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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COELEBS: THE LOVE STORY OF A BACHELOR ***

F.E. Mills Young

"Coelebs"

"The Love Story of a Bachelor"

Chapter One.

John Musgrave stood before the fire in his dining-room, a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* in his hands. He was not reading the paper; he was looking over the top of it at his new housemaid, as she brought in his breakfast, and, with many depreciatory sniffs which proclaimed a soul above such lowly service, set it carefully down upon the snowy damask.

He approved of her. It was natural that he should approve of her, considering he had himself engaged her for three very good reasons; the first and all-sufficient reason being that he invariably engaged his own servants; the second, that she was by no means young; the third, that she was plain and respectable.

It is an interesting psychological fact that plain people are more generally respectable than handsome people. From this it is not fair to infer that virtue is necessarily hard-featured; but temptation more frequently assails the beautiful. As temptation is a thing to be avoided, this doubtless is one of Nature's niggardly attempts at compensation. Which of us, given the choice, would not unhesitatingly pronounce for the endowment of physical attractions, and risk the possibility of an encounter with evil in the universal arena?

Virtue is a term which is frequently misapplied. To remain virtuous in circumstances which offer no temptation to be otherwise is a condition which does not justify the individual in the complacency usually indulged in where a knowledge of perfect uprightness which has never been assailed conveys a sense of superiority over one's fellows. There can be no cause for self-esteem when there has been no battle fought and won. It was quite safe to predict that Eliza—the eminently respectable Christian name of the middle-aged Abigail—had fought no battle; it was not such a level certainty to conclude that, if she had, she of necessity would have proved victorious; for appearances, no matter how respectable and forbidding, are no guarantee of inviolable virtue. Pretty faces have not a monopoly of sentiment. Indeed, the softer qualities of the feminine heart are often hidden behind an outward austerity.

Nevertheless, Eliza was respectable. She was proud of the fact. She flaunted it in one's face, and hurled it at one's head—metaphorically, of course; she had not sufficient energy to hurl anything except in metaphor. She had dwelt upon it to John Musgrave, when he had first interviewed her, so particularly that she had led him to suppose it was a more rare virtue than he had hitherto imagined, and that he was indeed securing a treasure, so that he was even prepared to pay a higher wage for such an anomaly. He agreed to pay the higher wage; and, with a nine-months' character from her last place, felt that he was to be congratulated on this respectable addition to his ménage.

Martha, his cook, who was stout, and not as active as, according to her own statement, she might have been, would have preferred some one younger and more energetic to help her in the conduct of Mr Musgrave's bachelor establishment; and when Mr Musgrave informed her kindly that it would be pleasant for her to have so highly respectable a companion in the kitchen, Martha agreed in the dubious manner of one to whom other qualities appealed equally, if not more strongly, than extreme respectability. But Martha, though an old family servant, and a steady, reliable woman, was, as Mr Musgrave had before observed, lacking in the finer sensibilities. She conferred with Bond, the gardener, and with Mr Musgrave's chauffeur, and the verdict that was duly pronounced was that "Lizer" was neither useful nor ornamental.

John Musgrave himself did not consider Eliza ornamental. But he was not desirous of adorning his establishment. A housemaid is not an ornament, but a useful domestic addition to the household of a gentleman; to suggest that she should be anything else would have appealed to John Musgrave as indecorous. He liked plain faces and matured years. In his way he was quite as respectable as Eliza.

"You have forgotten," he said, lowering his paper, and moving a little to one side in order that she might obtain a

view of the fireplace which his broad figure had blocked, "to put the fire-irons back in their place."

Eliza sniffed. It was a natural infirmity, and one of which she was less conscious than those about her. It was the only drawback that her employer had observed in her so far. He disliked mannerisms. She glanced at the gleaming tiles on the hearth, at the empty dogs standing upon it, and at the fire-irons referred to, which instead of reposing on the dogs stood assertively upright on either side of the grate. Eliza had not forgotten them. She had purposely stood them erect in order to save them from getting soiled. This thoughtfulness was not due to any regard for the fire-irons, but was conceived with the object of saving herself labour. If the brass became blackened it would be necessary to polish it daily.

She went to considerable trouble to explain this to John Musgrave, who listened with grave amazement to her voluble reasoning powers. Instead of commending her prudence he replaced the irons in their rightful position in the fender.

"For the future," he said, as he straightened himself after the performance of this feat, "we will have them in their place."

"They get dirty in the fender," Eliza objected, "and it makes a lot of cleaning. Every one knows brass fire-irons didn't ought to be used."

"What purpose do they serve, then?" Mr Musgrave inquired.

"They are meant for show, sir," answered Eliza, with a sniff that betokened contempt for his masculine ignorance.

Mr Musgrave looked at her with growing disapproval.

"To keep things for show is essentially vulgar," he said. "Everything has a proper use, and should be applied to it."

Having delivered himself of this rebuke he returned to the perusal of his newspaper. Eliza took up her tray, but, hearing the front door bell, put it down again and, with a protesting sniff, prepared to answer the ring.

John Musgrave seated himself at the table with its covers for one, its air of solid comfort and plenty, which, assertive though it might be, could not disguise a certain blank chilliness of aspect which the expanse of damask covering the long table insensibly conveyed; as did also the large, handsomely furnished room with its orderly row of unoccupied chairs which seemed mutely to protest against this disregard for their vocation. The apartment was essentially a family room, yet one man took his solitary meals there daily, had taken them there for many years: first as a small boy, with his parents and smaller sister, later as a man, who had seen these dear companions drop out from their accustomed places one by one, until now at forty he alone occupied the seat at the head of the table, and dwelt occasionally on those happier days when his meals had not been solitary.

Death had claimed his parents gently in the natural ordering of things. He had accustomed himself to their loss. But the loss of his sister was a more recent event, and less in accordance with nature, in John Musgrave's opinion. She had left him six years ago, had married a college friend of his, and taken her bright companionship, and with it, it seemed to the brother who felt himself deserted, the principal part of the comfort and pleasure of his own life, and settled it in the home of this inconsiderate friend two counties away.

It took John Musgrave a long time to reconcile himself to this marriage; but he had come to regard it now in the light of one of life's constant vexations. He hated change himself. For the life of him he could not understand why Belle had wished to marry anyone. People did marry, of course, but in his sister's case there had been absolutely no need for taking so serious a step; she had everything that a reasonable woman could desire. But, unlike himself, Belle enjoyed change. He supposed that this odd taste of hers had led her into matrimony. It was the only explanation that presented itself to his mind.

The married state was not in John Musgrave's opinion at all a desirable condition. He had never considered it for himself. He did not dislike women, but in all the forty years of his life he had never been in love, never met a woman the glance of whose eye had quickened his pulses or moved him to any deeper sentiment than a momentary interest. He was afraid of women. For the past ten years he had spent much of his time avoiding them. Women with marriageable daughters sought him continually, and made their pursuit so obvious as to fill him with grave embarrassment. He realised so well that he was not a marrying man that he could not understand why they failed to see this also.

It was a little indelicate, he considered, that any mother should try to secure a husband for her daughter. That a woman should seek to secure a husband for herself occurred to him a greater indelicacy still. John Musgrave had had the appalling experience of a written offer of marriage. He had replied to the writer courteously, and had promptly burnt the letter. He would have liked to have burnt the recollection of it, had that been possible; but unfortunately the foolish sentiment of that ill-considered letter remained in his memory, a constant and distressful humiliation, which was rendered the more disconcerting because he was continually and unavoidably brought into contact with the writer. She lived within a quarter of a mile of his own gates, and busied herself actively in the parish. John Musgrave also busied himself in the parish. To have thrown up this work, which he regarded as a duty of the head of his house, would have been impossible to him. Therefore he braced himself to meet this woman on school-boards and committees and other local interests, and tried to appear unconscious, when he encountered her, of a matter that always jumped into his mind whenever he saw her thin, eager face, or listened to the insistent tones of her reed-like voice, which made itself constantly heard at any public gathering.

John Musgrave was not thinking of this lady as he sat at breakfast and poured himself out a cup of coffee from the old-fashioned urn that had graced the table every morning within his memory; but the return of Eliza, like an austere Flora, whose sour visage showed above a basket of hot-house fruits hiding shyly beneath a profusion of wax-like blossoms, brought her promptly and most unpleasantly to his mind. Only one person in Moresby could send him such

a gift. He turned purple in the face when he beheld this dainty offering of fruit and flowers, and spluttered with rage as he waved their approach aside.

"Take away that—that rubbish," he commanded fiercely. "How dare you bring it in here!"

Eliza stared at him resentfully. She did not show surprise, because that was an emotion she seldom displayed, but she disapproved highly of his tone.

"I did not know what else to do with it, sir," she answered.

"No, no; of course not." John Musgrave seized an egg, and decapitated it with a shaking hand. "Take it with you, please," he said, in a mollified voice.

"Oh, thank you, sir," Eliza murmured, with a twist of her thin lips which was the only trick of smiling they knew.

He turned in his seat and stared at her fixedly.

"Tell Martha from me," he said curtly, "to throw that litter on the fire. I don't like cut flowers, and I do not eat fruit. If—if anything else of the kind arrives, do not take it in."

Eliza carried the rejected offering with her to the kitchen, where Martha and the chauffeur lingered over a late breakfast, and simperingly displayed the gift which she bore in the angular crook of her arm.

"The master gave them to me," she announced, with the conscious intonation of one marked out for especial favour.

The chauffeur was in the act of drinking coffee, but something went wrong with his throat at this moment, and Eliza, who was fastidious, turned aside from the unpleasant spectacle he presented, and buried her nose in the flowers. Martha good-naturedly thumped him on the back.

"Oh Lord?" he gasped. "Oh Lord?"

"I don't wonder," Martha ejaculated, with a contemptuous glance at the respectable Eliza, who was engaged in examining the contents of her basket. "That gipsy fortune-teller has turned her 'ead, poor thing!"

"There go all my 'opes," said the mendacious chauffeur, pointing to the dark stains of spilled coffee as though they symbolised his aspirations. "Strike me blue mouldy! if I don't go out and cut my bloomin' throat. If you don't want me to commit soocide, Lizer, share round those plums."

Generosity was not catalogued among Eliza's undoubted qualities. She took from the depths of the basket two of the smallest peaches, and placing these on the table, retired promptly from the kitchen, bearing her treasure with her.

"Mean, I call it," cried the indignant chauffeur after her retreating back. "One measly peach in return for a broken 'eart. If you'd given me 'alf a dozen I'd 'ave kissed you."

Martha laughed comfortably.

"If you aren't careful, she'll 'ave you up for breach of promise," she said.

"She'd lose the day," the chauffeur answered confidently. "A jury would only 'ave to look at 'er to know no man would 'ave 'ad the pluck to 'ave done it."

Martha laughed again.

"That gipsy woman got a shilling out of 'er," she remarked, "for telling 'er she was going to marry a gentleman. She believes it, silly thing!"

"She's as likely to marry a gentleman as anyone," the chauffeur answered. "Marriages are made in heaven, I've heard; and that's where Lizer'll 'ave to go to find 'er man. But the governor didn't ought to play with 'er young and untried affections. Givin' 'er presents like that."

Martha rose deliberately, pushing back her chair. She had been in John Musgrave's service for over twenty years, and therefore spoke as one having authority.

"'E give 'em to 'er most likely to throw in the ashbin," she said. "A silly like Lizer would believe anything."

Nevertheless Martha was not happy in her mind in regard to that basket of hot-house produce. She experienced a strong curiosity to learn where it had come from, and why it had been sent, and rejected by the recipient. Only a rooted objection to question Eliza on intimate family matters restrained her curiosity sufficiently to prevent her from discussing the subject with her fellow-servant. Martha, as the back-stairs custodian of the family honour, could not permit herself to gossip with the housemaid about John Musgrave's affairs.

Chapter Two.

The Rev. Walter Errol stood in the vestry doorway and watched, as he had watched for many years, his departing congregation. It was a large congregation, disproportionately large, considering the size of the parish. It was drawn mainly from the neighbouring parish of Rushleigh, which was a big town compared with Moresby. But the incumbent of Moresby was an eloquent preacher, and the Rushleigh inhabitants found that the two-mile walk across the fields

was well repaid in the satisfaction of hearing the message they desired to hear presented to them in a manner which was interesting as well as instructive, and more effective on this account. A message, whether beautiful or the reverse, has a greater hold on the imagination when effectively presented.

The flock of the Rev. Walter Errol never went away empty. There was always something in what he said to appeal to each individual member of the congregation, and so much that was novel and enlightened in his discourse that the thinker and the scholar found food for speculation, as well as the careless youth of the parish, who wandered into the church as a matter of course or from curiosity, and returned again and again because what they heard there was bright and stimulating and arresting, and gave them a sense of their own importance and responsibility in life, as well as a more beautiful conception of life itself.

The vicar, while he stood at the vestry door, was thinking of many things. Among other subjects of a greater or less importance, his thoughts turned upon John Musgrave, his sidesman and very good patron. He had read the burial service over John Musgrave's parents, and the marriage service over John Musgrave's sister; he had stood shoulder to shoulder with him when they were young men together, and later in middle-age they maintained their friendship, as men who hold joint memories of their youth and talk together of intimate things. He had married, John Musgrave had remained a bachelor. Each held the state of the other a matter for commiseration.

This evening the vicar was thinking of John Musgrave's lonely condition, and was feeling quite unnecessarily sorry for the man.

"He would have made a good father," he thought.

The one thing he never said of him was, he would make a good husband. But a good father is, after all, the best that can be said of a man.

While he remained at the vestry door, his sexton and right-hand man appeared at his side, and stood watching with him the departure of the flock. Robert looked after the vanishing forms with a slightly contemptuous glance, as one who failed to understand what they found in this weekly service to attract them from the fields in summer, and from their firesides in winter, when clearly there was no obligation for them to attend. Then he looked up into the face of the vicar, whom he loved as much as he loved anything in this curious world he adorned, and the contemptuous incredulity in his eyes deepened.

"Once again, sir," he observed, with a jerk of his head in the direction of the departing congregation. His manner and tone implied plainer than words could have, "We'd not be here, you and I, if we weren't paid for it."

The vicar glanced at his henchman and smiled.

"Once again, Robert," he repeated. "For your sake and mine and theirs, I hope it will be 'once again' often."

Robert grunted. For his own sake he saw no advantage in this increasing congregation. It was a difficult matter of late to find seating accommodation for the people. But the vicar liked it, of course; as well as adding to his prestige, it swelled the offertory. And what vicar does not enjoy a full collection plate?

Robert looked at the vicar and fidgeted. He wanted to lock up; but the vicar showed no haste to depart. When a man is looking forward to his supper he does not care to waste time, and Hannah, when he was late, was inclined to grumble. Robert, like his vicar, was married, and, unlike his vicar, he regretted his married state. When a man takes unto himself a partner he swears away his liberty at the altar as surely as any criminal who pleads guilty from the dock.

"I reckon Mr Musgrave will be supping with you to-night," he observed abruptly.

The vicar looked down into the quaint, bearded face, so many inches lower than his own, and smiled pleasantly.

"Supper?" he said. "I was forgetting, Robert. Yes, you can lock up."

Then he took his soft hat from its peg, and wishing his sexton good-evening stepped forth into the night.

Robert looked after him thoughtfully before turning the key in the lock.

"Seems to 'ave somethin' on 'is mind," he mused. "Reckon 'is missis is as aggravating as most."

With which he turned the key in the rusty lock viciously, and extinguished the lights and left.

The Rev. Walter Errol on entering the vicarage drawing-room found John Musgrave already there, talking with his wife. Mrs Errol, a pretty, delicate looking woman, who, while she made an excellent wife and mother, was none the less a dead failure in the parish, according to the opinion of the local helpers, looked round brightly as her husband entered the room, and remarked:

"Mr Musgrave has just been telling me that some friends of his—"

"Acquaintances," John Musgrave interposed gravely.

"Some people he knows," Mrs Errol substituted, "have taken the Hall. I'm so glad. It is such a pity to have a place like that standing empty."

The vicar looked pleased.

"Who are they, John?" he asked.

Mr Musgrave gazed thoughtfully into the fire. From the concentration of his look it would seem as though he found there the record of the family under discussion.

"The man," he said slowly, "is a connection of Charlie Sommers. Belle wrote to me that they had taken the Hall. She wants me to be civil to them. The expression is hers. His name is Chadwick. I met him at Charlie's place last year. He made his money in Ceylon, I understand, in rubber, or cocoa, or something of that sort. His wife is—modern." He pursed his lips, and looked up suddenly. "That expression also emanates from Belle. I don't think I like it very much. There are no children."

"The result of her modernity, possibly," observed the vicar.

John Musgrave's air was faintly disapproving. He did not appreciate the levity of some of Walter Errol's remarks.

"I am not much of a judge of women," he added seriously, "but from the little I saw of her I think she will be—a misfit in Moresby."

Mrs Errol laughed.

"I believe I am going to like her," she said. "I'm a misfit in Moresby myself."

John Musgrave turned to regard her with a protracted, contemplative look. She met his serious eyes, and smiled mockingly. Though she liked this old friend of her husband very well, his pedantry often worried her; it was, however, she realised, a part of the man's nature, and not an affectation, which would have made it offensive.

"You are not a misfit in the sense in which she will be," he replied quietly.

"You are rousing my curiosity to a tremendous pitch," she returned. "How is it no one here has seen these people? They didn't take the Hall without viewing it, I suppose?"

"They took it on Charlie's recommendation, I believe," he answered. "They will use it merely as a country house."

"Oh!" Mrs Errol's tone was slightly disappointed. "That means, I suppose, that they will live mostly in town?"

"And abroad," he answered. "They travel a lot."

"Well," observed Mrs Errol brightly, "they will probably do something when they are here to liven the parish a little. We want a few modern ideas; our ideas in Moresby are covered with lichen. Lichen is picturesque, but it's a form of decay, after all."

John Musgrave appeared surprised. Here was another person who hungered for change; it was possibly, he decided, a feminine characteristic.

"Moresby compares, I believe, very favourably with other small places," he said.

"I daresay it does." She laughed abruptly. "If it didn't it might be more gay."

The vicar smiled at her indulgently.

"I've a rebel, you see, John, in my own household. Mary only requires a kindred spirit to break into open revolt. The coming of Mrs Chadwick may create an upheaval."

"I doubt whether the advent of Mrs Chadwick will work any great change," John Musgrave returned in his heavy, serious fashion. "We are too settled to have the current of our ideas disturbed by a fresh arrival. She will adapt herself, possibly, to our ways."

