

# The One Left

by Edward Lucas, 1868-1938

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## I

HE had become very ill—could hardly move from where he lay; and she, who loved him, and was to have married him, and spent all her waking hours in thinking what she could do for him, persuaded him to have a telephone installed and brought to his bedside so that he and she could talk, and he could talk with others, too. Every night he rang her up and they had a long conversation; many times in the day also. Nothing, as it happened, could have saved his life, but this modern device lightened his last weeks.

His death, although it blasted her hopes, made no difference to her devotion. She merely installed his memory in the place of his rich personality and loved that. He, almost more than ever, was her standard. What he would have liked, she

did; what he would have disliked, she left undone. Although dead, he swayed her utterly, and under his dominion she was equable and gentle, although broken at heart. She took all things as they came, since how could anything matter now that everything that mattered was over?

One perplexity only had power to trouble her, and that was the wonder, the amazement, the horror, not only that so much knowledge and kindness and sympathy and all that made for the world's good and happiness should be so wantonly extinguished; but that no touch of the vanished hand should be permitted to the one soul (now left behind) with whom his soul had been fused. This she could neither understand nor forgive. Religious she had never been in the ordinary sense, although such religion as must sway a true idealistic lover was hers; but now she broke even from such slender ties as had held her to orthodoxy. She threw off the creed of her parents as naturally and simply as if it were a borrowed garment, and sank into her sorrow, which was also her joy, without another thought of here or hereafter.

So it went on for a year or so, during which time his house had remained empty, save for a caretaker—for she (who was rich) could not bear that any one else should live there—and his room exactly as he had died in it.

## II

One evening she dined out. Her next neighbor on one side was a young American engineer, and in their conversation they came in time to the topic of invention and the curious aptitude for inventiveness shown by the American race. It was a case, said the engineer, of supply following demand; all Americans required time—and labor-saving appliances, and they obtained them. Where servants abounded and there was no servant problem, as in England and on the Continent, the need for such contrivances was not acute. And so on. The conversation thus begun reached at last specific inventions, and the engineer told of a remarkable one which had come under his notice just before he left New York.

„You will probably not believe me,” he said; „the thing sounds incredible; but then who would have believed once that there could be a telegraph, and still less a telephone? Who would have believed that the camera would ever be anything but a dream? I will tell you what this is. It is a machine in which you insert a portion, no matter how small, of a telephone wire, and by turning a handle you compel this piece of wire to give back every message that has ever passed over it.“

She held her heart. „This really exists?” she forced herself to ask.

„Actually,” said the engineer. „But when I left home the inventor was in a difficulty. All the messages were coming out all right, but backwards. Naturally the reproduction would be from the most recent to the less recent. By writing down the words and then reversing them the investigator could of course get at what he was wanting—I may say that the invention is for the New York police—but my friend is convinced that he can devise some mechanical system of reversing at the time which will make the messages read forward as they should. Just think of the excitement of the detective, listening through all the voices and ordinary

conversations on the wire for the one voice and the one sentence that will give him his long desired clue!—But are you ill?“

„No, no,” she said, although her face was a ghastly white, „no, it is nothing. The room is a little hot. Tell me some more about your inventive friend. Is he wealthy?“

„Indeed, no,” said the engineer. „That is his trouble. If he had more money, or if he had some rich backers who believed in him, he might do wonders.“

„I should like to help him,” she said. „This kind of work interests me. Could you not cable him to come over and bring the thing with him? I would gladly finance him. I want some sporting outlet like that for my money.“

„Cable?“

„Yes, cable. There are things that one does by impulse or not at all. The butler here will get you a form.“

### III

She had been to the empty house that day with an employee of the telephone company, and they had extracted a foot of the precious wire. A few minutes ago she had held it in her trembling fingers and placed it in the machine. Now she carefully locked the door and drew the heavy curtain over it and carried the machine to the farthest corner of the room. There, with a sigh of relief and tense and almost terrible anticipation, she sat down and placed her ear to the receiver and began to turn the handle.

His voice sounded at once: „Are you there?“ It was quite clear, so clear and unmistakable and actual that her hand paused on the handle and she bowed her throbbing head. She turned on; „Are you there?“ the familiar tones repeated. And then the reply, „Yes, who is it?“ in a woman’s voice. Then he spoke again: „Ernest,“ he said. „Is it Helen?“ Again her hand paused. Helen—that rubbishy little woman he had known all his life and was on such good terms with. She remembered now, that she had been away when the telephone was installed and others had talked on it before her. It could not be helped: she had meant to be the first, but circumstances prevented. There must be many conversations before she came to her own; she would have to listen to them all. She turned on, and the laughing, chaffing conversation with this foolish little Helen person repeated itself out of the past now so tragic.

To other talks with other friends, and now and then with a tradesman, she had to listen; but at last came her hour.

„Is that you?“ she heard her own voice saying, knowing it was her own rather by instinct than by hearing. „Is that you? But I know it is. How distinctly you speak!“

„Yes, it’s me“—and his soft vibrant laugh.

„How are you, dear?“

„Better, I hope.“

„Have you missed me?“

„Missed you!“

And then the endearments, the confidences, the hopes and fears, the plans for the morrow, the plans for all life. As she listened, the tears ran down her face, but

still she turned on and on. Sometimes he was so hopeful and bright, and again so despairing.

She remembered the occasion of every word. Once she had dined out and had gone to the theatre. It was an engagement she could not well refuse. It was an amusing play and she was in good spirits. She rang him up between the acts and found him depressed. Hurrying home she had settled down to talk to him at her ease. How it all came back to her now!

„Are you there, my dearest?“

„Yes, but oh, so tired, so old!“

„It is a bad day. Every one has been complaining of tiredness to-day.“

„You say that because you are kind. Just to comfort me. It's no use. I can see so clearly, sometimes, I shall never get well—to-night I know it.“

„My darling, no.“

And then silence—complete, terrifying.

She had rung up without effect. He had fainted, she thought, and had dropped the receiver. She was in a fever of agony. She leaped into a cab and drove to his house. The nurse reassured her; he had begun to sob and did not want her to know it, and now he was asleep.

But there was no sleep for her that night. What if he were right—if he really knew? In her heart she feared that he did; with the rest of her she fought that fear.

As she listened, the tears ran down her face, but still she turned on and on. She sat there for hours before the last words came, the last he was ever to speak over the wire.

It was to make an engagement. He had rallied wonderfully at the end and was confident of recovery. She was to bring her modiste to his room at eleven o'clock the next morning with her patterns, that he might help in choosing her new dress. He had insisted on it—the dress she was to wear on his first outing.

„At eleven,“ he had said. „Mind you don't forget. But then you never forget anything. Good-night once more, my sweet.“

„Good-night.“

She had never seen him again alive. He died before the morning.

She put the machine away and looked out of the window. The sun had risen. The sky was on fire with the promise of a beautiful day. Worn out, she fell asleep; to wake—to what? To such awakening as there is for those who never forget anything.

## IV

Every night found her bending over the machine. She had learned now when not to listen. She had timed the reproduction absolutely, and watch in hand she waited until the other messages were done, and her own voice began. There was no condensing possible; one must either each time have every conversation or stop it. But how could she stop it before the end?

Locking the door and drawing the heavy curtain, she would sit down in the far corner and begin to turn. She knew just how fast to turn for others; so slowly for herself. When the watch gave her the signal she would begin to listen.

„Is that you? Is that you? But I know it is. How distinctly you speak!“

„Yes, it's me,“—and the soft vibrant laugh.

„How are you, dear?“

„Better, I hope.“

„Have you missed me?“

„Missed you!“

