, and touched the roses with her finger tips. After a glance at the clock, she walked deliberately up to the only mirror the room possessed, a long narrow strip of looking glass between two of the windows reaching from ceiling to floor, and took a quiet survey of herself. The reflection was that of a tall and gracious woman, and if her cheeks had lost the perfect rosette tint of youth, if the rippling masses of

golden brown hair lacked some of the vigour and sheen of bygone days, yet her steadfast grey eyes shone from beneath their dark straight brows as clearly, and as truthfully as before, her mouth, rather large, with a well-defined Cupid's bow, had kept its own sweet strong curve, and the delicate contour of her oval face was unchanged. A few lines certainly marked her forehead, accentuated the firm set of her lips, but these finger prints of Time showed only the deepening of character, and were but the emphasis of the unavoidable troubles and cares of the passing years. Young? No—she didn't look young. She looked her age, thirty and two years, but she also looked what she was, a true and perfect English gentlewoman.

That would have been Christopher Everard's verdict and yours, and mine, but Phoebe only saw a woman, past her youth, but not past her feelings, a hesitating, almost timid woman, longing for the happiness which appeared to be within her reach, yet fearing to stretch out her hand to grasp it.

She shook her head slowly, then as the little clock on the mantelboard tinkled out five o'clock, in lingering, deliberate chimes, she crossed over to the tea table, and the bright colour dyed her cheeks as almost at the same instant the thrill of the electric bell purred up from the hall. Christopher was not only a soldier, and therefore presumably bound to be punctual, but Christopher was Christopher, and would come at the time he had appointed.

Fifteen years, fifteen solid years since that golden summer-time when he was on six months leave home from India, a lad of three and twenty. They had loved each other then, why was no word spoken? No special reason, just the trend of circumstances. The summer waned and the boy returned to his regiment, and the girl "came out," and life looked different to both from what it did in the green lanes of Gloucestershire, and though they wrote to each other, the letters got fewer and fewer until they ceased altogether, the cares and pleasures of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches intervened. Christopher pursued his stern mistress Duty under the Eastern skies till she changed her name to Fame. Phoebe "smiled and smiled and did not sigh," and rejected suitor after suitor, till now he was a bronzed, grey-haired Colonel, with V.C. and many another initial after his name, and she was the passee wealthy woman, owner of houses and lauds, and chaperoning a pretty young niece this season, who now having met her old lover at a Foreign Office party a week ago, stood waiting for him to come to her. The spray of roses "in remembrance" telling her very well for what. Ah, me, those Jacqueminot roses—how well she recollected the way they wreathed the side door opening on the terrace at Count-thorpe, the place where "good-bye" had been said—and how their musky mellow sun-warmed fragrance had filled the air. Roses and sunshine—could they indeed be for her?

Complete silence followed the purring thrill of the bell, surely her men-servants had never before been so long in ushering up a visitor. Another purr-r-r, actually Christopher had been obliged to ring twice. At last the door opened, and as she turned towards it, half advancing, half hesitatingly shrinking back, she heard, as in a dream, Alfred's voice announcing "Lady Horsham," and

straightway fell into the embrace of a volubrious, voluble, extremely deaf old lady, who forthwith encouraged herself by the table, and poured forth a flood of questions at the top of her voice.

Mechanically Phoebe made and poured out the tea, answering at random whenever she could get in a word—it was, perhaps, fortunate that Lady Horsham was deaf, selfish, and inattentive, keeping her ears strained for the sound of the bell. Presently it thrilled, purr-r-r-r, why was he so late? What would Lady Horsham say? And when would she go? Again Alfred's voice, this time announcing "Mrs and Miss Carmichael." What had happened? It was impossible to ask, all she could do was to greet her unwelcome guests, and resign herself to making the best of matters. No use trying to listen for the electric thrillings now. Mrs Carmichael screaming at Lady Horsham, and Lady Horsham yelling at Mrs Carmichael would have drowned the passing of a fire engine. More friends dropped in. An old uncle, a young cousin, five or six people were in the room, and Phoebe fervently regretted she had arranged for Elsie Dormer to be conveniently absent. By the time the cups had been twice emptied, the scones and iced fruit done ample justice to, the last new play glanced at, the last "on dit" discussed, and Phoebe was alone again, the little clock had chimed half-past six.