Mrs Errol rose with a little shrug of the shoulders, and left the room. Had John Musgrave, she wondered, ever treated any subject other than seriously? In anyone else this habit of bringing the weight of the mind to bear on every trivial matter would have seemed priggish; but it sat on John Musgrave so naturally that, beyond experiencing a passing irritation at times, she could not feel severe towards him. He would have made, in her opinion, an admirable bishop.

The vicar followed her exit with his glance, and then dropped leisurely into a chair and stretched his feet towards the fire.

"When is Mrs Sommers coming this way again?" he asked, not so much conversationally as because he liked John Musgrave's sister, and was always glad when she returned to her childhood's home, which she did at fitful and infrequent intervals.

The man whom he addressed leaned back in his chair and stared thoughtfully into the flickering flames. The question recalled his own lonely fireside, the solitariness of which always struck him more forcibly while seated beside the cheery vicarage hearth. He missed Belle more as the years passed.

"She did not say," he answered. "She has many claims upon her time since Charlie entered Parliament. I wish it were otherwise. I miss Belle."

"That's only natural," the other answered. "She is so bright."

"Yes." John Musgrave looked directly at the speaker. "She is bright. She's companionable. I expect that's what

Charlie thought."

Walter Errol laughed.

"No doubt," he agreed.

"Yes, she's bright," John Musgrave repeated, as though the realisation of this fact, striking him for the first time, accounted for what he had been at a loss to comprehend before. "I expect that's why Charlie married her."

"My dear fellow," the other said, with a hardly repressed smile, "did it never occur to you that Charlie might have had a better reason?"

"A better reason?" John Musgrave echoed.

"Yes. Don't you think it possible that he married her for love?"

John Musgrave flushed deeply.

"For love!" he said.

The vicar smiled openly now.

"People do marry for love occasionally," he remarked.

"Do they?... Do they indeed?"

John Musgrave was gazing into the fire again, his expression doubtful, faintly discomfited—almost, it seemed to the man watching him in puzzled amusement, shocked.

"Dear me!" he ejaculated softly, and seemed disquieted at the presentment of this extraordinary idea. "Dear me!" he repeated slowly.

The vicar broke into a hearty laugh.

"Oh, Coelebs, my dear old Coelebs," he said; "it was not without a sufficient reason you gained that nickname at Oxford. What have you been doing, to live in the world so long and never to have learned the biggest and simplest of life's lessons? From the bottom of my heart I wish it may yet fall to your lot to get some practical experience. Find some one to fill Belle's place in your home, dear old fellow, and then you will miss her no longer."

"I wish, Walter," John Musgrave said, frowning heavily, "that you were given to a greater seriousness in your conversation."

"I wish, John," the other retorted amiably, "that you were inclined towards a lesser seriousness. As for me, I was never more in earnest in my life. Fill Belle's place, and then you will be relieved of the necessity for engaging such a sour-faced person as opened your front door to me yesterday."

"You mean Eliza?" said John Musgrave, surprised. "She is a most respectable woman."

"Guaranteed respectability has no need to be so disagreeably assertive of its claim to recognition," the vicar returned, unmoved. "The lack of amiability in one's expression suggests an unamiable disposition. A cheerful heart is the supremest of virtues."

He rose to his feet in response to the agreeable summons of the supper-gong, and placed a hand affectionately on John Musgrave's shoulder.

"Adam was the first man to take a bite out of an apple," he said, "but since he created the precedent for eating the fruit, men have developed the taste for apples."

"For a clergyman, Walter," his friend returned disapprovingly, "your conversation is at times highly irreverent."

Chapter Three.

A few weeks later John Musgrave set out across the fields in search of the vicar. The vicar on that particular morning was engaged in a search of quite another description, a search which necessitated the company of his sexton, armed with the iron rod with which he prodded in the moundless graveyard where the poor of the parish lay sleeping, to discover where he might, without disturbing an older resident, dig a grave for a fresh interment.

The nature of the soil in the Moresby churchyard was such that it was quite safe, after the lapse of a certain number of years, to bury the present generation in the resting-places of their predecessors. There were no headstones to suggest ownership in this little acre of the dead; and, owing to a whim of the old squire, who during his lifetime had ruled the parish with the despotism of an autocrat, the graves had been dug level with the rest of the ground. Since the advent of the present vicar mounds were insisted upon, and headstones encouraged; so that a man might feel assured when he was laid to rest that his resting-place would remain undisturbed. The old order was changing, even in the matter of interments.

For a while Robert prodded unsuccessfully; wherever he drove his rod in, after a few feet of solid earth it sank suddenly into the unresisting depths of an uncollapsed grave.

"Time most o' these 'ad a failed in," he grumbled. "It grows more difficult to find a spot wi' each fresh buryin'."

"Try here," suggested the vicar.

Robert drove his rod in once again. To the depth of about six feet it pierced firm, resisting soil.

"Reckon that's got it, sir," he said, as he drew the rod out from the ground. "I'll carry this back along, an' fetch my spade."

At this moment the vicar looked up and beheld John Musgrave bearing towards him. He stepped off the grass, where the quiet dead lay unmarked beneath his feet, and went to meet him.

"Are you busy?" Mr Musgrave asked, turning, and falling into step with him as he walked along the broad gravelled path beneath the scanty shade of the thinning trees.

"Not particularly. I have time to spare you, if you want me. We've a funeral this afternoon."

"Yes. Blackmoor, of course; Martha informed me he was to be buried to-day. Mrs Blackmoor assists Martha in the kitchen when she requires help. A very respectable woman." Walter Errol smiled.

"She is," he agreed. She had not always been so, as he and John both knew; but a call to grace in later life atoned for the indiscretions of youth. "Blackmoor had his failings," he added, "but he was a good-hearted man; and that goes a long way towards the redeeming virtues. What was it you wished to see me about, John?"

Mr Musgrave looked worried—more than worried; he appeared annoyed. He did not answer immediately. He passed through the little wicket gate into the lane, which led past the schoolhouse to the vicarage, in a preoccupied silence, upon which the unmusical singing of the school-children broke inharmoniously. Presently he said:

"I have received a very inconsiderate letter from Belle this morning. She writes to say she is coming to me next week —"

"But that's great," interposed Walter Errol. "You'll enjoy that."

"I should enjoy having Belle," Mr Musgrave answered quietly. "But she proposes bringing Mrs Chadwick with her. I was not agreeably prepossessed with this lady, and I do not anticipate pleasure from the visit. The Hall is to be got ready for their immediate occupation, and she wishes to superintend matters, I understand. I do not see the necessity for her superintending the redecoration of the Hall from my house. She could have stayed in Rushleigh."

"It won't be a long visit, I suppose?" the vicar suggested encouragingly. "And Mrs Sommers will relieve you of the principal share of the entertaining."

"I maintain," John Musgrave pursued, "that it is inconsiderate of Belle. She must be aware that it will put me out. My establishment is not equal to the entertainment of guests. It incommodes the servants."

"My dear John," the vicar returned sensibly, "you don't run a house for the convenience of your servants. A little extra work will not injure the health of the respectable Eliza, and Martha likes company. Whether you like it or not, it is good for you. When do the ladies arrive?"

"On Tuesday," answered John Musgrave shortly. "Belle desires that I will send the motor into Rushleigh to meet the train."

"Naturally you would do so," said the vicar.

"I shall do so, of course. But it is inconvenient. It is King's day off. He was not pleased when I told him he would be required to meet the afternoon train."

"Oh, Coelebs," said the vicar, laughing, "your servants are more arbitrary than a dozen wives. Why should they be unwilling to study your convenience occasionally?"

"My servants are accustomed to system," Mr Musgrave replied with dignity. "I am systematic myself."

"No one can dispute that, John. But system, like everything else when carried to excess, becomes wearisome. We will go in and tell Mary your news. She will be most interested."

"I want you to dine with me on Tuesday evening," Mr Musgrave said, as they turned in at the vicarage gate, "if Mrs Errol will be so kind. It will help me immensely."

"She'll be delighted," the vicar assured him. "And so shall I. Don't you worry, Coelebs, we'll see you through."

In the interest of John Musgrave's surprising news the vicar forgot for the time his more important duties. He remained to discuss with his wife and John this unexpected house-party to which the host alone looked forward with manifest misgivings.

Mrs Errol was pleased at the prospect of anything that offered a change from the dead level of monotony to which the social life of Moresby had sunk; and as soon as John Musgrave departed in the company of her husband she ran upstairs to her bedroom to hunt in her wardrobe for some garment which represented an evening gown, and might, with a slight alteration, be adapted to the present mode. In Moresby it was not necessary to be attired in the latest fashion; one simple evening dress did duty for local entertainments for years. But this occasion was different. Mrs Errol was aware that the ladies she would meet on Tuesday would not be garbed in the fashion of a bygone season.

They, however, would not be, she felt, unkindly in their criticism; and the knowledge that her dress was shabby did not concern her unduly. The Moresby living did not yield a handsome stipend.

The vicar, on parting from John Musgrave, returned by way of the churchyard, and was reminded as he walked along the elm-lined path of the funeral which worldly matters had banished completely from his thoughts. Robert was busy digging the new grave. The vicar's glance, travelling in that direction, was arrested at the sight of Robert's spade, which appeared out of the ground, it seemed, automatically and independently, ejected the freshly turned soil, and disappeared, to reappear with conscientious regularity in the performance of its appointed task. Robert himself was invisible; he was also, which was unusual, inaudible; the only sounds to be heard were those made by the spade and the falling earth.

The vicar stepped upon the grass and approached the open grave, looking about him with the perplexed air of a man whose locality is at fault. Finally he looked into the grave. Robert, perspiring freely, his flannel shirt open at the throat, looked up, and paused in his labours and rested upon his spade.

"You are a good twenty yards from the spot we marked," said the vicar.

Robert wiped his brow with a red pocket-handkerchief, and nodded briefly. The vicar did not appear surprised. Unless he attended at the cutting of the sods, Robert, possessing no bump of locality, frequently overran his distances.

"I ought to 'a' waited for you," he said, and mopped his brow again. "Thought this was the place we fixed on. But I mind now it was nearer the old yew tree. I ought to 'a' waited for you, sir," he repeated, and looked, the vicar observed, perturbed. "I got wrong somehow."

"Well, I suppose," the vicar said, "this spot will serve as well as another."

Robert spat upon his hands and grasped his spade, but he did not immediately use it. He gazed down into the grave resentfully, and then lifted his bearded face to Walter Errol's, watching him from above.

"I 'eaved up a corpse," he said.

And the vicar became abruptly aware of some bones lying partially covered with mould at the side of the grave.

"If it 'ad 'a' been my first," Robert proceeded, "it would 'a' turned me up; but I've done it afore. It'll be all right, though. I'll get they old bones out o' the way afore any o' the mourners come along."

"Treat them reverently, Robert," the vicar said gravely.

"Oh, ay. I buried 'em first go off. I'll fix they up all right."

Robert spat on his hands again, and prepared to resume his labours.

"Old George been buried this thirty years too... Should 'a' thought all trace of 'e 'ad gone," he added in the tone of a man who feels justified in complaining at this want of consideration on the part of old George.

The vicar left him to finish his work, and repaired to the vicarage for the midday meal. This desecration of a grave troubled him more than it troubled Robert. It was not exactly Robert's fault; he recognised that; though, had Robert been directly responsible, it was doubtful whether the vicar would have found it possible to rebuke the man seriously. Between his sexton and himself existed a mutual bond of affection which had begun from the hour when, as a young man taking over his first living, he had read himself in at Moresby during the lifetime of the old squire, in whose gift the living lay. Robert had constituted himself then director and guide of the new vicar. He had stood, or believed that he stood, as a safeguard between the vicar and the easily aroused displeasure of the irascible old squire.

Following the reading-in, he had drawn Walter Errol's attention to the omission of rearranging the stand when he left the pulpit, the position of which the vicar had altered for his own convenience.

"Squire can't abear to see en left askew. You'd get into a row over that," he said. "Every vicar that 'as come 'as got into a row over thicky stand. I wouldn't like you to get into a row wi' squire first go off like, 'cause squire never forgets."

Walter Errol, who possessed the saving grace of humour, had taken this advice in the spirit in which it was offered, and had thereby gained the sexton's unswerving devotion.

"Have you been in a row with the squire, Robert?" he had asked.

"Yes, sir, never out o' one," Robert had answered, and had seemed to experience a peculiar satisfaction in making the avowal; as though to be in a row with squire conveyed a certain distinction on a man of humble origin. For the vicar to be in a row was, however, another thing.

The vicar, to Robert's amazement, had kept on friendly terms with the squire to the day of the old man's death, which to those who knew Walter Errol did not appear so surprising a matter as it did to Robert, familiar with the squire's irascible temper, and accustomed to hearing himself spoken of as a very ignorant man. The vicar never called Robert ignorant; he showed, indeed, a very proper appreciation of his value; and, because to be appreciated is agreeable to every one, Robert returned in kind with loyal service and devotion. No man, whatever his status, can give more.

The vicar, as he sat at dinner with his wife, filled the sympathetic rôle of listener while she gave, with a certain quiet humour of her own, a graphic account of the meagre resources of her wardrobe. His own clothes also, she stated,

were somewhat shabby.

"We shall look the typical country vicar and vicaress," she said, with a most unclerical dimple coming into play when she smiled. "I hate dowdiness, Walter."

"Can't you get something made in the time?" he asked.

"No. I wouldn't if I could. For one dinner! Imagine it! Why shouldn't I look a country vicaress? That's what I am."

"You always look pretty," he said, "and so do your clothes."

"I believe," she observed, with a fair imitation of John Musgrave's tone and manner, "that I compare very favourably with other clergymen's wives."

He laughed.

"John considers you smart."

"Oh, John?" She waved a small hand, as though she waved aside John's opinion as of no account. "Was that man ever young, Walter?" she asked. "Somehow, I can never picture him as a boy."

"No," he said. "I can't, either. When I knew him first he was an elderly young man with a predilection for botany. But I believe at heart he is one of the kindest and best of fellows, incapable of a mean action or thought. I admire John."

She looked across at him, smiling.

"He suggests veal to me," she said—"which possesses no nature, according to the butcher. When John matures I shall perhaps appreciate him better. He is new wine in an old bottle—the outside crusted, and the inside thin and bloodless."

"New wine is apt to break old bottles," he reminded her.

"I know," she said. "I am waiting for John to break through his crust."

Chapter Four.

The kitchen of John Musgrave's establishment presented on Tuesday evening a scene of unusual activity. Martha, whose love for "Miss" Belle was even deeper than her affection for her master, was bent on doing her best for the honour of the house. It was an important occasion.

To Martha, as to all the old residents of Moresby, the Hall stood as the symbol of greatness, rather as Buckingham Palace might stand in the regard of the nation. Indeed, in local opinion it is possible that the Hall ranked above Buckingham Palace in importance, as tangible greatness surpasses legendary splendour. Moresby was accustomed to look with awe upon the Hall, which, since the reign of the old squire, had remained for the greater part of the time unoccupied, the present squire for private reasons preferring to live elsewhere.

The Hall still retained its importance in Moresby opinion; but had ceased to be the centre of magnificent bounty, such as it had been in the past. Now that it was let to wealthy people, local interest was stirred to a pitch of tremendous curiosity, and still greater expectation. The poor of Moresby—and save for John Musgrave, and Miss Simpson, who lived alone as Mr Musgrave did in isolated comfort, Moresby inhabitants were mainly poor—looked forward to a Christmas of the good old order, when feasting at the Hall was a yearly institution and, in local phraseology, things had not been backward in the way of good cheer.

Since to John Musgrave had fallen the unique honour of entertaining the new mistress of the Hall, Martha felt that some of the glory of the great house had descended upon Mr Musgrave's roof, and spread itself with benign condescension over each individual member of the household. A generous share of it enveloped Martha. Eliza, not being a native, could not be expected to participate in this reverence for local grandeur; she was, indeed, sufficiently lacking in appreciation to complain unceasingly of the extra labour imposed upon herself by the arrival of visitors in Mr Musgrave's house, notwithstanding that Mr Musgrave had engaged a younger girl to assist her in the heavier part of her duties.

"I didn't know there was company kept," she observed to Martha. "I've always set my face against company every place I've been to. It makes such a lot of extra work. Does Mr Musgrave keep much company?"

"I don't count Miss Belle as company," Martha replied. "She comes sometimes, and her husband, and the children. Three of them," she added, with the amiable intention of firing Eliza's resentment—"boys, and that full o' mischief, you never!"

"I can't put up with children," returned Eliza decidedly, "and dogs are worse. I couldn't stay in a house where there were animals kept, unless it was a cat—a clean cat. I can't abear dogs."

Neither could John Musgrave; and Mrs Chadwick had brought a pekinese with her.

Martha smiled drily.

"I wonder you don't give notice," she said.

"Notice!" sniffed Eliza. "And go to a new place with a two months' reference! I had a nine-months' character when I came here."

Martha, whose service numbered twenty-two years, looked her contempt.

"You might just as well have said nine weeks," she retorted. "Girls don't seem able to keep their places nowadays. I don't think much of a reference that doesn't run over the year."

Eliza returned to the dining-room, where her assistant was engaged in laying the table, and aired her grievances anew in Ellen's more sympathetic ears. Ellen, being in a subordinate position, was forced into the awkward predicament of being obliged to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare. She stood in awe of Eliza, and did her utmost to propitiate her; therefore, upon Eliza's reiterated complaint that her legs were giving under her, she redoubled her own energies, and did more than her share of the work. But not being a qualified parlourmaid, which Eliza, with a disregard for exactness, professed to be, she could not relieve her superior of the agreeable task of waiting at table, though she performed all the intermediate duties between kitchen and dining-room while the dinner was in progress, and was greatly interested in and impressed with the splendour of Mrs Chadwick, if somewhat disconcerted by this, her first, view of ladies dining in evening dress.

The elegance of the ladies, and the imposing spectacle of Mr Musgrave's shirt front, filled her with wondering admiration; while the gay, careless chatter of the strangers, and Mr Errol's easy and amusing talk, caused her to forget at times that she was present in the capacity of servitor, and not an interested spectator of a new kind of cinema.

Eliza's deportment in its aloof detachment was admirable; the merriest sally of wit was lost upon her, and Mrs Chadwick's surprising knack of telling daring stories elicited no more than a disapproving sniff. Eliza was as wonderful in her way as the guests, in Ellen's opinion.

The enjoyment ended for Ellen with the placing of the dessert on the table, and the closing of the dining-room door but she carried the wonder of all she had heard and seen to the kitchen, and there related it for the benefit of Martha and Mr King, who had looked in with a view to dining late himself. Eliza, collapsed in an arm-chair, pronounced herself too weary to eat.

