

***LANOE
FALCONER***



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DE NOËL***

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Cecilia de Noël

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CHAPTER I

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ATHERLEY'S GOSPEL

"There is no revelation but that of science," said Atherley.

It was after dinner in the drawing-room. From the cold of the early spring night, closed shutters and drawn curtains carefully protected us; shaded lamps and a wood fire diffused an exquisite twilight; we breathed a mild and even balmy atmosphere scented with hothouse flowers.

"And this revelation completely satisfies all reasonable desires," he continued, surveying his small audience from the hearthrug where he stood; "mind, I say all reasonable desires. If you have a healthy appetite for bread, you will get it and plenty of it, but if you have a sickly craving for manna, why then you will come badly off, that is all. This is the gospel of fact, not of fancy: of things as they actually are, you know, instead of as A dreamt they were, or B decided they ought to be, or C would like to have them. So this gospel is apt to look a little dull beside the highly coloured romances the churches have accustomed us to—as a modern plate-glass window might, compared with a stained-glass oriel in a mediæval cathedral. There is no doubt which is the prettier of the two. The question is, do you want pretty colour or do you want clear daylight?" He paused, but neither of his listeners spoke. Lady Atherley was counting the stitches of her knitting; I was too tired; so he resumed: "For my part, I prefer the daylight and the glass, without any daubing. What does science discover in the

universe? Precision, accuracy, reliability—any amount of it; but as to pity, mercy, love! The fact is, that famous simile of the angel playing at chess was a mistake. Very smart, I grant you, but altogether misleading. Why! the orthodox quote it as much as the others—always a bad sign. It tickles these anthropomorphic fancies, which are at the bottom of all their creeds. Imagine yourself playing at chess, not with an angel, but with an automaton, an admirably constructed automaton whose mechanism can outwit your brains any day: calm and strong, if you like, but no more playing for love than the clock behind me is ticking for love; there you have a much clearer notion of existence. A much clearer notion, and a much more satisfactory notion too, I say. Fair play and no favour! What more can you ask, if you are fit to live?"

His kindling glance sought the farther end of the long drawing-room; had it fallen upon me instead, perhaps that last challenge might have been less assured; and yet how bravely it became the speaker, whose wide-browed head a no less admirable frame supported. Even the stiff evening uniform of his class could not conceal the grace of form which health and activity had moulded, working through highly favoured generations. There was latent force implied in every line of it, and, in the steady poise of look and mien, that perfect nervous balance which is the crown of strength.

"And with our creed, of course, we shift our moral code as well. The ten commandments, or at least the second table, we retain for obvious reasons, but the theological virtues must be got rid of as quickly as possible. Charity, for instance, is a mischievous quality—it is too indulgent to

weakness, which is not to be indulged or encouraged, but stamped out. Hope is another pernicious quality leading to all kinds of preposterous expectations which never are, or can be, fulfilled; and as to faith, it is simply a vice. So far from taking anything on trust, you must refuse to accept any statement whatsoever till it is proved so plainly you can't help believing it whether you like it or not; just as a theorem in—"

"George," said Lady Atherley, "what is that noise?"

The question, timed as Lady Atherley's remarks so often were, came with something of a shock. Her husband, thus checked in full flight, seemed to reel for a moment, but quickly recovering himself, asked resignedly: "What noise?"

"Such a strange noise, like the howling of a dog."

"Probably it is the howling of a dog."

"No, for it came from inside the house, and Tip sleeps outside now, in the saddle-room, I believe. It sounded in the servants' wing. Did you hear it, Mr. Lyndsay?"

I confessed that I had not.

"Well, as I can offer no explanation," said Atherley, "perhaps I may be allowed to go on with what I was saying. Doubt, obstinate and almost invincible doubt, is the virtue we must now cultivate, just as—"

"Why, there it is again," cried Lady Atherley.

Atherley instantly rang the bell near him, and while Lady Atherley continued to repeat that it was very strange, and that she could not imagine what it could be, he waited silently till his summons was answered by a footman.

"Charles, what is the meaning of that crying or howling which seems to come from your end of the house?"

"I think, Sir George," said Charles, with the coldly impassive manner of a highly-trained servant—"I think, Sir George, it must be Ann, the kitchen-maid, that you hear."

"Indeed! and may I ask what Ann, the kitchen-maid, is supposed to be doing?"

"If you please, Sir George, she is in hysterics."

"Oh! why?" exclaimed Lady Atherley plaintively.

"Because, my lady, Mrs. Mallet has seen the ghost!"

"Because Mrs. Mallet has seen the ghost!" repeated Atherley. "Pray, what is Mrs. Mallet herself doing under the circumstances?"

"She is having some brandy-and-water, Sir George."

"Mrs. Mallet is a sensible woman," said Atherley heartily; "Ann, the kitchen-maid, had better follow her example."

"You may go, Charles," said Lady Atherley; and, as the door closed behind him, exclaimed, "I wish that horrid woman had never entered the house!"

"What horrid woman? Your too sympathetic kitchen-maid?"

"No, that—that Mrs. Mallet."

"Why are you angry with her? Because she has seen the ghost?"

"Yes, for I told her most particularly the very day I engaged her, after Mrs. Webb left us in that sudden way—I told her I never allowed the ghost to be mentioned."

"And why, my dear, did you break your own excellent rule by mentioning it to her?"

