# Borrowed feathers

Ruth Lamb

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*Ruth Lamb*

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# BORROWED FEATHERS.

BY

## RUTH LAMB

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## CONTENTS.

## CHAPTER.

I.

II.

III.

## BORROWED FEATHERS.

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# CHAPTER I.

"THAT dreadful bell again, and I am almost certain I heard wheels on the gravel! If it should be one of mamma's grandee friends, and only Cinderella to answer the door! I have a great mind to let the individual ring on until he or she is tired. To-morrow I will have all the front blinds down until evening, then no one will think there is anybody at home. And," added the speaker, "as, socially speaking, I am nobody, they will be right."

Annette Clifford was talking to herself. She had two good reasons for doing it, the first being that she had nobody else to talk to at the time. The second, that being a bright lively girl possessed of great intelligence, overflowing spirits, and a gregarious temperament, she found it difficult to hold her tongue for hours together. During most of the day she was all but alone in a large house, its only other inmate being a make-shift servant, who, in addition to general incapacity, was so deaf as to render any attempt at conversation laborious.

Whilst Annette thus communed with herself, she was also moving swiftly and noiselessly towards a window whence she could command a view of the person who was demanding admittance at the hall door.

There was a vehicle standing opposite to it, but it was a humble cab instead of the dreaded carriage. There was luggage on the top, and the driver was in the act of ringing the door bell a second time.

"Mamma and Laura, come back before their month is over," was Annette's first thought, but the sight of a lady's face which belonged to neither of the relatives named sent the girl flying to the entrance

with all possible speed.

Rushing past the cabman, and opening the door of the vehicle, she had her arms round the neck of the solitary passenger in a moment.

"Aunty," exclaimed the girl. "Is it really you? It seems quite too good to be true that you are actually here, and with boxes which indicate a possible stay."

The new arrival smiled at Annette's vehemence, and returned her embrace in the most affectionate manner.

"My stay depends upon yourself, dear child," she replied. "I know you are in sole charge at present, and, from a whisper which reached me, I am inclined to think that your domestic staff is below the average."

"Domestic staff! Why, aunty, I have neither staff nor crutch. Nothing but a broken reed, on which I cannot lean for a single instant. Nevertheless, 'I' am here, and I have a couple of fairly capable hands, the work of which shall be devoted to insuring your comfort, whatever else may be left undone."

Then turning to the cabman, Annette said, "Please get down the boxes and bring them inside the hall."

The man obeyed, and then the girl seized some of the smaller matters which were inside the vehicle, and saying, "Do come in, aunty, and let me carry the rest," she tripped lightly into the house with her burden, and soon returned for what remained.

"I suppose you will not want the larger things upstairs just yet, shall you?" she asked. "This old man is not strong enough to carry them to

your bedroom unassisted, but when the boys come home, the boxes will be whisked upstairs in a few seconds. Will you rest for a few minutes, or go straight to your room? It is quite ready, though it would be difficult for me to say what possessed me to see that it was kept so, from day to day."

"I shall not want my boxes at present, dear; and I would rather go straight to my room," replied Mrs. Worsley, the lady whom Annette called "aunty," though she was no relation to the girl, only her godmother. "But where is the 'reed' aforesaid? Surely she could carry up my dressing bag, and the odds and ends with which you are overloading yourself."

"The 'reed,' 'Sarah Jane,' by names—and she insists on being called by both—is at this moment engaged in what she calls 'cleaning herself.' The operation occupies most of each afternoon, and is unsatisfactory as regards results. She goes upstairs with honest black patches about her face, garments, and person generally. She comes down with an appearance of profuse dinginess, which gives you the idea that the black patches have been diluted by the application of water, and thus diffused over a larger surface. Sarah Jane objects to soap, aunty—on her face, I mean—as calculated to injure her complexion. The 'cleaning' process of which she talks so much is, I think, done in chapters, and ought to be continued."

The girl laughed merrily as she deposited her load in the bedroom. Then she brought hot water, undid straps, and paid the welcome guest all the little attentions which thoughtful love could suggest.

"Thank you, darling," said Mrs. Worsley. "You take care that I shall not be conscious of any lack of servants." And drawing the girl's

glowing face to her own, she kissed it again and again.

Annette allowed her head to rest on her friend's breast for a few moments. "It is very sweet to be petted now and then," she said, "but I must not stay long now; that would be too selfish. Shall we have our afternoon tea in the drawing-room or the den?"

"The den, by all means, dear; I will be down in a quarter of an hour," replied Mrs. Worsley.

After glancing round, to convince herself that she had done all in her power for the guest's comfort, Annette went downstairs and removed the pretty tea equipage from the state room to the smaller one, which the younger members of the family usually occupied. Knowing that no dependence was to be placed on Sarah Jane, Annette had taken care to have everything ready for afternoon tea in case of callers, and a very few minutes sufficed to arrange a tempting little meal for the tired traveller. Cake and bread and butter were already on the table; to these Annette added two or three daintily cut sandwiches, a couple of peaches, and some cream.