The enjoyment for Mr Musgrave began where it should have ended, with the departure of the ladies from the dining-room. He closed the door upon them with formal politeness, and then returned to his seat with an air as collapsed as Eliza's, and lighted himself a cigar. The vicar, lighting a cigar also, looked across at him, and smiled.

"She will certainly," he said, "wake Moresby up."

John Musgrave took the cigar from his mouth, and examined the lighted end thoughtfully, a frown contracting his brow as though the sight of a cigar annoyed him. Since he was in reality addicted to cigar smoking, the frown was probably induced by his reflections.

"I am not in sympathy with advanced women," he remarked, after a pause. "A woman should be womanly."

He frowned again, and regarded the vicar through the chrysanthemums decorating the centre of the table.

"She smokes," he said presently, and added, after a moment—"so does Belle. Belle used not to do these things. She is much too nice a woman to have a cigarette stuck between her lips."

Walter Errol took the cigar from between his own lips, waved the cloud of smoke aside, and laughed.

"John," he said, "what fools we men are!"

Mr Musgrave stared.

"I don't follow you," he remarked coldly.

"It's all prejudice, old fellow," said the vicar pleasantly. "If there were any real evil in it, should you and I be doing it?"

"You wouldn't have women do the things men do, would you?" demanded his host.

"Why not?"

John Musgrave fingered the stem of a wineglass, and appeared for the moment at a loss for a suitable reply. Failing to find any logical answer to this perfectly simple question, he said:

"I don't like to see women adopting men's habits. It's unnatural. It—it loses them our respect."

"That, I take it," the vicar returned seriously, "depends less on what they do than the spirit in which they do it. I could not, for instance, lose my respect for Mrs Sommers if I saw her smoking a pipe."

John Musgrave gasped. Such a possibility was beyond his thinking.

"Would you care to see your own wife smoke?" he asked.

"If she wanted to, certainly," Mr Errol replied without hesitation. "She hasn't started it yet. But it would not disconcert me if she did. We live in a progressive age."

"I doubt whether smoking comes under the heading of progress," Mr Musgrave returned drily.

Walter Errol looked amused.

"Only in the sense, of wearing down a prejudice," he replied. "We are old-fashioned folk in Moresby, John. We are hedged about with prejudices; and to us a perfectly harmless pleasure appears undesirable because it is an innovation. Human nature is conservative; it takes unkindly to change. But each generation has to reconcile itself to the changes introduced by the next. One has to move with the times, or be left behind and out of sympathy with one's world. The world won't put back to wait for us."

"Then I prefer," John Musgrave answered, "to remain out of sympathy."

The vicar was abruptly reminded of this conversation with his host when later they rejoined the ladies. The atmosphere of John Musgrave's drawing-room struck foreign. It was a rule of Mr Musgrave never to smoke there. There were other rooms in a house in which a man could smoke, he asserted; the drawing-room was the woman's sanctum, and should be kept free from the objectionable fumes. Although there was no longer a woman to occupy Mr Musgrave's drawing-room, he adhered to his rule strictly, because adhering to rule was his practice, and men of John Musgrave's temperament do not change the habit of a lifetime merely on account of the removal of the reason for a stricture. But unmistakably on this particular night the rule had been violated; the fragrance of cigarette smoke lingered in the air, and on a small table beside Mrs Chadwick's coffee-cup an ash-tray, containing a partially smoked cigarette, confessed unblushingly that Mrs Chadwick had been enjoying her after-dinner smoke. On a cushion beside Mrs Chadwick, who was seated on the sofa, reposed the pampered pekinese, the presence of which both Eliza and her master resented equally.

John Musgrave gravely ignored both these objectionable novelties, and, crossing the room in his deliberate fashion, seated himself beside Mrs Errol, as a man adrift in uncongenial surroundings seeks refuge in the society of one upon whom the mantle of respectability still rested, and who embodied for him safe and familiar things.

Walter Errol shared the sofa with the pekinese and the pekinese's mistress, and smoothed the little creature's silken coat while he chatted with its owner and Mrs Sommers, who, a devoted admirer of the vicar's, sat on the other side of him.

"I've been hearing such a lot about the parish from your wife," Mrs Chadwick said. "I'm quite charmed with the place. I have always longed to find a spot that has been passed over by time, so that I could bring it up to date in a hurry. It takes the people's breath away at first; but they grow to like it—like riding on a switchback and standing on a moving staircase. When one learns to balance one's self these things are delightful."

"I can well believe it," the vicar answered, and wondered whether she suspected that she had already succeeded in taking away the breath of one of Moresby's inhabitants. "But I doubt whether you will find us exactly grateful."

She looked him directly in the eyes and smiled. She was, he observed, a very handsome woman, and her smile was radiant.

"I never look for gratitude," she answered; "it is a waste of time. And why should people be grateful? Whatever we do, even though it be ostensibly for the benefit of others, we do in a measure for ourselves. Therefore there is no sufficient ground for gratitude. I shall simply love modernising Moresby. Modernising is one of my cranks. The improvement of women's economic position is another. I don't employ any men servants, except for the rough and hard work. I have a woman butler, women chauffeurs, women gardeners—head gardeners; they have lads under them. And their wages are at the same rate as men's wages. It works admirably. You must come and inspect every department when we are settled in. And if you can help with any ideas I shall be grateful."

"So you permit yourself the grace of gratitude?" he said, smiling.

"Oh, that's a figure of speech, of course. I hope you will be kind to me, and let me poke about the schools, and interfere generally?"

"If that is a kindness, you can count on it," he said. "I shall be grateful for ideas too. I've grown behind the times with the rest."

"You humbug!" remarked Mrs Sommers with a laugh. "He is the only progressive person in Moresby," she added, turning to Mrs Chadwick, who was watching the vicar's caressing hand as it played with her dog's ears. "You'll find he will possibly think ahead of you. Where you will need to start—and I very much doubt whether you will get beyond the starting-point—is with my brother, John. Modernise him, my dear, and I will believe in woman's power."

Mrs Chadwick glanced towards John Musgrave, seated erect in his chair, conversing seriously with the vicar's bored little wife; then her eyes wandered back to Belle's face and rested there affectionately.

"You have set me something of a task," she said. "But I am going to attempt it."

Walter Errol laughed softly.

"Since I possess already unshakable faith in your sex," he said, "I predict enormous changes. 'Ce n'est pas une simple émeute, c'est un révolution.'"

Chapter Five.

Mrs Chadwick's purpose in coming to Moresby was not concerned only, or even chiefly, with the interior decoration of the Hall, which was kept, as far as the squire's means permitted, in very good order both inside and out. There was a

certain amount of work to be done, and Mrs Chadwick purposed having a voice in this, as in other things; but her presence was more concerned with the home farm than with the palatial residence she intended to occupy. The home farm came within the range of her scheme for the development of women's energies.

For several generations this farm had been worked on conservative lines by tenants who from father to son had succeeded to the place in unbroken succession, after the manner, indeed, of the family at the Hall. Though merely tenants, they had looked upon the farm as their rightful inheritance, quite as if it had been entailed property of their own. That anyone should seek to dispossess them would never have occurred to them in the light of possibility. But the present farmer was a bad tenant, and the farm was going to ruin. With the expiration of his lease had come the order for his eviction.

Mrs Chadwick, in taking the Hall, had stipulated for the right to find her own tenant for the farm. In the end she became the tenant, with full power to do what she liked with the property, providing always that what she did was for the improvement of the farm, and was first of all submitted to the squire for his approval. She had submitted so many schemes to him already that the worthy man, like John Musgrave, had felt his breath taken away; and in order to avoid any further shocks he had applied her to his lawyer, and gone abroad for an indefinite time to escape the worry of these matters. Change was not agreeable to him; but he was not so unwise as to object to the improvement of his estate, and the expenditure of other people's money upon it.

The lawyer, grasping the main point that Mrs Chadwick intended laying out money on the property, and had plenty of it to disburse, was satisfied to give her a free hand. Provided only that she increased the working value of the farm, he saw no reason against her pulling down all the old buildings and erecting new ones on improved models, and enlarging and improving the dwelling-house. Everything was to be brought up to date. There could be no objection, the lawyer considered, to that. He was not averse to change when it had a sound financial basis; and Mrs Chadwick's ideas occurred to him as practical. He was not quite so positive that her intention to work the farm principally with female labour would prove satisfactory. But that was her affair. If she liked to run risks of that nature she could afford the whim.

With the passing of the days, with the coming and going of architects and builders, and other persons the nature of whose occupation remained a mystery to John Musgrave, Mrs Chadwick's host became more and more bewildered, more distinctly opposed to this feverish feminine energy—to this unfeminine encroachment on what he had always considered was the business of his sex. What, he wondered, was Mr Chadwick thinking about to allow his wife to interview these people, and settle without reference to his wishes all the details of the home which was, after all, to be paid for by cheques which he, presumably, would sign?

John Musgrave could not have brought himself to remind any woman of her duty as a wife; but he did in many ways allow Mrs Chadwick to see that he viewed her proceedings with amazement, and with a sort of well-controlled disapproval. His attitude only amused her. In the process of attempting to modernise Mr Musgrave, she took a pleasure occasionally in shocking him.

"Does Mr Chadwick usually leave the conduct of his affairs entirely in your hands?" he asked her once.

"His affairs!" she repeated, with an uplift of her arched brows. "Oh, you mean 'our' affairs. Will knows these things interest me; they only bore him. He is a lazy man, except in the matter of organisation; he's splendid at that. Generally, I suggest a certain scheme and he develops it. He has a genius for developing."

That certainly was true of Mr Chadwick. In most of his successful undertakings his wife had originated the idea, and he had developed it; hers was the quick, and his the thorough, brain. Quite voluntarily he ceded her a full share for the credit of the enormous fortune he had amassed; and he was lazily interested in her talent for spending it, and quite sincerely in sympathy with many of her schemes for the improvement of the conditions of her sex, with which was closely associated the improved conditions of the race.

It is a surprising, and would be a gratifying, fact, were it not for a feeling that it ought to be the other way about, that men are usually more ready to help a woman in her fight for the good of her sex than persons of the sex she is working for. Men shake off prejudices more readily than women, because their training and mode of life gives them a broader outlook. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. The narrow-minded man is, if more rare, considerably more contracted in his outlook than even the narrow-minded woman.

John Musgrave's view was certainly contracted; but Mrs Chadwick, in her sanguine moments, entertained the belief that the restricted line of his horizon was due to the accident of circumstances, rather than to a natural deficiency in breadth, and held hopes of a possible development of his view. She did not tell him this; but she confided her belief to Mrs Sommers, who was as sceptical of John's development as she was of the profitable results of Mrs Chadwick's enterprises.

Mrs Chadwick told John Musgrave something else, which she deemed of greater importance even than the development of his mind, something which so scandalised Mr Musgrave as to render him speechless, amazed at her audacity, her want of delicacy; and too utterly dumbfounded to defend himself. She informed him, quite seriously, and without any effort to conceal her meaning, that he was not doing his duty by the State.

She had been in Moresby a week when she made this astounding attack, and the occasion which she chose for making it was one morning when she was returning with her host from an inspection of the village school, which, in a moment of weakness, he had suggested might interest her.

The school did interest her; but the sight of John Musgrave surrounded in the infants' classroom with a number of greedy, unabashed babies, who felt in his pockets for sweets with a confidence that suggested familiarity with the practice, interested her far more. On the homeward walk she informed him that patronising other people's babies, while undoubtedly commendable, was not his business in life; that he was not a good citizen, because, from purely

selfish motives, he was neglecting his most important duty to the State.

John Musgrave was so embarrassed, and so annoyed, that during the rest of the walk, which fortunately was not of long duration, he could not utter a word. He turned in at his own gate in a seriously displeased frame of mind; and Mrs Chadwick, feeling guilty but unrepentant, preceded him up the path with the wickedest of little smiles playing about her lips.

"Thank you so much, Mr Musgrave," she said, as they parted in the hall, "for a really enjoyable morning."

Then she went upstairs to her room, and later she recounted for Belle's edification the result of her visit to the school.

Mrs Sommers was amused; but she experienced a slight compassion for her brother, who would feel, she realised, as startled at a woman approaching a man on such a subject as he would be averse to the subject itself. People in Moresby left the laws of life alone.

John Musgrave was, as a matter of fact, deeply disgusted. He resented, not only the indelicacy, but the impertinence of this interference with the individual. He summarised the proceeding as a display of bad taste. Nevertheless the idea, once presented to him, was not easily dislodged from his brain. Somehow he had never considered the individual in responsible relationship to the State. The suggestion was new to him, and highly disturbing. He had up to the present considered himself in the light of a very good citizen, an example to other men who disregarded their duties to the borough in which they resided, and gave neither in money nor service to local affairs. He was respected in Moresby as a useful as well as a generous resident. It would have been difficult to fill his place if he left it; he could not conceive anyone filling it satisfactorily. And now he was told that all that counted for nothing, or at least for very little, since he was neglecting the principal duty of all. No wonder that Mr Musgrave was annoyed; that he looked upon Mrs Chadwick as highly objectionable, and resented her presence in his house.

"You are a very daring woman," commented Mrs Sommers. "Although I have grown up with John I would never have ventured to say such a thing as that."

"Possibly," returned Mrs Chadwick calmly, "if I had been brought up with John I would not have adventured either. Familiarity with a person's prejudices makes one diffident. I am not laying myself out to please Mr Musgrave, but to modernise him, as you suggested. When he is sufficiently modernised I mean to marry him."

"You will need to obtain a divorce first," retorted Mrs Sommers, laughing. "And I am sure John would not consider that respectable."

"You have a mischievous habit of misrepresenting things. You know perfectly well that I am satisfied with my lot in life. I am going to find him a wife."

"Oh?" said Mrs Sommers. She looked thoughtful. "I think you will have in that a more difficult task than in bringing him up to date."

"We shall see," returned Mrs Chadwick, and her tone was confident. "I think myself that lack of opportunity has bred the disinclination. No man is born a bachelor. The state, which is a misfit, results from his circumstances."

"It isn't due to lack of opportunity in John's case," Belle asserted. "The women who have run after him!..."

"Yes," said Mrs Chadwick. She was thinking of Miss Simpson. "But that sort of woman doesn't count, my dear."

The successful married woman has, as a rule, a very good idea of the kind of women men like. The successful married woman is never the vain woman. The vain woman always imagines that the type she represents is the type men admire; usually she is at fault. Mrs Chadwick was not a vain woman. She knew very well that all men are not drawn towards the same type of woman. Some men prefer looks; others mental qualities; and, by an odd inconsistency in human nature, the perfectly simple-souled and self-disciplined man inclines naturally toward the woman endowed with the captivating wickedness of her sex. There is a big distinction between captivating wickedness and vice. No man, whether he be good or bad in principle, admires vice in the mothers of the race.

Since Mr Musgrave reckoned in the category of the simple, self-disciplined soul, plainly the woman for him must have a spice of wickedness in her. Mrs Chadwick may have been mistaken in her deduction, but at least she believed in it firmly.

Had John Musgrave had any idea of what floated through her busy brain while she smilingly confided to him some of her plans for the improvement of Moresby, he would have been horrified. Marriage was the one subject of all others he considered it indelicate to dwell upon. If people married they did it for some good reason; to contemplate the step impartially with, no adequate motive for so serious an undertaking was to him unthinkable. Had he ever reflected upon it, and attempted a portrait of the lady he might have honoured with his preference, it certainly would not have been a woman with any latent wickedness in her. John Musgrave's ideal, had he been called upon to embody an ideal, would have revealed the picture of a calm-faced woman of unemotional temperament, who would always have said and done the correct thing, would have adorned his home, and revered himself, and would have been in every sense of the word womanly.

Mrs Chadwick could have told him that such a woman did not exist outside a man's imagination. She would not have done so, of course. She believed in encouraging masculine fallacies when they were harmless; to attempt discouragement was to invite defeat. Opposition is the least effective form of argument. A clever woman seldom makes the mistake of forcing her ideas; and Mrs Chadwick was undoubtedly clever.

"Anything can be accomplished through suggestion," she had been heard to assert. "Suggestion, plant it where you

will, is a seed which never fails to germinate.”

Chapter Six.

Miss Simpson contemplated her appearance by the aid of the long mirror in her wardrobe with an eye sharply critical as that of the vainest of her sisters, whose concern for outward things she held generally in contempt. But a visit to the house of a bachelor in regard to whom one entertains matrimonial intentions excuses, as anyone will acknowledge, a greater attentiveness to detail than usual.

The result of her inspection was on the whole satisfactory. The effect of her severely tailored costume and small, unassertive hat was neat in the extreme, so neat, indeed, that Mrs Chadwick, when she beheld it, felt a womanly compassion for the wearer; she preferred to see a woman daintily gowned. But Mrs Chadwick's taste was not Moresby's.

One lock of Miss Simpson's tightly braided hair betrayed a rebellious tendency to escape the hairpins and stray pleasingly over her brow. This could not be permitted. The aid of additional pins was requisitioned, and the unruly lock was brought into subjection, and tucked out of sight beneath the unrelenting brim of the eminently decorous hat.

Woman's hair never seems to achieve a definite recognition in the scheme of its wearer. Some women regard their hair as an adornment, which it is, and take trouble that other people shall recognise its claim as an asset in feminine decorativeness; with other women it would seem that the human head suffers this objectionable growth only because nature insists upon it as an essential part of her design. They brush it back from the face in strained disapproval, and further abuse it by screwing it into as tight a ball as circumstances permit. No frivolous abandon is allowed; pins, and even pomade, are resorted to, until what is undoubtedly beautiful in itself is rendered sufficiently unbecoming to soothe the most fastidiously decorous mind.

Miss Simpson belonged to this latter category. By instinct Miss Simpson was modest to the verge of prudery. But as, in the inconsistency of human nature, a good person is often streaked with evil, and an evil person possesses a strain of goodness, so Miss Simpson, despite her prudery, had a touch of the softer sentiments which no woman should be without. This weakness led to the cherishing of a romantic passion for Mr Musgrave, which so far overcame her natural decorum as to drive her to open pursuit of the object of her middle-aged affections. From anyone else a written proposal to a man would have appealed to her in the light of an offence against every womanly tradition; but in her own case circumstances allowed for the forsaking of her principles, even demanded this sacrifice of her. Plainly John Musgrave would have liked to propose; but he was a shy man. His gentlemanly refusal of her offer was, she recognised, prompted by this same shyness, and not at all from disinclination towards a life-partnership with herself. Eventually she trusted this not unmanly shyness would be conquered so far as to give him the courage to open the courtship which she felt he was always on the verge of beginning.