How hot the room was, how tired she felt. What had possessed her to give Simmonds that message? Christopher had not come, how humiliated, how humbled to the dust, what, in short, what a fool she felt. It's all very well to shake your head at the gracious reflection of yourself in a mirror, to play with your heart, and to wonder whether you will say "Yes," and to pretend your suitor cannot care for an old maid, but it's quite "une autre paire de bottes" when the said suitor does not keep his tryst, and you find yourself in the memorable predicament of Miss Baxter who "refused a man before he asked her."

Wearily she laid her head against the frame of one of the open windows, little puffs of warm summer air played through her hair, and the cooing of the wood pigeons in the park floated in, in recurrent monotony. A great longing for silence, for coolness and peace, and the deep woods of her beloved Count-thorpe, where "the gardens and the gallant walks stand dressed in living green" came upon her. She would leave London, and love, and Christopher, and go back to her home and learn sense; as for going out to the Speaker's party to-night, such a thing was out of the question, for Christopher would be there. So far had she got in her melancholy reverie when Elsie came quickly into the room—a vision of youth and brilliance and happiness, and gave her a kiss and a loving hug.

"Oh, Aunt Phoebe," she cried, "he will be at the Speaker's to-night—and—and he said he wanted to have a talk with me, on the Terrace, if he might." And Phoebe knew she had to pick up her load again, however much it might hurt her shoulders, and take this radiant young creature to meet the "he" of her heart—Lord Garstang—who was only waiting for the opportunity to propose.

"You look very done, old girl," quoth Elsie when, after twenty minutes' harping on "he," she had a thought to spare for any other subject. "Just you lie back in that chair, and nap till dressing time, whilst I enter the cards—that'll keep me quiet."

She settled Phoebe in a deep chair with a pile of cushions, and proceeded to fetch the cards, which had been left during the afternoon, and to enter them in the calling book, with a running commentary on each in an undertone.

"Marquis and Marchioness of Brown-mout—with an At Home for Thursday—that's all right. Miss Jocelyn—tabby,—glad we missed you. Um—um—Captain Dunn—let me see. Vicomte de Herst—dear, how tiresome."

Phoebe heard it all, like water tinkling a long way off.

"Mrs. Cockrane—Mrs. Brett—Lord and Lady Savanage. Oh, Captain Cockrane—how stupid of people not to keep their cards together—perhaps it was Simmonds. Sir Arthur and Lady Radcliffe—Colonel Everard—?" Elsie's voice didn't sound far away now, it was more like a trumpet singing in Phoebe's ears.

"Colonel Everard," she exclaimed incredulously, struggling out of the deep chair and feeling abnormally wide awake—"Colonel Everard?"

Elsie held up a card in confirmation, and Phoebe rang the bell with some energy, and demanded of the footman at what time Colonel Everard had called, and why he had not been shown up. Alfred looked respectfully aggrieved.

"Colonel Everard called at five prompt, Miss," he replied, "just before Lady Horsham. Mr. Simmonds, he said I wasn't to forget, if Colonel Everard came to tea, you were not at home, and so I told him."

"That will do—it's all right, thank you, Alfred," said Phoebe in a very subdued voice. "Elsie, dear, do go and get dressed—I'll finish the cards." But her niece once out of the room, Phoebe swept all the cards—except one—into an ignominious heap in a china tray, and stood by the writing table a prey to sundry and diverse thoughts. Gone was the headache, gone the longing for Count-thorpe, gone the "O for the wings of a dove" feeling, for had not Christopher come after all, as he had said he would? Wounded pride, slighted affection, mortified vanity, vanished as a watch in the night. "Bad dreams depart and phantoms fly"—but then—in vulgar

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