The tea-table stood within a large bay window, one side of which was open, and let in the sweet summer air, laden with the scent of roses. A few flowers were in tiny vases up and down, just a bloom or two amid a mass of variegated ivy leaves, like jewels in a setting of plain gold. The tea equipage was pretty—a harlequin set made up from a collection of fine old china. The kettle in which the water was boiling over a spirit lamp was of massive silver, exquisitely chased, and everything prepared for the visitor's entertainment suggested refinement and loving thoughtfulness.

Yet the room and its furniture were emphatically shabby. Each article

had been good and handsome in its day, but the day was many a year back. Even the fine engravings on the walls were in this room because the frames had become too hopelessly dingy to permit of their remaining in what Annette called the state apartments.

As Mrs. Worsley entered the den, she was first struck with its general air of dilapidation, then charmed with the pretty picture presented by that one little nook which held the tea equipage and Annette.

The girl's face was all aglow with happy anticipation, and she exclaimed, "Come, aunty, dear, the tea is just in perfection, and I hope you feel ready for it. Here are some sandwiches, which will perhaps sustain nature until—I had nearly said dinner-time, but I must own the truth. Having no cook, we have no formal dinners. The boys get a substantial lunch in the middle of the day; I have something here, and at seven we have a sort of mongrel meal, which combines dinner, tea, and supper."

"I could wish nothing better than what you have prepared for me, Nettie," said Mrs. Worsley. "Why, my dear, this is a meal for a princess. How have you arranged and prepared all so quickly?"

"The tea-things were in the drawing-room, and the water had boiled once, and only required a renewed blaze to make it boil again. I have to exercise a little diplomacy seeing that I am at the head of domestic affairs, but with nobody to obey orders."

"Not even the 'reed,' my dear?" asked Mrs. Worsley.

"Not even Sarah Jane, aunty. She hears, sometimes, in spite of her deafness, but never obeys. And when she finds it inconvenient to hear, her natural infirmity increases fourfold. There is always a

possibility of callers, in spite of mamma's absence, and I must be prepared to entertain them thus far—" with a wave of the hand to indicate the tea equipage. "Well, Sarah Jane and I are agreed on one subject, namely that she is unpresentable to any caller of higher degree than the butcher's boy. Should there be a ring at the hall door, Sarah Jane's tousled head is pushed in at this, and she says,—

"'Please, miss, there's that door again, and I'm not fit to be seen.'

"I assent, for the fact is self-evident, and I answer the door myself, trying the while to look as if I had been accidentally crossing the hall, and recognised a friend in the applicant for admission. During the afternoon, matters are easily managed. The tea-things are in the drawing-room, the bread and butter cut and covered with a second plate, so that it may not get dry, and so placed that I can whisk away the upper plate unperceived. I do it so cleverly, aunty, that the operation is like a conjuring trick. Then I lie in wait, sometimes indoors, at others in the garden, the hall door being kept hospitably open. And if people come, I meet them quite naturally, bring them in for rest and tea, then stroll with them to the entrance if they are driving, to the gate itself if they are pedestrians. I had only to bring the tea-things from the other room to this, you see, aunty."

"And to cut the sandwiches, and gather the peaches, for I presume these are not generally found on the tea-table. Well, my dear, you see how thoroughly I appreciate these additions. I never felt more grateful for a meal, or enjoyed one more than I am doing this. Now tell me how it is I find you alone?"

"Mamma and Laura are at Scarborough, and the boys do not reach home until nearly six. They still attend the Grammar School, and they

have a long walk home after the work is done."

"True, dear, but the servants—where are they? Your mamma keeps three usually, does she not?"

"Two and a half. We have really only two efficient servants, and a girl who does the most disagreeable items of household work, and waits upon and is scolded by the other two," replied Annette, promptly.

"Where are the efficients?" asked Mrs. Worsley.

"Bolton, the housemaid-waitress, is at Scarborough with mamma and Laura, promoted for a full month to the dignity of ladies' maid."

Mrs. Worsley looked perplexed.

"I do not understand," she said. "I thought you told me in a letter that Mrs. Clifford and your sister were staying at the principal hotel."

"They are. Mamma said that Scarborough lodgings in the only part that she could possibly elect to stay in were extremely expensive, and that, by arranging to remain the whole time at the hotel, she would be able to make favourable terms. That, in fact, the cost of staying there would not be much greater than in private rooms, to say nothing of the isolation of lodgings and housekeeping worries which would be avoided."

"Then is Bolton at the hotel too?"

"Of course, aunty. She would be useless anywhere else," said Nettie.

"But Mrs. Clifford and Laura have no maid when at home! It seems so strange to take one for a month to an expensive hotel, when—"

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