Proof that he enjoyed her companionship was forthcoming in the fact that he adhered to the practice of seeking it publicly. If he did not enjoy her companionship he would assuredly retire from the committee of school management, and other local matters in which they were jointly interested. Every one knows that interests in common form a substantial basis for mutual regard; and John Musgrave and Miss Simpson had a common bond in their insatiable love for busying themselves in parish affairs. They considered themselves—it is not an uncommon conceit—indispensable to the efficient working of the social machinery of Moresby. If the vicar held opposite views he was too wise a man to air them; and being good-natured, and tactful beyond the ordinary run of persons in authority, he allowed them their amiable conceit, and was grateful that they in return allowed him to occupy his own pulpit and generally conduct the services. Interference in his particular department was the one thing he would have resented. On this amicable footing was the parish of Moresby run.

But with the advent of Mrs Chadwick the vicar, at least, foresaw complications, and awaited their development with curiosity. Miss Simpson alone harboured no thought of change in the conduct of Moresby affairs. That the coming of a stranger should foreshadow interference in parish matters would never have occurred to her. The coming of the vicar's wife had not effected that.

But this afternoon, setting forth to call on Mrs Sommers, with a pleasurable thrill of anticipation which the prospective society of the ladies would scarcely seem to justify, it entered her mind for the first time that Mrs Chadwick's residence at the Hall must work some sort of change in the pleasant routine of their daily lives.

She was not sure that she approved of Mrs Chadwick. She was very sure, when she arrived and was shown into Mr Musgrave's drawing-room, that she, disapproved of her. Mrs Chadwick was seated at the open window, although the day was cold, and she was smoking a cigarette. She threw the cigarette away on the visitor's entrance, and smilingly apologised.

“I hope you don't object to smoke,” she said. “It is an incurable bad habit with me.”

Miss Simpson did not object to smoke from the proper quarter—the proper quarter being as it issued from between the lips of the sterner sex, who were privileged in the matter of bad habits, which is a feminine fallacy that is slipping out of date; she very strongly objected to smoking when her own sex indulged in it—indeed, save for Mrs Chadwick, she had never seen a woman smoke. It was, she considered, a disgusting and unfeminine practice.

She murmured “Really!” And shaking hands somewhat frigidly, addressed herself pointedly to Mrs Sommers for the first few minutes after sitting down.

Mrs Chadwick caressed the pekinese, and watched the visitor with curious interest the while. It was not, however, in

Mrs Chadwick's nature to remain outside any conversation for long; and she gracefully insinuated herself into the talk, to Miss Simpson's further surprise. She expected, when she took the trouble to show her displeasure, to see the object thereof properly quelled. That, too, is a characteristic of parish omnipotence. And, amazingly, Mrs Chadwick was already betraying a desire to interfere in Moresby arrangements.

"I visited the schools this morning," she observed, breaking in on Miss Simpson's gossip about the new schoolmaster, who, seemingly, gave every satisfaction, being a great improvement on his predecessor, who was, as Miss Simpson expressed it, a horrid Radical. "It was all very amusing. They are such quaint, blunt little people. I liked them. But the schools want pulling down and rebuilding. Everything is obsolete. The ceilings are too low and the ventilation inadequate. I am all for fresh air."

She laughed at sight of Miss Simpson's wooden expression, and at the shiver which ran through her narrow frame as she glanced meaningly at the wide-open window.

"Do you feel this too much?" she asked pleasantly, and obligingly drew the window partially down. "Mrs Sommers and I are seasoned; but we blow Mr Musgrave away at times."

That, of course, accounted for the absence of the master of the house which Miss Simpson had regretfully noticed. The draughts and the smoke would naturally drive Mr Musgrave away; no self-respecting man would stand it.

"I like air," Miss Simpson answered coldly, "in moderation."

Then she returned to the subject of the schools. This outspoken person must be given to understand from the commencement that, though she might pose as *grande dame* in Moresby by reason of her residence at the Hall, the older residents would not brook interference with existing institutions. Moresby was conservative in principle, and resented innovations.

"The present schools are a feature of the place," she said. "No one would care to have them done away with. They are picturesque."

"Yes; they are," Mrs Chadwick admitted readily. "That is what distresses me in old places—their beauty. One hates to demolish the beautiful. But healthy children are more beautiful than old buildings; and the modern buildings, with up-to-date construction, are healthier for small people."

"I think our village children are remarkably healthy," Miss Simpson protested.

"Do you? Half the school, I observed, had colds. Healthy children should not be susceptible to chills. If they worked in properly ventilated rooms they would not be. The lungs of the young have immense powers of resistance, but we weaken these powers with our foolish indifference to overheating and overcrowding. It is little short of criminal to study the picturesque in preference to the well-being of the rising generation."

"I think we should study both," Mrs Sommers intervened, with a view to soothing the ruffled feelings of her visitor, who was chafing visibly under this downright attack. "The schools are certainly charming. I should hate to see them pulled down myself. We will have to effect some compromise."

Compromise, in Mrs Chadwick's opinion, was as ineffectual as patching a worn-out garment; the worn-out garment could but fulfil its destiny, and become rags. But she let the subject drop. It could be revived at some future date. The schools were being slowly drawn into the network of her revolutionary schemes for the modernising of Moresby.

Miss Simpson, less diplomatic, and more assertive than Mrs Sommers, showed her disapproval by abruptly changing the subject, and introducing an entirely new, and, in Mrs Chadwick's opinion, distinctly quaint topic of conversation. She referred with considerable vim to certain matters of local importance which had been given prominence in the pages of the current number of the *Parish Magazine*. Mrs Chadwick betrayed such absorbed interest in these matters that Miss Simpson was beguiled into inquiring whether she had seen the current number of the *Parish Magazine*. She spoke of the magazine as a lover of the poets might speak of the works of Shakespeare, with a certain reverential awe for the importance of proved literary merit. Mrs Chadwick wore the vaguely distressed look that a well-read woman wears on discovering an unsuspected limitation in her literary attainments. She had not even heard before of the *Parish Magazine*.

"I am afraid I don't know it," she answered. "There are such a number of magazines, aren't there? And so many new ones always coming out. One can't keep pace with these things. I stick to the old magazines, like the *Century*, and the *Strand*, and the *Contemporary Review*. If one ought to read the *Parish Magazine*, of course I should wish to."

Miss Simpson stared, and Mrs Sommers laughed softly, albeit she did not consider this quizzing altogether fair.

"The publications you refer to are not of the same nature as the *Parish Magazine*," the visitor observed crushingly. "Our magazine is a purely local pamphlet for local circulation. It deals solely with parish matters."

Mrs Chadwick considered this dull, but she did not say so. She appeared politely impressed.

"That must be very interesting to—to Moresby inhabitants," she said gravely.

"That is its object," Miss Simpson returned. "Most parishes have their magazines. The people like to know what takes place locally; and they find it all noted down."

She spoke with the laboured forbearance of one who seeks to instruct a very ignorant person on a subject which should not have required explanation.

"Our magazine is a new venture," she added, with the conscious pride of the literary aspirant. "I started it last year. I edit it."

"Indeed!" Mrs Chadwick's tone expressed admiration. "Please put me down as an annual subscriber."

Miss Simpson unbent.

"I shall be delighted. It is a monthly pamphlet, issued at one penny."

"That is not ruinous," murmured the prospective subscriber.

"The village people could not afford more," Miss Simpson explained patiently. "They all like to read it. Occasionally some of their names are mentioned. They expect that."

"I should be afraid," Mrs Chadwick remarked, surveying the editress seriously, "of letting myself in for a libel action in your place. It is so difficult to be personal without the sacrifice of truth, and refrain from giving offence. I am inclined to think a parish magazine must be a dangerous publication."

"You haven't got the idea at all," Miss Simpson said acidly. "We only mention the things which reflect to the credit of the persons concerned, such as any little gift to the parish, or the participation in local entertainments, and such matters; and, of course, work done on committees. Mr Musgrave's name appears in its columns frequently."

"Belle," said Mrs Chadwick, with one of her radiant smiles, "I insist upon seeing the *Parish Magazine*. How is it you have kept these things from me? It would amuse me immensely to read of Mr Musgrave's doings. He is so reticent about such things himself."

The entrance of Mr Musgrave created a diversion. He came in in advance of Eliza with the tea; and Mrs Chadwick, watching with mercilessly observant glance, noted the fluttering agitation of the visitor, whose austere manner changed as surprisingly as the colour of the chameleon, and became immediately gracious, and demurely coy. Mr Musgrave's manner was not responsive. It suggested to Mrs Chadwick his attitude towards herself.

"I have just been hearing terrible tales of the things you do, which gain you notoriety in the columns of the *Parish Magazine*," she said wickedly. "I am going to read up all the back numbers."

John Musgrave did not smile. He crossed the room deliberately, and closed the window and fastened it—an act Miss Simpson witnessed with satisfaction.

"So thoughtless of me," said Mrs Chadwick apologetically. "I always forget your dislike for fresh air."

"I do not dislike fresh air," he returned gravely, "in its proper place."

"What would you describe as its proper place?" she asked.

"Out of doors," he answered, surprised that a clever woman should ask so obvious a question.

Then, while the three women sat and watched him, he made the tea, taking from the caddy a spoonful for each guest, and an additional spoonful for the requisite strength, according to custom. Mr Musgrave had made his own tea for many years; he saw no reason now for discontinuing this practice, though one person present—the one with the least right—would gladly have relieved him of the task. It was so pathetic, she reflected, to see a man making the tea; it was significant of his lonely state. Clearly a man needed a wife to perform this homely office, a wife of a suitable age, with similar tastes, who would never distress him with any display of unwomanly traits.

"I always think that no one makes tea quite like you do," she murmured sweetly, as she received her cup from John Musgrave's hand.

Which speech, in its ambiguity, Mrs Chadwick considered extremely diplomatic.

Chapter Seven.

"I have," said Mrs Chadwick dramatically that same evening to Mrs Sommers, "been exactly a week in Moresby, and I have made two enemies. What will be the result when I have lived here a year?"

This question opened up ground for reflection. Belle reflected. She did it, as she did most things, quickly.

"You will possibly overcome their prejudices, and make them love you."

"That is a charming answer," Mrs Chadwick replied. "But I am not sure that their love would not prove equally embarrassing. I would prefer to win their regard."

"It is merely another term for the same emotion," Mrs Sommers insisted.

They were seated before the fire in Mrs Chadwick's bedroom, having a last chat before retiring. Though women live together in the same house, and part, possibly for the first time for the day, outside their bedroom doors, a last chat is a privileged necessity—that is, when women are companions; when the last chat ceases to be a necessity it is a proof of mutual boredom. Mrs Chadwick and Belle Sommers were a long way off the point of boredom.

Belle had begun going to Mrs Chadwick's bedroom in her capacity of pseudo hostess, thinking that possibly Mrs

Chadwick, who had come without a maid in deference to a hint from her friend that strange servants would be unwelcome in Mr Musgrave's household, might find herself at a loss. But Mrs Chadwick was seldom at a loss in the matter of helping herself; a maid was a luxury, not an essential, in her train of accessories. The pekinese alone was indispensable. She had conceded the point about the maid, but she had refused to be separated from the pekinese. It is conjectural whether Mr Musgrave did not object more to the pekinese than he would have to the maid; but Belle, like Mrs Chadwick, did not consider it wise to humour all his little prejudices.

"I think," observed Mrs Chadwick, after a pause, during which they had both been gazing reflectively into the fire, "that I have settled everything that was immediately pressing, and can now relieve your brother of the strain of my presence. I cannot begin anything until we are established at the Hall."

Mrs Sommers looked amused.

"I believe," she said, "that John is frightening you away."

"He is," Mrs Chadwick admitted. "I am afraid of John. His inextinguishable courtesy chills me. How come you and John to be the children of the same parents? I don't believe you are. I believe that John is a changeling."

Belle laughed.

"He is our father reproduced," she said.

"That disposes of my theory. Then you must be the changeling. Plainly, Miss Simpson ought to have been his sister."

"She would prefer to stand in a closer relationship," Mrs Sommers said.

"Yes; that's obvious. But she hasn't the ghost of a chance. She is an old maid."

"She would scarcely be eligible for the position if she were not an old maid," Mrs Sommers pointed out.

"She would be eligible as an unmarried woman," Mrs Chadwick argued. "There is a distinction. An unmarried woman is not of necessity an old maid."

Belle allowed this. It was, indeed, irrefutable.

"I see," she said. "Yes... just as my brother is a confirmed bachelor."

Mrs Chadwick smiled into the flames.

"I wouldn't be so positive on that head," she replied. "You should visit the schools with him, as I did to-day. I think it might shake your opinion. A man who is a confirmed bachelor has not the paternal instinct. He ought to have married ten years ago, in which event he would not now make the tea, and fuss about draughts. I think, you have been neglectful of your duty to him. Before you married you should have found him a wife."

"He doesn't like the women I like," said Belle slowly. "He considers them too—"

"Modern," suggested Mrs Chadwick. She stirred the fire thoughtfully. "The very modernest of modern wives would be the saving of him. If he doesn't find her soon he will be doomed to eternal bachelorhood, and develop hypochondria, and take up homeopathy."

Belle laughed outright.

"Poor old John?" she said, and relapsed once more into contemplative silence.

John Musgrave, meanwhile, was going his usual nightly round of the house; which, perforce, was later than he was in the habit of making it, because the ladies did not retire, as he did when alone, at ten o'clock. He carefully examined all the gas-jets to satisfy himself that these were safely turned off. He inspected the bars and locks of doors and windows, not because he feared burglars, who were a class unknown in Moresby, but because he had always seen to the securing of his house, as his father had done before him. He placed a guard before the drawing-room fire, and examined the kitchen range to assure himself that Martha had not left too large a fire for safety—which Martha never by any chance did. John Musgrave did not expect to find any of these matters overlooked; but he enjoyed presumably satisfying himself that his instructions were faithfully observed. Then he turned off the light in the hall, and quietly mounted the stairs.

Belle, stepping forth from Mrs Chadwick's room at the moment, with her beautiful hair falling over her shoulders, met him on the landing. He appeared slightly taken aback; and she felt instinctively that he was on the verge of apologising for surprising her in this becoming *deshabille*. She forestalled the apology by catching him by the lapels of his coat and kissing him in her impulsive, affectionate way.

"You old dear!" she said softly.

"I thought you were in bed," Mr Musgrave said, feeling, without understanding why, that the touch of Belle's soft cheek was very agreeable, that the sight of a woman standing in the dim light of the landing was pleasing, particularly with her hair streaming over her blue *peignoir*. It was, of course, because the woman was Belle, and that therefore it was natural that she should be standing there, that he found the picture attractive. He experienced a twinge of regret at the thought that she would go away and leave him to his solitude shortly. When he came upstairs after she had left him, he would recall the sight of her standing there, smiling at him; and the big landing would seem doubly solitary.

"I've been gossiping," she explained.

He looked surprised. It baffled him to understand what she found to talk about, considering she had done nothing else all day.

"More schemes?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, and laughed unexpectedly.

If only John guessed what the latest scheme was! Had she allowed him a hundred guesses she believed he would never have arrived at the right one.

"I hope you won't take up schemes, Belle," he said, with a faint uneasiness in his voice. He looked at her wistfully. "You are too nice to be caught with fads, my dear."

She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him on the lips.

"I'm too lazy," she said, "and have my hands too full to trouble myself about anything beyond my boys. But a childless woman, John, dear, has to mother something."

"I suppose that's it," he answered, a little relieved, it occurred to her, by this explanation of what had appeared to him inexplicable. "Yes; that's the reason, undoubtedly. I am glad you have your boys, Belle."

"So am I," she returned gently, and kissed him good-night, and left him standing alone on the dim landing with his lighted candle in his hand.

He sighed as he listened to the closing of her bedroom door. Then he entered his own room, his mind still intent upon her, so that for a long time he remained inactive, gazing abstractedly at a picture of his mother hanging on his wall, comparing the sweet, lined face with the younger face of the daughter, who came and went in the old home, bringing the sunshine with her, and taking it with her again when she left. He envied Charlie Sommers more than he envied any man on earth.

And yet John Musgrave would have been surprised had anyone told him that he was lonely. He enjoyed, he believed, all the companionship that a man requires. But no one, unless he be a misanthropist, is entirely happy in the possession of a solitary hearth.

On the following morning Mrs Chadwick introduced the subject of her departure. She did not expect Mr Musgrave to be overwhelmed with distress at the announcement of her intention; nor was he; nevertheless, with the memory of his overnight reflections flooding his brain, he did not feel the relief he imagined he would feel at the prospect of having his house to himself once more. He was, oddly enough, growing accustomed to Mrs Chadwick. When she was not personal she was decidedly interesting, and not infrequently amusing. And when she left he knew Belle purposed leaving also. It was not convenient for her to be away from home just then. She had come solely to oblige Mrs Chadwick, whose recognition of this service influenced her more than her pretended alarm of her host in hastening her arrangements.

"I am sorry you are thinking of returning already," Mr Musgrave said, expressing only his sincere sentiments, and not obeying, as his visitor believed, the prompting of his habitual courtesy. "It appears to me that you have given yourself a very limited time, considering the magnitude of your undertakings. I would not have believed it possible that anyone could do so much in a week."

"I came with all my plans cut and dried, you see; and my appointments with people were prearranged. The work at the Hall will be finished in less than two months, and we shall be settled in well before Christmas. I dislike delay."

"Yes," said Mr Musgrave, disliking haste equally. "Moresby inhabitants will be glad to see the Hall occupied again. They have been accustomed to look to the Hall for a lead."

"They will get it, that's certain," Belle put in, smiling. "I am coming down on you at Christmas, John, to see the fun."

"Of course," he returned readily, though he looked a little doubtful at the mention of fun. "Christmas festivities are going out of fashion," he added slowly. "I am not sure it is not as well that is so. Too much merry-making leads to unseemly behaviour. It unsettles the people."

"If anyone behaves in an unseemly manner we will put his name in the *Parish Magazine*," Mrs Chadwick said. "That punishment should act as a sufficient restraint on future occasions. The *Parish Magazine* is the only thing that appals me in Moresby. I mistrust that organ. I am informed that in every issue there appears a sonnet by an anonymous poet. Where in Moresby do you conceal a poet?"

She addressed this question to Mr Musgrave; but though she looked towards him expectantly, and waited a sufficient interval for his reply, there was no response forthcoming. Mr Musgrave evaded her glance, and appeared to regard the question as put generally, and the questioner as not expecting a reply. He looked, Mrs Chadwick observed, guilty.

So John Musgrave was an anonymous poet as well as a confirmed bachelor. She determined to read before leaving his house some of John Musgrave's sonnets.

Chapter Eight.