"Because she had the impertinence to tell me, almost directly she came into the morning-room, that she knew all about the ghost; but I stopped her at once, and said that if

ever she spoke of such a thing especially to the other servants, I should be very much displeased; and now she goes and behaves in this way."

"Where did you pick up this viper?"

"She comes from Quarley Beacon. There was no one in this stupid village who could cook at all, and Cecilia de Noël, who recommended her—"

"Cecilia de Noël!" repeated Atherley, with that long-drawn emphasis which suggests so much. "My dear Jane, I must say that in taking a servant on Cissy's recommendation you did not display your usual sound common sense. I should as soon have thought of asking her to buy me a gun, knowing that she would carefully pick out the one least likely to shoot anything. Cissy is accustomed to look upon a servant as something to be waited on and taken care of. Her own household, as we all know, is composed chiefly of chronic invalids."

"But I explained to Cecilia that I wanted somebody who was strong as well as a good cook; and I am sure there is nothing the matter with Mrs. Mallet. She is as fat as possible, and as red! Besides, she has never been one of Cecilia's servants; she only goes there to help sometimes; and she says she is perfectly respectable."

"Mrs. Mallet says that Cissy is perfectly respectable?"

"No, George; it is not likely that I should allow a person in Mrs. Mallet's position to speak disrespectfully to me about Cecilia. Cecilia said Mrs. Mallet was perfectly respectable."

"I should not think dear old Ciss exactly knew the meaning of the word."

"Cecilia may be peculiar in many ways, but she is too much of a lady to send me any one who was not quite nice. I don't believe there is anything against Mrs. Mallet's character. She cooks very well, you must allow that; you said only two days ago you never had tasted an omelette so nicely made in England."

"Did she cook that omelette? Then I am sure she is perfectly respectable; and pray let her see as many ghosts as she cares to, especially if it leads to nothing worse than her taking a moderate quantity of brandy. Time to smoke, Lindy. I am off."

I dragged myself up after my usual fashion, and was preparing to follow him, when Lady Atherley, directly he was gone, began:

"It is such a pity that clever people can never see things as others do. George always goes on in this way as if the ghost were of no consequence, but I always knew how it would be. Of course it is nice that George should come in for the place, as he might not have done if his uncle had married, and people said it would be delightful to live in such an old house, but there are a good many drawbacks, I can assure you. Sir Marmaduke lived abroad for years before he died, and everything has got into such a state. We have had to nearly refurnish the house; the bedrooms are not done yet. The servants' accommodation is very bad too, and there was no proper cooking-range in the kitchen. But the worst of all is the ghost. Directly I heard of it I knew we should have trouble with the servants; and we had not been here a month when our cook, who had lived with us for years, gave warning because the place was damp. At first

she said it was the ghost, but when I told her not to talk such nonsense she said it was the damp. And then it is so awkward about visitors. What are we to do when the fishing season begins? I cannot get George to understand that some people have a great objection to anything of the kind, and are quite angry if you put them into a haunted room. And it is much worse than having only one haunted room, because we could make that into a bachelor's bedroom—I don't think they mind; or a linen cupboard, as they do at Wimbourne Castle; but this ghost seems to appear in all the rooms, and even in the halls and passages, so I cannot think what we are to do."

I said it was extraordinary, and I meant it. That a ghost should venture into Atherley's neighbourhood was less amazing than that it should continue to exist in his wife's presence, so much more fatal than his eloquence to all but the tangible and the solid. Her orthodoxy is above suspicion, but after some hours of her society I am unable to contemplate any aspects of life save the comfortable and the uncomfortable: while the Universe itself appears to me only a gigantic apparatus especially designed to provide Lady Atherley and her class with cans of hot water at stated intervals, costly repasts elaborately served, and all other requisites of irreproachable civilisation.

But before I had time to say more, Atherley in his smoking-coat looked in to see if I was coming or not.

"Don't keep Mr. Lyndsay up late, George," said my kind hostess; "he looks so tired."

"You look dead beat," he said later on, in his own particular and untidy den, as he carefully stuffed the bowl of

his pipe. "I think it would go better with you, old chap, if you did not hold yourself in quite so tight. I don't want you to rave or commit suicide in some untidy fashion, as the hero of a French novel does; but you are as well-behaved as a woman, without a woman's grand resources of hysterics and general unreasonableness all round. You always were a little too good for human nature's daily food. Your notions on some points are quite unwholesomely superfine. It would be a comfort to see you let out in some way. I wish you would have a real good fling for once."

"I should have to pay too dear for it afterwards. My superfine habits are not a matter of choice only, you must remember."

"Oh!—the women! Not the best of them is worth bothering about, let alone a shameless jilt."

"You were always hard upon her, George. She jilted a cripple for a very fine specimen of the race. Some of your favourite physiologists would say she was quite right."

"You never understood her, Lindy. It was not a case of jilting a cripple at all. She jilted three thousand a year and a small place for ten thousand a year and a big one."

After all, it did hurt a little, which Atherley must have divined, for crossing the room on some pretext or another he let his strong hand rest, just for an instant, gently upon my shoulder, thus, after the manner of his race, mutely and concisely expressing affection and sympathy that might have swelled a canto.

"I shall be sorry," he said presently, lying rather than sitting in the deep chair beside the fire, "very sorry, if the ghost is going to make itself a nuisance."