

The Expected Guest

By R. H. Benson

As day after day went by and the old man seemed no worse, I began to have hopes that he might recover, but the doctor discouraged me.

“At the best,” he said, “he may just linger on. But I do not think the end is far off. You must remember he is an old man.” And so at last the end came.

During these days, since Parker was of course too much occupied with his master, a boy waited on me. On the last evening, as the boy came in for the second time at dinner, he looked white and frightened.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We don’t like it, sir, in the servants’ hall. Two children ran in just now and said they had seen something, and we are all upset, sir. The maids are crying.”

“What was it the children thought they saw?” I asked. The boy hesitated.

“Tell me,” I repeated.

The boy put down the dish he held and came closer to me.

“They say they saw the master himself, sir, on the front lawn, at the gate.”

“Where were the children?” I asked.

“Passing round from the house, sir, in front, under the chestnut. They had been sent by the Rector to inquire.”

I got up from the table.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“In the servants’ hall, sir.”

“Bring them into the sitting-room.” And I followed him out and waited. Presently the swing-door opened and the children looked in. Behind them were the pale faces of the servants, whispering and staring.

“Come in,” I said to the children, “and sit down. Don’t be afraid.”

They came timidly in, evidently very much frightened. The door closed behind them.

This was their story.

They had been to the house to inquire how the old man was, and were returning to the Rectory. But they had hardly started, in fact had only just reached the chestnut-tree in front of the house, when both of them, who were looking towards the lighted windows, had seen quite plainly the figure of the old priest standing just inside the gate. He was bareheaded, they said, dressed in black, but they could only see his head and shoulders over the bank, as the road is a little lower than the grass which borders on it and runs up to the gate. He seemed, they said, to be looking out for some one. When I asked them how they could possibly see any one at that distance on such a dark night, they had no sort of explanation; they could only repeat that they did see him quite plainly. At last I took them out myself, and made them point out to me the place where they had seen it; but, as I expected, all was dark, and we could not even make out the white balls on the pedestals. I took them on to the end of the drive, as they still seemed upset; and they told me there that they would not be frightened to go the rest of the way alone. Fortunately, however, as we waited a man passed in the direction of the village, and he consented to see them as far as the Rectory gate.

When I entered the house again the maids with the boy were standing in the hall. They looked eagerly towards the door as I opened it, and one of them cried out.

“What is it now?” I asked. One of the elder servants answered:

“Oh sir, the master’s worse. Parker’s afraid he’s going. He’s just run downstairs for you, sir; and now he’s gone back,”

I did not wait to hear any more, but pushed past them, through the sitting-room, and ran upstairs.

The door of the old man’s room was open, and I heard faint sounds from within. I went straight in without knocking, and turned the corner of the screen.

Parker, who was kneeling by the bed, supporting his master in his arms, turned his head as I came in sight, and made a gesture with it. I came close up.

“He’s going fast, sir, I’m afraid,” he whispered.

The old man was sitting up in bed looking quite straight before him. His lips were slightly parted; and his eyes were full of expectancy. He kept lifting his hands gently, half opening them with a welcoming movement, and then letting them fall. Now he leaned gently forward, as if to meet something with his hands extended, then sinking a little back upon Parker’s arm. He paid no attention to me, and it seemed as if his eyes were focused to an almost infinite distance.

I too knelt down by the bed and waited watching him. Then there came soft foot-steps at the door, but it was not for that he waited. Then a whispering and a sobbing: and I knew that the servants were gathering outside.

Still he waited for that which he knew would come before he died. And the expectancy deepened in his eyes to an almost terrible intensity; and it was the expectancy that feared no disappointment. It was perfectly still outside, the servants were quiet now, and the old man’s breathing was inaudible. Once I heard the far-off bark of a dog away somewhere in the village.

As I watched his face I saw how wrinkles covered it, the corners of his eyes and his forehead were deeply furrowed, and the lines deepened and shifted as his face worked. And then suddenly he cried out: “He is coming, my son, He is coming far away.” And then silence.

I heard a sudden movement outside and then stillness again. Then a maid broke out into sobbing: and I heard footsteps, and then the door of my room across the landing open and shut: and the sobbing ceased. But the old man paid no heed. Then suddenly he cried out again:

“Behold He stands at the door and knocks.”

He made an indescribable gesture with his hands. Then I was startled, for there came a loud pealing at the bell downstairs.

Parker whispered to me to send one of the servants downstairs: and I went to the door for an instant and told the boy to go: then I came back. The boy’s footsteps died away down the staircase. I knelt down again by the bed.

Then once more the old man cried out:

“He is coming, my son. He is here: and then, “Look!”

As he said this across his face there came an extraordinary smile; for one moment, as I started up and looked, his face was that of a child, the wrinkles seemed suddenly erased, and a great rosy flush swept from forehead to mouth, and his eyes shone like stars. I noticed, too, even at this moment, for I was almost facing him as I sprang up, that the focus of his eyes was contracted to a point at the foot of his bed where the screen stood.

Then he fell back; and Parker laid him gently down.

A moment after footsteps came up the stairs: and the boy whispered from the doorway that the Rector had come.