Mrs Chadwick's departure was as abrupt, and therefore as disconcerting to Mr Musgrave, as her arrival had been. She

announced her intention of going one morning, and on the following morning she left. This rapidity of movement, and extraordinary energy, reduced Mr Musgrave to a condition of bewildered breathlessness. He fetched Bradshaw's Guide for the purpose of looking up her train; but she had learnt all about the train service beforehand, and knew to the minute the time of her departure. There was nothing left for Mr Musgrave to do save order his car for a certain hour to take the ladies into Rushleigh.

Most people would have been relieved to be spared further trouble; but John Musgrave was old-fashioned. He felt that in these matters it was fitting that the woman should depend on the man; just as he would prefer that a woman confronted with a burglar should scream for assistance rather than attempt an encounter with the intruder, physical courage being no more a womanly attribute than independence. But Mrs Chadwick belonged to a type of womanhood he had not met with before. She had made herself independent of the sterner sex. She would in all probability, if she encountered a burglar, tackle him; it was inconceivable that she would stop to scream. He supposed that residence abroad accounted possibly for these peculiarities. Women who lived in semi-civilised lands acquired characteristics unbecoming to their sex.

Mr Musgrave would have been surprised could he have penetrated Mrs Chadwick's opinion of himself. Mrs Chadwick had formed an opinion early in their intercourse; she saw no reason to modify it later; and she was confirmed in it when she read some of his sonnets in the carefully preserved back numbers of the *Parish Magazine*. There were sonnets to the different seasons; sonnets to childhood, to youth, to flowers, to a cloud effect in a windswept sky, and to the autumnal tints. There was not, in the whole, she observed without surprise, a single reference to love. Verse-making without that essential quality must be a difficult process, she reflected. Had Byron possessed John Musgrave's temperament, it is doubtful that he would have attained to immortality. John Musgrave with a touch of the Byronic weakness might have been interesting, and would certainly have been lovable. Coldness of itself is scarcely a virtue, nor is it an endearing characteristic. The man possessed of a big heart and a quite legitimate inclination towards the opposite sex is human; and Mrs Chadwick loved humanity.

The most human types she had as yet discovered in Moresby were those of the vicar and his wife, and Robert. Robert and the new mistress of the Hall were allies. Robert held the sex, as a sex, in contempt; that was the code of his class; and a very pronounced dread of the length of Hannah's tongue, added to a proper recognition of Hannah's muscular development, had accomplished little towards mitigating this sense of masculine superiority. He considered the utterance of Saint Paul, that it is better to marry than to burn, the most supreme wisdom that a man has ever given expression to. On Occasions he was a little doubtful whether it were not better to burn. He had tried marriage, but he had not tried burning, and so could not give a definite opinion. But for Mrs Chadwick he entertained an unbounded respect. Robert perhaps had a touch of the Byronic temperament; and Mrs Chadwick on coming out of church had given him one of her radiant smiles. Subsequently she stopped him in the road and chatted with him in an easy, intimate way that Robert described as "haffable." She began by asking him if he had a wife. Robert admitted this possession reluctantly; and, upon further inquiries, owned with even less enthusiasm to a son.

"Only one?" she said.

"One's more'n enough for me," Robert answered sourly. "Brought up respectable, 'e was, and confirmed under Mr Errol; and then," Robert jerked his thumb over his shoulder as though in indication of the direction the errant youth had followed, "'e takes up with a young woman, and turns Plymouth Brother to please 'er. Preaches, 'e does... they mostly do. Dresses 'isself up, and tramps five miles, and 'ollers to a lot more of 'em about their sins. Disgraceful, that's wot I calls it."

"Perhaps he thinks he is doing good," she suggested.

Robert smiled grimly.

"Precious little good 'e ever done, or ever will do, mum. And 'is preaching! You should 'ear 'im."

"Do you tramp five miles to hear him preach?" she asked.

"Wot, me? And wot would the vicar do without me, do you suppose? I 'ear quite enough without going to 'is old meeting-place. 'E practises 'is old sarmons night-times, after me and the missis is a-bed. You'd reckon it was a nuisance if 'e waked you up, as he wakes me and Hannah in the dead o' night sometimes, screeching an' 'ollering. 'Is your Lord deaf?' I asks en; 'because if 'E be, us bain't,' I says, 'and us can't sleep for your noise.' 'E's gone away now. Got a job at a farm near 'is young woman; an' I 'opes 'e stops there. I don't 'old wi' religion outside o' church, and then I likes it shortened like. Our vicar is the best vicar Moresby's ever 'ad, but 'e do make 'is sarmons long. Seems I could say as much as 'e do in 'alf the time."

Mrs Chadwick laughed. Robert's garrulity would seem to discredit this conceit.

"I like his sermons, Robert," she said. "I'm glad I am going to live at Moresby. Later I shall visit Mrs Robert, if you think she won't mind."

"She won't mind, mum," Robert answered. "She'll be proud. I'm not sure it won't make 'er over proud," he added reflectively. "Hannah gets obstroperous when she's took notice of. Better let 'er think you come to see me, I reckon."

She nodded brightly, and left him standing in the roadway looking after her retreating figure, and from it to the shining coins lying in the horny hollow of his palm. Perhaps it was due less to the Byronic temperament than to the natural love of every loyal subject for the King's portrait set in silver that Mrs Chadwick won from thenceforth Robert's unshakable respect. Being a man actuated by occasional chivalrous promptings, he drank to her good health conscientiously during the following days. But from a fear of making Hannah "obstroperous" he refrained from mentioning that interview with Mrs Chadwick and its amicable finish; and, in case Hannah went through his pockets while he slept, which experience taught him was the way of wives, he put temptation out of her way by concealing

the coins beneath the altar cloth in the church. Familiarity with holy things had bred an undesirable freedom in Robert's views.

The vicar and his wife stood at the vicarage gate and waved farewell to Mr Musgrave's guests as the car drove past. Mr Musgrave on this occasion accompanied the ladies, speeding, as Mrs Errol remarked, the departure, if he had not obeyed strictly the prescribed rules of hospitality by welcoming the coming guest.

"Well, that's over," she said, as the car turned the bend and disappeared from sight. She tucked her hand within her husband's arm, and walked with him a few yards down the road. "I shall be glad when they are settled at the Hall. It will make things gayer."

"It will certainly do that," he agreed. "Gaiety and Mrs Chadwick are synonymous terms."

"There is no especial virtue in gravity," Mrs Errol returned.

"There is not," he answered readily. "I prefer a cheerful countenance myself."

The vicar's road that morning taking him past Robert's cottage, he looked in to inquire for Mrs Robert, who had been much troubled of late with mysterious pains which attacked equally mysterious parts of her anatomy. To listen to Hannah's diagnosis of her complaints was to wonder how anyone who suffered so distressingly could continue to live, and to remain on the whole fairly active. The vicar, being accustomed to this exaggerated description of the minor ills of the flesh, was able to be sympathetic, and not unduly pessimistic in regard to the patient's ultimate recovery. But this morning Hannah, having received a letter from her son, was less concerned with her ailments than with the epistle of Robert the younger, who, after two pages devoted to personal and intimate matters, had sent a filial exhortation to his father, in which he recommended for the latter's careful study the sixteenth verse of the sixteenth chapter according to Saint Mark.

Robert the elder had insisted upon Hannah hunting up that particular verse in the Bible which stood in the front window, where the vicar's eye, and the eye of the district visitor, could not fail to light upon it. The vicar's eye had become so familiarised with this object, which looked as though it had never been displaced since first it had been put there, that he had formed a very fair estimate of its accepted value in the household. Mr Errol held no illusions concerning the piety of Robert and his wife.

Hannah, nothing loth, had found the text, and read it aloud to Robert, whose wrathful disgust had caused her quite pleasantly to forget her pains for the time. There stood the words in relentless black and white: "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

Hannah performed the supererogatory task of reading the text aloud to the vicar, who endeavoured while he listened to conceal the smile that found its way to his lips.

"And what has Robert to say to that?" he asked.

Robert had had a good deal to say, but his wife did not feel it necessary to quote him verbatim.

"Robert's mad," she answered. "He says he'll learn 'im. But Bob's a good boy, sir, and terrible clever."

"He certainly possesses a strong sense of responsibility," the vicar allowed.

When later Mr Errol saw Robert, he was reminded of young Robert's message by the dour look on his old sexton's face. His expression of wrathful indignation did not convey the suggestion that the seed of his son's counsel had fallen upon fruitful ground. Robert not only looked upset, he was most unusually taciturn. When he heard that the vicar had been to his cottage that morning he merely grunted. The grunt was expressive of many emotions, the most eloquent of which was unspeakable disgust. At the same time the consciousness of certain coins concealed beneath the altar cloth in the church caused Robert to lower his gaze before his vicar's eyes.

"So Hannah has heard from Bob," the vicar observed pleasantly. "Bob seems to fear you are in considerable danger, Robert."

"E'll be in considerable danger if 'e comes 'ome before I've 'ad time to cool," answered Robert grimly. He eyed his horny hand and the wrist muscles, developed like taut leather through long usage with the spade, and smiled darkly. "Reckon I didn' let in to en enough when 'e were a youngster," he remarked regretfully. "I only wish 'e were young enough for me to start in again. But I'm more'n 'is match now. Learn 'is father, will 'e? Us'll see. Thinks 'e knows a sight more'n I do, because 'e's got a few textes in 'is 'ead. 'Tis about all 'e 'as got there. Proud, 'e is, because 'e reads 'is Bible, which 'e 'lows other folk don't. Neither they does; but no more didn't 'e before 'e took up wi' preaching."

"Oh, come, Robert," remonstrated the vicar, smiling. "Plenty of people read their Bibles, even in Moresby."

"Plenty of people 'as Bibles," Robert replied darkly. "Keeps 'em for show, they do. I knows. Folks don't read their Bibles nowadays."

Robert spoke of the Bible as though it were a relic of prehistoric times which, being a respectable relic, and one the possession of which brought the owner occasional benefits from those in spiritual authority, was therefore worthy of a place even in the front window; but as a book for practical use, the idea was simply a pose.

"Indeed," the vicar insisted, "I know one or two in the parish who read their Bibles consistently. I have gone in at times and found them reading it."

Robert eyed the speaker with a gleam in his eyes that suggested affectionate patronage, and a half-contemptuous commiseration for such blind credulity.

"They seed you coming, sir," he said, with a shake of the head at the depths to which human duplicity will go.

The vicar gazed seriously into the quaint, sincere face of his sexton.

"Don't you ever read your Bible, Robert?" he asked gravely.

"No, sir. Never 'ear aught of it 'cept wot you reads out in church," Robert replied with disconcerting candour.

The Rev. Walter Errol turned away abruptly to conceal from the observant eyes regarding him whatever emotion moved him at the outspoken sincerity of this man, who had worked under him for many years in the service of the church. An honest heart is a worthy possession, and truth, no matter what laxity it reveals, is preferable to deceit.

Chapter Nine.

The weeks came and passed, and the work at the Hall continued with unabated energy. Early in November everything was in readiness for the occupation of the new tenants; and with the departure of the workmen the servants arrived at the Hall, and were speedily followed by Mr and Mrs Chadwick and the pekinese.

John Musgrave, with punctilious politeness, paid his call within the week, and was admitted and ushered into the drawing-room by a responsible-looking young woman in a neat uniform, who was, Mr Musgrave supposed, Mrs Chadwick's butler.

Mrs Chadwick, beautifully gowned, rose at his entry to receive him; a very gracious hostess, having discarded her air of bantering satire, which had so often incensed Mr Musgrave, for the easy cordiality of the woman of the world, bent on being agreeable in her own home; bent, too, on maintaining an attitude of sympathetic patience towards the idiosyncrasies of other people. John Musgrave considered her for the first time without reservation a very charming woman. Mr Chadwick, who had a greater right than anyone else to set himself up as an authority on this subject, had never considered her anything else.

Mr Chadwick was present on the occasion of John Musgrave's call. He was a big man of indolent appearance, who preferred rather to listen than to talk, but who, when he offered an opinion, commanded naturally the respectful attention of his hearers. One felt that the man possessed a mind of his own. Although most people pride themselves on this possession, it is not given to every one to secure its recognition by others. It is usually the case that the people who insist most upon this recognition are the people who do not receive it. John Musgrave, although he had met Mr Chadwick before, had very little knowledge of the man. It surprised him now to discover in him a man he could like and feel at home with. He had been prepared for something quite different. It had even occurred to him that no man of any intelligence could take second place and allow his wife to usurp his privileges as head of the house; but when he talked with Mr Chadwick he found it necessary to modify his views to the extent of admitting that in exceptional circumstances a clever man might do this without the sacrifice of his dignity. Will Chadwick would have solved the question, had Mr Musgrave put it to him, by explaining that he regarded the individual, irrespective of sex, as being under the obligation of filling the place he or she is most fitted to fill. It was not a matter of privilege, in his opinion, but of capacity; and he never bothered about sex problems. His wife and he were companions and not rivals in their domestic relations.

When Mr Musgrave left—and he was less conventional in timing his departure than he had been in the selection of the hour and date of his call—he carried with him a very pleasant picture of the perfectly organised and harmonious home of cultured and agreeable people. There was a good deal, after all, to be said in favour of English home-life. It was regrettable that home-life was going out of fashion.

As he walked down the broad gravelled drive Mr Musgrave pondered deeply over these matters. He glanced about him upon the beautiful wooded lands surrounding the Hall, and thought how many old English homes of equal dignity were passing into the hands of wealthy strangers because their owners preferred to live in moderate comfort abroad to clinging to their birthright and all it symbolised in defiance of a meagre purse. The privilege conferred by birth, and the dignity of ancient things, were fetishes with Mr Musgrave, to whom poverty in a good old English home would have been preferable to the easy freedom of continental life. This was one of John Musgrave's many old-fashioned ideas; and old-fashioned ideas are occasionally worthy to stand beside and sometimes even in advance of the modern trend of thought.

While thinking of these things Mr Musgrave was suddenly brought face to face with something so essentially modern that, prepared as he was for surprises in Mrs Chadwick's household, he was nevertheless taken completely aback. The first intimation of this extreme modernity rushed upon him disconcertingly, after the manner of a noisy herald preparing the way for some one of importance, in the shape of a very ugly and extraordinarily fierce-looking bull-dog. The bull-dog sprang out upon him from behind a wall and growled ferociously, showing his teeth, which is the custom of the well-bred bull, who cannot conceal them, as Mr Musgrave knew. Mr Musgrave, who disliked dogs, was nevertheless not so utterly foolish as to raise his stick, or otherwise show the alarm he felt; but he was very greatly relieved when a sharp, clear whistle called the bull-dog off and assured him that some one, who seemingly had authority, was at hand for his protection. Then it was that, looking up to trace the whistle to its source, he was confronted with the most astonishing sight he had ever beheld.

Against the wall a long ladder leaned, and standing at the top of the ladder doing something apparently to a climbing rose-bush—or, to be exact, not doing anything to the climbing rose-bush at that moment, but looking down at himself—was a young woman. For a second John Musgrave thought it was a boy; during the next second it dawned upon his

startled intelligence that this was no boy, but an exceedingly well-grown young woman—a young woman in male attire; that is to say, while the upper part of her was clothed in quite feminine fashion, the lower half—John Musgrave blushed as he grasped the horrible reality—was garbed in a man's overalls, a serviceable pair of loose-fitting blue trousers, buckled in at the waist with a workmanlike belt, in which was thrust pruning-knife, hammer, and other things necessary to a gardener at the top of a long ladder with no mate at the foot.

"It is all right; he is quite gentle," the girl called down the ladder reassuringly to the astonished, upturned face of Mr Musgrave.

She was, Mr Musgrave could not fail to observe, a very pretty girl, and she looked unquestionably well in the immodest get-up. Her hair, which was uncovered, was brown, and broke into curls at her temples; and a pair of smiling, darkly grey eyes gazed down at him amiably, with serene indifference to her embarrassing attire. Mr Musgrave imagined this male attire must be even more embarrassing to its wearer than it was to him to behold, in which he was quite mistaken. The girl was beautifully unconscious of anything in her appearance to attract comment. She wore trousers for use; and the serviceability of a thing explains and justifies its existence.

Since the person who addressed him was a woman, natural instinct suggested to Mr Musgrave the raising of his hat; but the sight of those objectionable overalls decided him that the courtesy was uncalled for; then, meeting the grey eyes fully, natural instinct prevailed with him.

The top of a ladder is not a comfortable place for social amenities, and the young person in the overalls had a long nail between her lips, which she had removed in order to call out her reassurance and had since replaced; she inclined her head nevertheless.

"That Moresby," murmured the owner of the grey eyes, as they followed Mr Musgrave's retreat. "Moresby does not like two-legged females; it prefers the skirt, and cherishes the fond delusion that the feet are attached quite decorously somewhere to the hem."

Then she returned to her work, and dismissed Mr Musgrave from her thoughts. The head gardener at the Hall had something else to do besides occupying her mind with idle speculations.

Mr Musgrave passed out through the lodge gates feeling inexpressibly shocked. He knew, because she herself had told him when unfolding some of her schemes, that it was Mrs Chadwick's practice to employ female labour whenever possible. In that respect, although it was unusual—for which reason alone it did not appeal to him as desirable—she was, he allowed, experimenting in a perfectly legitimate manner; but he could not see the necessity for the substitution of male attire. Because a young woman was employed in an unwomanly capacity it was no argument that she should further unsex herself by encroaching on the right of man to this very proper assertion of being, as the young woman would have expressed it, a biped. But Mr Musgrave in his very natural prejudice overlooked two essential points: that clothes in the first instance are worn for decency and comfort; and that the fashion of them has been decided with regard to utility and convenience, rather than the important question of sex. Plainly a skirt is neither useful nor convenient for climbing ladders in; it is also highly dangerous. Mr Musgrave might have argued: why climb ladders? To which the grey-eyed girl would have replied: because thereby she could earn a living in a perfectly honest and agreeable manner by following the occupation which most interested her, and in which she was undoubtedly skilled. Also the climbing of ladders is quite as simple to many women as it is to the average man. It is a matter of balance. Some people enjoy climbing, just as others prefer going down-hill, and the more equable natures, like Mr Musgrave, have a predilection for a flat road.

But—Mr Musgrave blushed again as he recalled a mental picture of the girl in the overalls—she was such a pretty girl. She looked the kind of girl one places instinctively in a refined home, engaged in the ladylike occupation of painting flowers on satin, or working at plain sewing for the poor. Mr Musgrave's idea of a suitable setting would not have raised a pang of regret in the contented breast of the head gardener. She would not have vacated her position at the top of the ladder for the most elegant drawing-room, nor have relinquished her pruning-scissors in favour of the daintiest satin-work in the world. She, like Mr Chadwick, believed in the individual doing what she was best fitted to do. And gardening was her "job."

It is a noteworthy fact that had the head gardener been plain and middle-aged her unsuitable occupation and unseemly attire would not have worried John Musgrave to the extent that it did. He would have dismissed the matter from his thoughts as simply objectionable, and therefore not to be dwelt on; but the youth of this girl and the beauty of her aroused his sympathies. The clear grey eyes were responsible for this. Chivalry in the male breast, even when that, breast belongs to a middle-aged bachelor, is an emotion which, contrary to all right principles, responds most readily to the curve of young lips and the call to laughter from bright eyes.

Chapter Ten.

The residents of Moresby—by which is usually understood not the bulk of the community, but that select portion which gathers in the drawing-rooms and about the tables of its social equals—were moved to a mild and almost pained surprise at being hospitably bidden to dine at the Hall within a month of the Chadwicks' arrival. This was, Moresby recognised with chill ingratitude, a grave breach of social etiquette. Plainly it was the duty of Moresby to show hospitality to the new-comers and then accept in return whatever the Hall saw fit to offer in acknowledgment of its welcome.

But Mrs Chadwick, who needed no precedent in anything she wished to do, was not prepared to wait on Moresby hospitality, which, she rightly guessed, would be slow in asserting itself. She wanted to gather her new neighbours together, and she did not mind in the least whether or no they invited her back to their houses. As soon, therefore, as they had called and she had returned the calls, she asked them to dine; and despite the general feeling of perturbed

wonder which this unexpected invitation occasioned, no one—their numbers were but four, because Moresby had its limitations—declined.

Thus it came about that on a certain cold December night John Musgrave foregathered with his neighbours and one or two people from Rushleigh in the great drawing-room at the Hall, where, as a young man in the old squire's time, he had been wont to attend functions of a similar nature, more formal and dull perhaps, as suited the day and prestige of the entertainer, but certainly not more splendid nor more kindly in tone.

It was so long since John Musgrave had taken part in any entertainment other than an informal supper at the vicarage or an equally quiet home-dinner, that he felt rather bewildered as he looked about him on this assemblage of, for the greater part, familiar faces rendered unfamiliar by reason of an unwonted magnificence of attire. Even little Mrs Errol was gowned with unusual elegance. As Mr Musgrave's eyes fell upon her he was conscious for the first time that she was a very pretty woman. He had not thought of her as pretty before; he had merely considered her womanly. It was possible, he realised, to be womanly and pretty at the same time. Her dress was eminently becoming.

Miss Simpson wore a narrow-shouldered, aesthetic garment, so modestly cut that only the scraggy column of her throat was visible above its lavender folds. Mr Musgrave, whose eyes were attracted towards her by the magnetic force of her gaze, which was riveted on him from the moment of his entry, compared her to her disadvantage with the vicar's modish little wife, whose extravagance in the matter of her new dress was spoiling one-half of her satisfaction in the knowledge that she compared favourably with the other guests.

Of the rest of the ladies present only one was unknown to Mr Musgrave. His eyes fell upon her as he left his hostess's side, passed over her face without recognition, and then, as though suddenly reminded of having seen it somewhere amid other surroundings, planted, indeed, in an altogether different setting, they wandered back uncertainly and rested with a puzzled scrutiny on the delicate profile that was half turned from him. Something in the rebellious wave of the brown hair, something in the buoyant grace of the girl's carriage, appeared vaguely familiar. And then suddenly the stranger turned and faced him squarely, and a pair of darkly grey eyes looked for a second into his and betrayed a flash of recognition. The faintest of smiles lit their grey depths. She was talking to the vicar, and she turned to him and said something in a low voice, as a result of which the vicar summoned Mr Musgrave to his side and presented him, and—quite unnecessarily, John Musgrave thought—left him alone with this exceedingly womanly looking, unwomanly young person.

As Mr Musgrave beheld her now, suitably attired in an exceedingly elegant yet simple white dinner dress, he found it difficult to associate this dainty person with the dreadful vision in blue overalls standing at the top of a long ladder and whistling to the bull-dog. He shuddered when he recalled that sight. How could any refined girl be guilty of such immodest conduct?

But the person in the overalls had done him a service. He felt that it would be only courtesy to acknowledge it. But did not courtesy demand rather that he should ignore that painful episode? It was possible that the girl would be displeased to be reminded of that occasion. Mr Musgrave felt so embarrassed, and was so little successful in concealing this emotion, that the girl, becoming conscious of it, imagined that he was shy. She promptly "started in," as she would have phrased it, to set him at his ease.

"I'm quite in love with Moresby," she said brightly. "It's the prettiest spot I've happened upon so far. These old places which have fallen asleep are restful. I was just asking Mr Errol when you arrived to whom that beautiful garden belonged, with the old gabled house standing back from the road, and he replied, 'Here's the owner.' When I looked round and saw you I remembered your face. Diogenes introduced us informally, if you recall the afternoon you called here. He is a dreadfully pushing person, Diogenes; but he's a dear when you know him."

"I daresay," Mr Musgrave answered, correctly surmising that Diogenes was the bull-dog. "But I dislike dogs."

"I should never have thought that," replied the girl, looking faintly surprised; "because Diogenes likes you. He never speaks to people he doesn't like; and dogs as a rule know at once when people are not sympathetic. He quite gushed about you after you had gone. I won't tell him he has made a mistake, it might hurt his feelings. And after all you are possibly mistaken yourself. You'd love dogs, I expect, if you once allowed yourself to take an interest in them. They are like children; one has to get accustomed to them."

"On the occasion you refer to," said Mr Musgrave tactfully, "I was very obliged to you for coming to my assistance. I confess to having felt distinctly nervous of Diogenes."

"Most people are," she said. "He looks so ferocious, and he's noisy. But that was only good-tempered teasing. He always helps me when I am gardening, and he enjoys thinking he is keeping intruders off. You must come and see the gardens some day. Mr Errol tells me you are dreadfully learned about flowers."

"I am interested in flowers," John Musgrave allowed modestly.

"So am I—enormously. I just love having this big place to experiment with. And my aunt is such a dear; she gives me a free hand." She laughed delightfully, showing a set of very pretty teeth. "A free hand constitutes also unlimited funds, and that is such a help in the making of a beautiful garden."

"I should have thought," Mr Musgrave said, "that the making of a garden was unnecessary where a garden already existed. I understood the grounds were always kept up."

"They have been kept from neglect," she answered. "But there is a lot to be done. We have got to bring it all up to date."

"Oh?" he said, and repressed a shudder. He had never liked that expression; since his acquaintance with Mrs Chadwick he had grown to actively dislike it. "I am old-fashioned, I suppose," he added. "I prefer things left as they are. The associations which cling about familiar things are more beautiful, in my opinion, than change. No outlay of money can improve an old-world garden."

"The introduction of a quantity of patent manure into the ground helps considerably in its productiveness," she answered practically. "Wait till the summer comes. When you see the glory of bloom then you'll admit the utility of money. I should like some time to come and see your garden. Do you work in it yourself?"

"!" Mr Musgrave appeared taken aback at the suggestion that he should labour among his borders, which were noted in Moresby for their beauty. "I supervise the man, of course," he said.

"Oh!" she returned in a tone of commiseration for the pleasure that he missed. "Supervising is tame. When one feels the soil with one's hands one learns what it means to love it, and every little root one buries in the mould becomes as a dear child. You are only scientifically interested in flowers, I suspect. I've learnt the science of them, too; but I am trying to forget all that and acquire practical knowledge. Imagine a mother bringing up her child scientifically! I know some people consider it a wise plan, but every child, like every plant, has its little peculiarities, and needs to be made a separate study."

"You are very young," Mr Musgrave remarked, looking into the clear eyes with a shade of disapproval in his own, "to entertain views on these subjects."

To his surprise she laughed.

"I'm twenty-eight," she answered frankly. "If one hasn't any views at that age it is safe to predict one will never have any. At twenty-eight lots of women are engaged in experimenting practically in the upbringing of children. I have nephews and nieces ranging up to ten."

Mr Musgrave was by now firmly convinced that he did not like this young person. He was quite sure that working in overalls was not good for the mind. And yet, when he came to reflect upon what she had said later, he failed to discover what there had been to object to so strongly in her talk. But he had taken a strong objection to the tone of her conversation. Could it be that he was not merely old-fashioned, but slightly priggish? Mr Musgrave did not like to think of himself as a prig. It is a term which Englishmen affect to despise. Nevertheless there are a few prigs in the world. Mr Musgrave was not a prig, but he came perilously near to being one at times.

A move in the direction of the dining-room put an end to their talk. Mr Musgrave was paired off with his legitimate dinner partner, a Rushleigh lady, the importance of whose social position as a member of one of the oldest families in the neighbourhood rendered it seemingly unnecessary for her to support the effort of being even ordinarily conversational. John Musgrave knew her intimately, and was therefore not unduly depressed by her long silences and her chilly acceptance of his stereotyped phrases in an attempt to sustain a courteous soliloquy during the courses.

Farther down, on the opposite side of the table, the grey-eyed girl was chatting animatedly with a young medical man, also from Rushleigh, who appeared, John Musgrave observed with a sense of feeling suddenly bored and out of tune with his surroundings, to be enjoying himself hugely. Mr Musgrave had always understood that young people did not enjoy dinner-parties; as a young man he had found them extraordinarily dull. But this young man was apparently enjoying both the food and the company. The grey-eyed girl was not, however, discussing with him patent manures, or other horticultural matters. At the moment when John Musgrave observed them they were engaged in a flippant conversation which the young man characterised as psychological, but which John Musgrave would not have dignified by such a term. It was the kind of agreeable nonsense which is pleasing only to youth.

The young man considered the grey-eyed girl ripping. The grey-eyed girl—who was called Peggy Annersley—referred to him in her thoughts as a sport. Mr Musgrave would not have approved of either expression. The vocabulary of youth is uncouth.

In the drawing-room, following the long dinner, there was a little music, under cover of which many of the guests took refuge in silence, relieved that the necessity to make conversation was temporarily relaxed. The business of enjoying one's self is a strenuous matter.

Mr Musgrave, moved by a stern sense of duty and the conviction of what was correct, went from one group of acquaintances to another and exchanged civilities with all. Peggy watched his conscientious progress through the room with mischievous, comprehending eyes. He was the quaintest thing in Moresby, she reflected, where everything was quaint.

Later, when the guests had departed, in response to a question put by Mrs Chadwick in reference to him, she stated that he seemed quite a nice old thing. Mrs Chadwick surveyed her niece thoughtfully, and then glanced at her own reflection in a mirror.

"Should you describe me as old?" she asked.

"You!" the girl laughed scoffingly. "You dear! What a question?"

"I am thirty-nine," Mrs Chadwick said. "And John Musgrave is forty."

The girl looked unimpressed.

"I daresay. But no one would consider John's years. He is fossilised," she said.

Chapter Eleven.

Miss Peggy Annersley was a niece of Mr Chadwick, one of a family of four girls whom Fate had deprived of their mother in early childhood, and, as though repenting the evil turn she had wrought them, had remedied the ill as far as she was able by subsequently removing their father also from a world in which, though undoubtedly ornamental, he was not of the slightest use. Having freed them thus far from the only obstacle in the path of any possible success which might fall to their lot, she threw them with light-hearted irresponsibility and an air of having finished with them, if not finally, at least for the time being, into the care of the wealthy uncle who, being childless, was naturally the person best fitted to undertake the charge of four well-grown, unruly, under-educated girls. Mr Chadwick sent them forthwith to a good boarding-school, and, like Fate, having disposed of them temporarily, dismissed them from his thoughts. But Mr Chadwick was possessed of a wife, and that wife was possessed of ideas regarding the race in general and the feminine half of it in particular; she therefore shouldered his neglected responsibilities and made the education of those four girls her special study.

Mr Chadwick's idea had been to educate them decently, as he expressed it, and give them a small but sufficient income on which to live independently, and leave them to worry out the problem of life for themselves. Mrs Chadwick objected to this plan on the plea that it was charity, and charity, save in exceptional circumstances, was humiliating to the individual and unsatisfactory, inasmuch as it retarded the mental and moral growth, and disorganised the social scheme.

Therefore each girl was educated as a boy might be, with a knowledge that she must earn her livelihood and had therefore better develop any talent and specialise in the choice of a profession.

The arrangement had worked well. The eldest girl, who, like her father, was ornamental rather than useful, had specialised matrimonially and left the schoolroom for a home of her own, and was very well satisfied with her lot. The second girl had become a medical student; and, showing marked ability in the profession she had chosen, took her M.D. and subsequently practised successfully as a doctor in a busy Midland town. The third girl, who was Peggy, had taken up gardening with equal aptitude, and was employed by her aunt for two reasons: the first being that Mrs Chadwick preferred a woman gardener; the second and all-important reason being that she was very fond of Peggy and wished to keep her with her. The fourth girl was an architect, and, being still quite young, was as yet on the lowest rung of the ladder. She was, however, keen, and Mrs Chadwick hoped that she would become an ornament to her profession in time.

Save for Peggy and the eldest girl, who was a beauty, looks were not the chief asset of the family, so that for the doctor and the young architect it was more expedient that they should do well in the work they had taken up.

Mrs Chadwick was on the whole very satisfied with the result of her effort on their behalf. Next to having girls of her own, four nieces with an average share of brains provided admirable material for the development of her feminist schemes. It afforded her immense gratification to watch their progress, and behold, instead of four helpless girls keeping house in bored inactivity on other people's money, four—or rather three—very capable young persons equal to fighting their own way through life, and privileged to enjoy the bread of independence. If any girl imagines there is a better lot in life she is mistaken. No occupation unfits a woman for the *rôle* of wife and mother; it gives her rather a greater right to bring children into the world, when she is able to support them if necessary. Mr Musgrave would not have shared this opinion; but Musgravian ideas fill almshouses and orphanages and are responsible for a great deal of genteel and quite needless poverty. That one half—and that the larger half—of the race should depend for its existence on the other half is absurd.

Peggy Annersley was a young woman of very independent spirit. Had she wished, she might have made her occupation as gardener at the Hall a sinecure. She could have given her orders to those under her and have enjoyed her leisure in any way that appeared agreeable to herself. Mrs Chadwick imposed no conditions or restraints. But Peggy drew a handsome wage, and she liked to feel when she received her monthly cheque that she had earned it; therefore she donned overalls and spoilt her hands, or, as she would have expressed it, hardened them, in the conscientious fulfilment of her duties. She put in her eight hours a day, except in the winter when work was slack, and insisted upon her half-day off during the week. There was only one matter in which she enjoyed any advantage over the rest—she was not liable to dismissal.

On her half-day off Peggy usually went for a walk accompanied by Diogenes. She resolutely refused to give up these half-days to paying calls with her aunt or helping her to entertain visitors. If she were imperatively needed for social duties these had to be worked in in her employers' time. Peggy was a veritable Trades Union in herself, and refused absolutely to sacrifice her off-time to any object that did not conform with her ideas of pleasurable relaxation.

Thus it fell out that when the guests who had participated in the Chadwicks' hospitality were, with rigid observance of rule, punctiliously performing their duty in the matter of an after-dinner call, Miss Annersley, in defiance of her aunt's remonstrance, insisted on going off as usual with the faithful Diogenes. Mrs Chadwick was vexed. Mr Chadwick had that morning met John Musgrave in the village, and had returned with the news that Mr Musgrave had mentioned that it was his purpose to call that same afternoon. Mrs Chadwick for some inexplicable reason desired Peggy's support on this occasion, and appeared disproportionately annoyed when Peggy departed on her walk and left her aunt to receive Mr Musgrave alone. Mr Chadwick was present, certainly, but the presence of Mr Chadwick could not further her amiable plans for the modernising of John Musgrave.

It was a wild, bright day with a touch of frost in the air, and as she walked briskly across the fields the sun and the wind and the cold air brought a glorious colour into Peggy's cheeks and lent a sparkle to her eyes. It was regrettable that there was no one there to note these things except Diogenes and a few cows. Peggy was not alarmed of cows; but Diogenes, who was in a boisterous mood, caused her considerable anxiety through displaying a desire to chase these unoffending animals, resenting which, they acted in a manner unseemly in their breed. In one field there were bulls. They were young bulls, and harmless; but Diogenes excited them, and when they began to chase Diogenes he

feigned nervousness and sought shelter behind his mistress's skirts, Peggy, feeling nervous without feigning it, took refuge in the hedge. Then it was that she became aware of a small bearded man, who, having just climbed the stile, walked fearlessly among the herd, which made way before him as before the progress of some royal personage and allowed him to pass unharmed. The small bearded man stopped when he was abreast of Peggy, and stared up at her where she crouched in the hedge with critical, contemptuous eyes.

"Do you like milk?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Yes," Peggy answered, puzzled to understand why this person, whom she now recognised for the sexton, if he wished to address her should open civilities with such an unusual remark; why, too, he should seem upset with her reply. He looked almost angry.

"Do you like beef?" he proceeded, putting her through this catechism as though he were playing a serious kind of new game.

"Yes," Peggy repeated with increasing wonder.

The little man looked really fierce now. She was relieved to have Diogenes at hand; this person was more terrifying than the bulls.

"Then wot are you afeard of? Get down out of thicky hedge. They won't 'urt 'ee."

Peggy felt indignant; the little man was quite unnecessarily rude.

"I do not care to watch milk churning itself in the open," she retorted; "and I prefer beef cooked."

Robert appeared for the moment at a loss for a suitable response. He looked at her sourly, and from her to the dog.

"You shouldn' take that there toy terrier across the fields, if you'm afeard o' cattle," he remarked. "'E's more mischeevous than wot they be. Get down out o' thicky 'edge, I tell 'ee. I'll see 'ee across."

"Why didn't you say that in the beginning?" Peggy said, flashing a smile at him and slipping nimbly down from her position of doubtful security. "That's exactly what I was wishing you would do."

"I seen a woman orched once," Robert was beginning conversationally, as they walked along together, when Peggy interrupted him to inquire what "orched" meant.

"Why, bein' tossed, o' course," Robert answered, amazed at her ignorance. "She died, too—died o' fright, I reckon; 'er warn't 'urt much. It was a cow done it. But 'twas more by way o' play than temper. Females is easy scared."

"Yes," Peggy agreed. "I allow that would scare me. You must be very brave, Mr Robert. I knew you were brave the moment I saw you."

"Eh?" Robert ventured, a little doubtful as to her entire sincerity. He knew something about females and he had never known them other than deceitful. "Reckon I'm not more easy scared than most."

Hannah would have laughed could she have heard that boast; he was—and she knew it—scared of her.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" Peggy asked.

"Ghosts!" Robert's tone was scornful. "No, I ban't afeard o' they. Somethin' you can put your 'and through don't signify much. Wot I might be afeard of," he added, wishful not to appear bragging, "is somethin' bigger an' stronger than meself, wot can take holt to your whistle and squeeze it like the plumbers do the gas-pipes of a 'ouse. That might scare me, now."

His manner conveyed a doubt whether even that experience could effectively arouse his fears. He left it to her imagination to picture him struggling valiantly, undismayed, against gigantic odds.

"Folks say there's a ghost up at the 'All," he added.

"I knew it!" the girl exclaimed. "I've a feeling in my bones, when I wake in the dark, that there must be a ghost somewhere."

Robert nodded confirmation.

"Hannah—that's my missis—she used to live 'ousemaid up at the 'All in old squire's time. She seen it. Leastways, she says she 'as," he added in the tone of a man who considers the reliability of the evidence open to question.

"If she says so, of course she must have seen it," Peggy insisted.

"Well," Robert answered, "I dunno. Seems to me if Hannah 'ad a seen it, er'd 'ave left; an' 'er didn' leave, not till I married 'er. But 'er was always tellin' up about thicky ole ghost, though 'er never could describe it. If I'd seen a ghost I'd know wot 'e looked like. Misty, 'er used to say—kind o' misty like, an' big. I've seed misty kind o' things meself when I've 'ad a drop; but Hannah's teetotal."

Peggy eyed him contemplatively.

"When you are digging graves, Mr Robert, do you never see a ghost?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Nothin' more'n a few ole bones."

"Ugh?" the girl exclaimed.

"There's naught to mind in bones," Robert returned. "They couldn't put theirselves together again, anyway, because parts of 'em would be missin'. But the first lot I 'eaved up turned my stummick, sure. A man gets used to it."

Peggy had a feeling that she had had enough of Robert's society for one day, and, having come to a stile where an inviting lane branched off from the fields, she inquired of him where it led.

"It takes 'ee past the back o' Mr Musgrave's house," he answered.

"Oh," said Peggy, "then I think I am going that way. Thank you very much for seeing me past the danger."

She parted from Robert joyfully, and set off with Diogenes down the muddy roadway between its tall green banks.

"We are going to see the back of the fossil's dwelling; now for adventure number two, Diogenes," she said.

Chapter Twelve.

Peggy was fond of boasting that adventures usually met her on her walks abroad. It is a peculiar conceit with some people to believe that things happen for them. To the imaginative person the unexpected event befalls, and signifies considerably more than it would signify to the person of a practical mind. The adult of Peggy's temperament never grows away from the fairyland of make-believe which usually is considered the sole prerogative of childhood. There is a wonderland for grown people, but not many dwell in it. Peggy dwelt in it, which was one reason why she always derived enjoyment from her country rambles with Diogenes.

But on this particular afternoon the adventures which befell Peggy were less agreeable than exciting. The encounter with the bulls had ended comfortably as a result of the opportune appearance of a knight-errant in the form of Robert; the second adventure had a less agreeable termination, possibly because no knight-errant arrived upon the scene, save in a laggard fashion which was in the nature of an anti-climax. Diogenes was directly responsible in both instances for everything which occurred. It was unusual for Diogenes to make himself a nuisance; possibly the Moresby air was too exhilarating for him.

When Peggy reached the end of the lane and emerged upon Mr Musgrave's back entrance she paused and looked about her, less from a sense of curiosity than a sudden realisation that the lane was a *cul-de-sac*, and unless she could brace herself to make the return journey by the way she had come, and face again the dangers from which Robert had rescued her, only to leave her basely in the lurch outside the back gate of the dwelling-house of a respectable, fossilised bachelor, she would be forced to make use of the tradesmen's entrance—the notice was painted neatly on the gate—and pass through Mr Musgrave's garden.

"Why not?" said Peggy to herself. "I wanted to see his garden. I told him so; and he didn't respond as a gentleman should. Therefore I will commit a trespass."

She would, have committed anything rather than return by the fields with Diogenes, who, for the first time within her knowledge, had defied her authoritative whistle. Diogenes, having created a precedent by this act of defiance, proceeded to follow it, which is what a precedent exists for. When Peggy, not without the feeling which a burglar must have when he forces his first lock, pushed open the tradesmen's entrance and took a furtive look inside to assure herself no one was on the watch to prevent her, Diogenes got his inquisitive snub nose between the crack, and using his broad shoulders, forced the gate a little wider and entered with a bound.

A rush, a scream, a frantic barking and growling followed, and Peggy, pursuing in hot haste and whistling as authoritatively as her panting breath permitted, arrived at the back door of Mr Musgrave's house, and, hearing a distressing pandemonium within, did not pause to consider the conventions, but dashed through the scullery and into the kitchen. There such a scene met her eyes as would have moved her to laughter had she not been too frightened to realise the comic element in the domestic drama she beheld. Diogenes held the floor—he was too unwieldy an animal to get above it; but he had cleared every one else off it and remained master of the situation, showing his teeth, and growling hideously in huge enjoyment of the game. The respectable Eliza stood on the table screaming; Martha, the corpulent, was mounted on a chair. Since she was not screaming, but was merely murmuring, "Good doggie, good doggie?" in a soothing voice, Diogenes was not concerned with her, but gave his whole attention to the subduing of Eliza.

The cause of the first mad rush, Mr Musgrave's sedate tabby, had sprung upon the highest shelf on the dresser, having dislodged in her ascent more of Mr Musgrave's valuable dinner-service than would have seemed necessary in attaining to her present elevation. The floor was strewn with broken china, and the breaker, with arched back and distended tail, looked down upon Diogenes barking amid the débris with the most malignant glare that Peggy had ever beheld in the eyes of a cat.

Peggy swooped down upon Diogenes, and, seizing him by the collar, belaboured him soundly with the dog-whip, which, until the present occasion, she had carried merely from force of habit, as one carries an umbrella in England at certain seasons even when one does not expect it to rain. Diogenes, who had recognised the dog-whip only as the symbol of an invitation to go walking, was so astonished when he realised that this hitherto agreeable-looking object could hurt that he ceased his joyous barking and relapsed into a sulky mood, which changed to a whimpering protest when he discovered that Peggy did not tire as readily as he did of this abominable misuse of the instrument she wielded. Diogenes had thought it was a game; and the game was having a most discouraging ending.

Mingled with Diogenes' protests, drowning them, indeed, Eliza's noisy wailing, the hissing of the cat, and the soothing reiteration of Martha's "Good doggie!" penetrating Peggy's hearing, took the power out of her arm. She did not laugh, although she experienced an hysterical desire to both laugh and cry, but she left off thrashing Diogenes and fastened the lead to his collar, to Eliza's intense relief, and then looked up.

"I am so sorry," she said, addressing herself to Martha, since Martha alone showed sufficient control to heed her apology. "I've never known him do such a thing before. But he wouldn't hurt anyone—not even the cat. He is perfectly gentle."

He might have been; he was, on the whole; but appearances seemed rather to belie the assertion.

Martha scrambled down from the chair and readjusted her cap, which was drooping coquettishly over one ear.

"Lor'!" she said. "What a fright it give me; it most a turned me inside out."

Diogenes, thoroughly subdued, wagged a tentative tail at her. He rather liked Martha. But when Eliza, still weeping, sat down on the table and, with an unconscious display of thin legs, descended on the far side, he showed a tendency to become restive, and strained at the unaccustomed leash. Peggy cuffed him vigorously, whereupon he subsided and affected to sulk again.

"However could that animal 'ave got in?" exclaimed Martha, at which simple question Peggy felt guilty. She felt more guilty still when Martha added acrimoniously to the weeping Eliza, "That's your fault, Lizer. You must 'ave left the gate open."

"No," said Peggy bravely, conscious of her glowing cheeks, and wishing from the depths of her being that she had faced the bulls rather than trespass on Mr Musgrave's property; "I opened the gate. I wanted to walk through the garden because of the bulls. And then Diogenes saw the cat and escaped from me."

Martha looked amazed, only imperfectly understanding this none too lucid explanation; and Eliza, who had been too upset to know whether she had left the gate open or not, discovering that she was not responsible for the mischance, stared resentfully at the intruder.

"This is private property," she announced in the haughty manner of a person who feels herself by virtue of her residence thereon joint owner of the premises. "You can't walk through private grounds."

What Peggy would have replied, or if she would have replied at all, remained indeterminate. At that moment Martha straightened her cap anew and Eliza started to sniff more loudly and Diogenes ventured on a bark as the kitchen door opened and John Musgrave, with gravely astonished face, stood framed in the aperture, gazing upon the scene.

To Peggy's consternation the displeased glance of the master of the house fell immediately upon the broken china which strewn the floor—he could not possibly overlook it, since it lay almost at his feet—and then lifted and rested accusingly, it seemed to her, upon her blushing face. Her presence in his kitchen was an event which called for some explanation. Peggy proceeded to explain, and to express her regret for the accident. She hoped, despite a desire to punish her, which from his expression she was positive he was experiencing, he would eject her by the front gate instead of the back. It would be horrible if after all these nerve-shattering happenings she would still be obliged to face the bulls.

"Diogenes only chased the cat for fun," she finished, loyally excusing the delinquent, who by no means deserved to have his conduct defended. "He would not have hurt it really. He's rather partial to cats."

"Indeed!" said Mr Musgrave, and stared up at the cat, who glared back at him defiantly from her position of security. The cat was suffered, not as a pet, but because cats in a house were of use in keeping down the mice. "I think," added Mr Musgrave, "that the cat would feel happier if Diogenes were removed."

"Please," pleaded Peggy humbly, "let us go by the front gate. I am really afraid to cross the fields again. Diogenes chases the bulls."

"'Orrid brute!" muttered Eliza with a sniff so loud that it drew Mr Musgrave's eyes in her direction.

"You had better," he observed drily, "clear away this—rubbish."

He indicated the broken crockery. Then he stood away from the door and looked at Peggy.

"If you will come with me, Miss Annersley, I will take you through the garden. Kindly keep the dog on the lead."

Peggy preceded him from the kitchen in a chastened mood, feeling very like a small girl about to be reprimanded. She resented Mr Musgrave's air of elderly superiority. He might have assured her, before the servants at least, that it did not matter, and told her not to distress herself. She had a conviction that he felt it was only proper she should distress herself, for which reason she determined not to be overwhelmingly contrite. It was his cat that had effected the damage; Diogenes had not scrambled over the furniture.

Mr Musgrave led her through a passage and into the hall, which was wide and spacious, and had a comfortable fire glowing on the low hearth. It was a very nice hall. Peggy looked about her with interested curiosity. It was a nice house altogether; and Mr Musgrave, as he paused and looked down at her a little uncertainly, did not appear so forbidding as he had looked in the kitchen. After all, considering the amount of damage she and Diogenes were responsible for between them, he had shown admirable control. Peggy was relenting. She experienced the desire to more adequately express her regret.

"Would you like to—rest a little while?" Mr Musgrave asked.

The question was so unexpected that Peggy wanted to laugh. She realised that courtesy alone dragged the reluctant suggestion from her unwilling host, and was aware that acceptance of the invitation by increasing his embarrassment would aggravate her former offence. Mischievousness prompted assent; but the new feeling of kindness towards him overruled the teasing instinct, and to Mr Musgrave's relief she declined.

"I think," she said, "you have seen enough of us for one day. When I come again I will leave Diogenes behind."

She put out a hand and laid it with girlish impulsiveness on his sleeve.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

Mr Musgrave looked down at the small hand as he might have looked at something that had alighted on his sleeve by accident, which could not be brushed off, but must be allowed to remove itself at its own convenience. It was a strong little hand, roughened with labour, and ungloved, because its owner had removed her glove the better to chastise Diogenes; but it was quite a nicely-shaped woman's hand, and would have been fine and white had it been allowed to become so. Then he looked straight into the upturned face.

"Please don't think any more about it," he said, and meeting the grey eyes fully, smiled.

Chapter Thirteen.

When Peggy Annersley parted from John Musgrave at his gate and set off down the road accompanied by the joyous Diogenes, now freed from the lead, Mr Musgrave turned about and slowly retraced his steps along the gravelled path he had traversed at Peggy's side. His mind, despite the early prejudice which the sight of the young lady immodestly attired had excited, and the later annoyance of her unfortunate trespass, which anyone might well have resented, harboured no unkindly thought. He was even conscious of a faint amusement as he recalled the astonishing picture of her unexpected presence in his kitchen, and his own amazement at finding her there. She stimulated alike his interest and his curiosity. It is impossible to experience interest in another human being and remain altogether indifferent in feeling, particularly when that interest is centred in a member of the opposite sex. John Musgrave was not given to self-analysis, nor did he disturb his mind with problems of this nature. Had it occurred to him that a mild interest in a prepossessing young woman held possibilities of unexpected development he would promptly have banished the captivating Peggy from the place she engaged in his thoughts. At that stage in their acquaintance this would have been quite simple of accomplishment. John Musgrave would have thought so, at least. But the mind is an odd store-room, and many things dwell in it which the owner is powerless to eject—small, persistent, elusive thoughts which hide behind the lumber of inconsequent things.

As Mr Musgrave slowly paced the gravel walk, lost in a not unpleasing reverie, he became suddenly aware of an insignificant object lying in his path, and, stooping to examine this object at closer range, discovered that it was a woman's glove. Since only one woman had used that path recently, since, too, the glove had assuredly not been there when he had accompanied Peggy to the gate, the inference pointed conclusively to the glove being Peggy's property.

John Musgrave picked it up, and held it between his fingers. Then he placed it across the palm of one hand and examined it with curiosity, after the manner of a collector who has discovered some new object of interest. It was a small glove, absurdly small it seemed to John Musgrave as it lay across his large palm, and it was obviously new. Had Mr Musgrave been more experienced in the matter of women's dress he would have realised from the fact of its newness that the owner would make some effort to recover her property, an odd glove being useless, and no woman caring to sacrifice a new pair. But Mr Musgrave did not consider this point. He was for the time absorbed in contemplation of the absurd thing.

Having examined it on the one side, he reversed it on his palm and examined it on the other. Then he took it up, and idly, in abstracted mood, thrust his fingers into it and began pulling it over his hand. The futility of attempting to fit a larger object into a smaller was immediately demonstrated; the kid split obligingly at the seams to accommodate the hand that was never intended to fill it, and John Musgrave, gazing at the mischief he had wrought, beheld his large knuckles bursting through the tear. The new glove was no longer a thing of any value.

At the moment of realising what he had done he became aware of a still more disquieting circumstance: the gate behind him clicked and the sound of rapid footsteps fell upon his ear. Hastily, with a change of colour which suggested a conscience not altogether free from guilt, he proceeded to drag the glove off his hand. But the thing resisted stubbornly, and the girl was almost at his elbow. He desisted from his efforts, and swung round and faced her, concealing his hand awkwardly behind his back. There was nothing in the expression of the demure face that met his gaze to betray that the girl had any suspicion why that right arm of his should be doubled behind his back; but to one familiar with Peggy the guilelessness of her look might have suggested knowledge.

"I'm sorry to trouble you again," she said softly, "but I have dropped a glove. It's a new glove, and I don't wish to lose it. I thought it might be in the garden, perhaps."

Mr Musgrave hesitated, and was lost. He dissembled. To have admitted in the first instance having found the glove, even though he had to confess to having spoilt it, would have been simple, but he had let the opportunity slip; to own to it now would prove embarrassing. He looked with discomfited eyes along the path.

"I do not see it," he said.

"No," replied Peggy, "neither do I. But I thought..."

"Perhaps," said Mr Musgrave quickly, "you left it in the kitchen. I will tell the servants to look. It shall be returned to you."

"I had it," Peggy persisted, "when I was talking with you in the hall."

"Yes?" he said. "Then—then perhaps it is there. It shall be found."

A spirit of wickedness entered into Peggy.

"Never mind," she said brightly. "It serves me right if I have lost it. Don't trouble to hunt for it, Mr Musgrave. I came back because I thought I might find it near the gate; but plainly it isn't here. Good-bye again."

She held out a determined hand. Mr Musgrave was faced with the greatest dilemma he had ever experienced. What was he to do? Courtesy demanded that he should take her hand; to ignore it would be unpardonable. To extend the left hand was equally impossible; to offer the right was to acknowledge his duplicity, and might lead to an altogether wrong conception of his motives. A man when he acts upon impulse is not necessarily guided by any motive. For the fraction of a second he hesitated; then, with perfect gravity, he drew his arm from behind his back, and with the hand still wearing the torn fragments of the lost glove he silently touched her fingers. Peggy's grey eyes were on his face; they did not fall, he observed, once to his hand. He felt grateful to her. A little tact—and tact is but the dictates of a kindly nature—smoothes over many awkward situations.

He returned with her to the gate and opened it for her, and raised his hat gravely as she passed through, to be greeted with boisterous effusiveness by Diogenes, who had reluctantly waited outside.

"He's rather a dear, Diogenes," she said, as she proceeded down the road, a little more soberly now. "He made me feel a little mean female cad."

John Musgrave, returning along the path, drew off the torn glove and slipped it into his pocket. Another link had been formed in the chain of impressions.

By the time Peggy reached the Hall her self-abasement had evaporated, and her usual good spirits reasserted themselves. She made directly for the drawing-room, where Mrs Chadwick, after a disappointing afternoon, lay limply against the cushions of a sofa, solacing herself with the inevitable cigarette. She looked round at Peggy's entrance, and was so relieved to see some one bright and young and wholesome that the resentment she was prepared to show vanished—in her welcoming smile. Peggy was one of those fortunate people who disarm wrath by reason of unflinching good temper.

"You are late," Mrs Chadwick said. "If you want fresh tea you will have to ring for it."

"I don't mind it cold," Peggy returned, attending to her needs at the tea-table and smiling pleasantly to herself the while. "Tired?" she asked, dropping comfortably into a seat, and surveying her aunt inquiringly above the tea-cup in her hand.

"Tired and bored," Mrs Chadwick answered.

"Been entertaining the aborigines, I suppose?"

"Yes. You might have stayed to help me. These people... Peggy, I consider it is in the nature of a solecism to be so dull; it's a breach of good taste."

"They can't help it," Peggy said soothingly. "I expect if we had lived all our days in Moresby we should be dull too. It's stultifying. I am sorry you have had such a slow time. I've been enjoying myself—hugely. I've had most surprising adventures."

Mrs Chadwick laughed.

"You generally do," she answered. "But it puzzles me to think how you contrive adventures in Moresby. Nothing ever happens when I pass beyond the gates. It would cause me a shock if it did."

"It caused me several shocks," Peggy replied, looking amused. "I experience them again when I review the afternoon's doings. You'd never guess where I've been."

"Then I won't try to. Tell me. If you give me a shock it may shake off the *ennui* I am suffering. You have done something audacious, I suppose."

Peggy ceased munching her cake and tried to look serious, but failed. Two tantalising dimples played at the corners of her mouth and her eyes shone wickedly.

"A little audacious, perhaps," she allowed. "In the first place, I've been walking out with the sexton. He was quite interesting and agreeable until he began to discuss corpses. That made me feel uncomfortable; so I left him and went to call on Mr Musgrave."

"*What!*" exclaimed Mrs Chadwick.

"It is all right," Peggy proceeded reassuringly. "Nobody saw me. I slipped in through the tradesmen's entrance and interviewed him in the kitchen chaperoned by the cook and a sour-faced parlourmaid. Having satisfied the proprieties thus far, we proceeded to the hall for more intimate conversation. He is not as fossilised as he looks. He accompanied me through the garden and kept my glove for a souvenir of the visit. And I think," Peggy paused and looked into the

fire with a dancing gleam of mischief in the grey eyes, "I think," she added, smiling, "that he will send me a present of a new pair. Now confess, you would never have credited John with being such a sport."

"When you have finished romancing," Mrs Chadwick said severely, "perhaps you will explain exactly what you have been up to. If you had wished to see Mr Musgrave you could have accomplished your purpose by remaining at home. He was here this afternoon."

"That wouldn't have proved so exciting," Peggy returned. "He doesn't open out in front of other people. I like John best in his own home."

She rose with a laugh, and, approaching the sofa, seated herself at Mrs Chadwick's side.

"I couldn't help it," she said with an affectation of contrition. "It all just happened. Things will, you know."

And then she gave a more detailed account of the afternoon's doings. Mrs Chadwick was amused, in spite of a slight vexation. Peggy's veracious version of her intrusion on Mr Musgrave was disconcerting to her listener; and the anecdote of the glove, which lost nothing in the telling, seemed to Mrs Chadwick, who possessed a certain insight into John Musgrave's sensitive mind, the last straw in the load of prejudice which would bias John Musgrave's opinion of her niece. She could cheerfully at the moment have boxed Peggy's ears. But Peggy, laughing and unrepentant, hung over her aunt and kissed her. Mrs Chadwick was as weak as water when Peggy coaxed.

"I hope he doesn't send you that pair of gloves," was all she said.

But John Musgrave did send the gloves. He drove into Rushleigh himself for the purpose of matching the torn glove in his possession, and, failing to do this, posted it to London, and received a similar pair by return. He posted this pair to Peggy with a brief note of apology, which, when she had read it, Peggy, for some unexplained reason, locked away in a drawer.

The note read as follows:

"Dear Miss Annersley,—

"You will, I trust, pardon me for having destroyed in a moment of abstraction the glove you dropped in my garden. I believe I have succeeded in matching it, and hope that the pair enclosed will serve as well as that which my awkwardness ruined. I apologise for my carelessness, and the consequent delay in returning your property.

"Yours faithfully,—

"John Musgrave."

"But he hasn't returned my property," mused Peggy, with the new pair of gloves in one hand and Mr Musgrave's note in the other. "I wonder what he has done with it?"

Chapter Fourteen.

With the approach of Christmas Mr Musgrave's quiet home took on the air of an over-populated city. A strange woman in a nurse's uniform swelled the party in the kitchen when she was not in the nursery with the two youngest members of Mrs Sommers' family. She was a young, nice-looking woman, and her presence, though welcomed by the other servants, was bitterly resented by Eliza. In Mrs Sommers' nurse Eliza beheld a rival, though where rivalry came in in a field that admitted no competition it were difficult to say.

When Eliza had condescended to fill the position of housemaid in a bachelor establishment she had not allowed for this objectionable practice of family gathering. Clearly Mr Musgrave should spend Christmas in his sister's home and not introduce an entire family into his house to the inconvenience of his servants. It was very inconsiderate.

Martha only laughed when Eliza aired her grievance. She liked family gatherings. As well cook for a dozen as for one, she declared. The same amount of trouble with a little extra labour went to the preparation of the larger meals. And Martha loved to have Miss Belle in the house, and Miss Belle's children. Miss Belle's husband was there also, and a responsible-looking person who, with an anglicised pronunciation, described himself as a valet. Eliza did not object so strongly to this addition, his manners being irreproachable and the tone of his conversation gentlemanly. Also he saved her trouble by carrying the hot water upstairs and performing many small duties that were not a part of his regular office. He sized Eliza up very quickly, and behaved towards her with such exemplary chivalry that he speedily won her susceptible heart, so that Eliza, with some reluctance, half relinquished the idea that she was destined to become eventually Mrs John Musgrave, in order to entertain the possibility of being selected by Fate as the wife of the gentlemanly valet. The valet, backed with the comfortable safeguard of a wife at home, did nothing to discourage the assumption. Men have not without reason won the distinction of being considered deceivers of the fair sex.

The arrival of the Sommers, and the contemporaneous arrival of a house-party at the Hall, resulted in a succession of entertainments such as Moresby had not previously known. Mrs Chadwick conceived the idea of getting up theatricals and a series of tableaux, in which the Moresby residents were invited to take part. She also got a kinema operator down and invited the entire village to view the films.

The kinema party was fixed for Boxing Night; the tableaux were to follow a dinner to be given on Christmas Eve. The villagers were not bidden to the Christmas Eve party, but the ringers were invited to go up to the Hall after ringing the chime and regale themselves on hot punch.

Moresby on the whole was pleasantly excited. Things were being done in the good old style, even to the distribution of blankets and coals and other comforts acceptable to the season, though received with a certain grudging mistrust which would appear to be the recognised spirit in which to accept charity. There is an etiquette even in the manner of accepting patronage; the recipient feels it incumbent on him to be patronising to the giver of alms in order to retain a proper sense of independence. Let no one who gives blind himself to the fact that he is receiving as well as distributing favours.

John Musgrave gave regularly at Christmas, and handsomely, to his poorer neighbours; Miss Simpson also gave; but, since she demanded gratitude, and Mr Musgrave demanded nothing, regarding his charity in the light of a duty which his more fortunate circumstances imposed, he received a more generous meed of thanks, and a less grudging acceptance of his gifts. Mr Musgrave's bounty received his personal supervision, and was packed and ultimately delivered by his chauffeur, with Mr Musgrave's compliments and the season's greetings; Miss Simpson was her own almoner, and dispensed with her gifts a little timely homily on the virtues of frugality and sobriety, and the need for a humble and grateful heart. But humility—at best an objectionable virtue—has gone out of fashion, and gratitude is a plant which is not usually fostered with the care it deserves. The poor of Moresby accepted Miss Simpson's gifts—they were glad enough to accept anything—but they ridiculed her homilies behind her back.

"I always believe in a word in season," she informed the vicar.

"So do I," he returned. "Only it is so difficult to recognise the season."

Miss Simpson attended the Hall parties, not because she enjoyed them, but she could not keep away. She made unkind remarks about the Chadwicks and their doings. She was, though she would not have admitted it, jealous. She resented the coming of these people; their careless patronage of the village, which their immense wealth made so easy that it could scarcely be counted to them as a kindness; their untiring social efforts to bring Moresby and Rushleigh into contact, and to gather all sorts and conditions of men and women beneath their hospitable roof. The Chadwicks were altogether too democratic. But above and beyond everything else, the bright, gay personality of saucy Peggy Annersley proved the canker in the rose of her happiness. She suspected Peggy Annersley of having designs on Mr Musgrave, which was unjust. Peggy had designs on no one at that period in her career.

John Musgrave, despite the pressure that was brought to bear to shake his resolution, refused to take part in the theatricals or to pose in the groups for the living pictures. Mrs Chadwick asked him; Belle attempted persuasion; and Peggy coaxed unsuccessfully. Mr Musgrave was embarrassed at the mere suggestion of dressing in character and posturing before the footlights of the newly-erected stage for the edification of Moresby and the amusement of Mrs Chadwick's guests. He was embarrassed, too, at being compelled to repeatedly refuse his persistent tormentors.

"I did so hope you would be Lancelot to my Guinevere," Peggy said reproachfully. "And I wanted you to be Tristram and Othello to my Isolde and Desdemona. They are all lovely impersonations, and the costumes are gorgeous. You'd make a heavenly gladiator, too."

"I should not be at home in these parts," he said gravely.

"But," urged Peggy, "it's so simple. I'll rehearse you. You'd find it awfully amusing."

"I do not think so," he replied.

"Then will you be Bill Sykes, with Diogenes and a revolver?—and I'll be Nancy. You would only have to murder me. If you don't like the lover parts you'd enjoy that."

There was a gleam in the grey eyes that John Musgrave was unable to account for; he saw nothing funny in such a sordid scene.

"I do not like that idea any better," he said. Then he made a sudden appeal to her generosity, his air slightly apologetic, almost, it occurred to Peggy, humble. "Please leave me out of it," he begged. "I'm a very prosy person. These things are better suited to the younger generation. Many men will enjoy filling these parts with you; I shall enjoy looking on."

Peggy gave in. She had not expected Mr Musgrave to agree to her proposes; she had, indeed, been guilty of teasing him. But she endeavoured with some success to make him believe in her acute disappointment, so that when he left her it was with a sense of his own ungraciousness, and a desire to make amends in any way possible for having been disobliging, if not actually discourteous, to a young lady who was, he could not but admit, both amiable and charming. The difficulty was how to make amends. After considering the matter seriously and developing and rejecting many ideas, he decided that he would be forced to remain indebted until the opportunity presented itself for discharging the obligation. He really felt extremely and quite unnecessarily grateful to Miss Annersley. There was, on the face of it, no obligation to discharge. Mr Musgrave was advancing a little way along the road of complexities that go to the making of human emotions. He had begun by feeling an interest in this young woman. Interest is a comprehensive term embodying many sentiments and capable of unforeseen developments. Peggy was undoubtedly a dangerously pretty person to become an object of interest to a middle-aged bachelor.

If Mr Musgrave thought Peggy pretty—and he did consider her pretty—on ordinary occasions, he found her amazingly lovely tricked out in stage attire, when, at the conclusion of the Christmas Eve dinner, he repaired with the other guests to the temporary theatre and viewed a succession of brilliantly arranged tableaux which, despite the fact that they were exceedingly well done and perfectly staged, he mentally pronounced a stupid form of entertainment for intelligent adults. Mummery of any kind appealed to him as undignified. Never in all his forty years had he felt the slightest temptation to play the fool; it always surprised him to see other people doing it. And this histrionic grouping was but playing the fool in serious fashion; it was a game of vanity better suited to children. But the pictures were pretty. He admitted that. Most of the guests appeared to enjoy them.

"I am afraid you are bored with this," his host said, approaching him during an interval in the performance, having observed with the turning up of the lights Mr Musgrave's serious expression. "Come along to the billiard-room and have a smoke."

"I am not bored," John Musgrave answered, as he left his seat and accompanied Will Chadwick with a willingness which seemed to discredit his assertion. "I was interested, and—and surprised."

"Surprised," suggested Mr Chadwick, "that people can find amusement in this sort of thing? Very little amuses most of us. I've seen quite brainy fellows absorbed in watching flies pitch on a lump of sugar. Their interest was sporting, and had a financial basis, certainly. In this instance it is the pleasure of the senses that is appealed to. I enjoy watching pretty women posturing myself."

"I have no doubt it is artistic," returned John Musgrave reflectively.

It passed through his mind that a pretty woman appeals to the senses quite as effectively in the natural poses of everyday life, but he did not voice his thoughts. The suggestion of women posturing for the enjoyment of the other sex jarred his fastidiousness. John Musgrave held women reverently in his thoughts, or, rather, he held his ideal of womanhood in reverence; he knew very little about women in reality.

There was a fair sprinkling of men in the billiard-room when they entered, who had repaired thither for their refreshment during the interval. They were smoking and drinking and criticising, with a freedom which occurred to Mr Musgrave as not in the best of taste, some of the scenes that had been staged and the persons who had taken part in them. John Musgrave found himself standing near a couple of young men from Rushleigh whom he knew very well by sight, though he was not acquainted with them. One of them was engaged in watching two men playing a hundred up; the other was eagerly talking to his inattentive companion about Peggy Annersley, whose posturing had apparently pleased his appreciative eye.

"She's the gardener," he was saying, and Mr Musgrave frowned with annoyance when he realised who it was the youth was discussing with such avidity. "A lady gardener—a real lady, you know."

His friend, if he heard, showed no interest; his attention was centred in the balls. The youth jerked his arm.

"She is," he insisted, "a real lady. I know it for a fact."

"All right, my dear chap," the other returned, unmoved. "I know quite a nice girl who sells shrimps."

Mr Musgrave felt his anger rising, though why he should feel angry he did not understand. It hurt him that Peggy Annersley's name—the young cub spoke of her as Peggy—should be bandied about in this fashion. It hurt him more that Peggy should be satisfied to dress up and posture for the delectation of these youths. When the rest of the men left the billiard-room he remained behind alone.

Chapter Fifteen.

"Oh," said Peggy Annersley, "I didn't suppose there would be anybody here." This was not strictly accurate, because Peggy had seen Mr Musgrave through the open door as she was passing the billiard-room and had entered on the spur of the moment to discover why he was there, and alone. Such is the bump of feminine curiosity. "Have you been here long?"

"Since the interval," he answered, rising at her entry, and confronting her with the shame-faced air of a man caught playing truant.

"Then you missed the pictures?"

"I was present during the first half of the programme," he explained, feeling awkward under the steady regard of the observant grey eyes. To have missed viewing the pictures he began to realise was a breach of his duty as a guest.

"And you didn't care for them?"

"I would scarcely put it that way," Mr Musgrave said very earnestly. "The pictures were pretty; but the room was very hot; I preferred remaining here. Are the tableaux finished?"

"Not quite. But my part in them is. I came out because I was so thirsty. I've just been murdered by Othello."

She seated herself on a settee and smiled at John Musgrave, who stood surveying her with gravely-intent gaze. She was still attired in Shakespearian costume and wore a little jewelled cap on her bright hair, which fell about her shoulders and gave her an air of extreme youth. John Musgrave, while he regarded her, was thinking how pretty she looked.

"You appear to have a predilection for being murdered," he observed. "What shall I get you—lemonade?"

She made a negative movement of her head.

"Champagne, please. I'm frightfully tired."

Mr Musgrave poured out a glass of the sparkling wine and handed it to her. He stood behind her while she drank it, and when she finished the wine he took the glass from her and replaced it on the table. When he turned about from performing this office he observed Miss Annersley put out a hand towards a box of cigarettes within reach. He had

not suspected before that she smoked. Her action occasioned him a most unpleasant shock. Peggy was to experience a shock also. Before she could select a cigarette and withdraw her hand from the box another hand closed suddenly upon hers and held it firmly. John Musgrave had come quickly behind her and imprisoned her hand with his own.

"Please don't do that," he said. He leaned over the settee, his face almost on a level with hers, his eyes meeting hers steadily. "I've no right to dictate to you... but I wish you wouldn't smoke."

A glint of laughter shone in Peggy's eyes. The situation was growing increasingly funny. In her world, to see women smoke was such an ordinary matter that it had not struck her that anyone—not even John Musgrave—could possibly object. But John, of course, was Moresby, and Moresby had its traditions, and lived by them.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's—unwomanly," he returned seriously.

"Oh!" said Peggy. "What, I wonder, is conveyed exactly by the term 'womanly'? I understood that that expression belonged to the Middle Ages."

"I hope not," Mr Musgrave said.

"Well, define it."

"A womanly woman," Mr Musgrave began slowly, weighing his words as though he felt that the subject were deserving of his utmost care in an appropriate selection of language, "is first and foremost a gentlewoman."

"H'm!" commented Peggy. She was tempted to interrupt him in order to inquire if he did not consider her a gentlewoman, but refrained.

"She is," Mr Musgrave proceeded, "considerate in her actions and in her conversation. She is always sincere and thoughtful for others; and she would never do anything unbecoming to her sex, or unworthy of herself. That is what I understand by the term womanly."

"She would be a bit dull, don't you think?" Peggy hazarded. "She sounds priggish to me. Do you really believe you would like her, Mr Musgrave? I think you'd be fed up in no time. She wouldn't, for instance, permit you to stand talking to her and holding her hand all the while. That would, according to your definition as I interpret it, be unseemly on her part."

John Musgrave promptly released her hand and straightened himself and looked grave. Peggy laughed.

"That would have been better left unsaid," she remarked demurely. "It was an indiscretion of speech. I fear it would take me a long time to learn how to be womanly, don't you?"

"Don't you think that possibly you are womanly without knowing it?" he asked.

"Shall I tell you what the term womanly conveys to me?" Peggy said.

"If you will," he replied.

"It suggests a woman of a big nature and a warm heart. She doesn't bother her head as to whether what she is doing is becoming; but her conscience troubles her when she does something which is not quite square and honest, which is perhaps a little mean. She strives to be helpful and companionable and sympathetic, and she detests censoriousness and unkind criticism, either in herself or others."

"I am afraid," Mr Musgrave said, with an insight which Peggy had not credited him with possessing, "that you are rebuking me for impertinence."

Peggy flushed, and raised her face quickly to his.

"No," she contradicted; "no. I think you meant to be kind."

There was something very bewitching in Peggy's upturned face, in the unwonted earnestness of her eyes, and the sweetly serious curve of the parted lips. John Musgrave, as he returned her steady gaze, was more powerfully influenced than he had any idea of. He believed that his interest in Peggy was of the paternal, platonic order. Many people become obsessed with the platonic ideal and travel far along the road of life without discovering that between a man and woman platonic affection is unnatural. There have been instances of platonic love, but these are few; it is a rare and an abnormal emotion.

"I wish," he said with unusual impressment, "that you would do something to please me."

"What is that?" inquired Peggy, with an instinctive understanding of what he had it in his mind to ask.

"I want you to promise that you will give up smoking."

Peggy did not alter her position; neither did John Musgrave. As she sat looking up at him, a tiny pucker knitting her brows, he remained bending over her, intently watching her face without the alteration of a muscle in his own. He anticipated her answer; none the less he felt extraordinarily disappointed when she spoke.

"I can't do that," she said. "It isn't," she added slowly, "that I do not wish to oblige you, nor that it would be exactly difficult for me to make such a promise. But I can't recognise any reason why I should. It would be tantamount to an

admission that I agree with you that the practice is objectionable. I do not. And I do not wish to encourage your mistaken belief by acquiescing in it. I am sorry. But, you see, I should feel myself something of a humbug if I promised that. I will not, however, offend your sensibilities by smoking in your presence."

"It is the act itself, not the place or time of committing it that is of importance," he said with a touch of displeasure.

Peggy considered this ungracious of him; he might at least have thanked her for her consideration for his feelings.

"In that case," she returned audaciously, "perhaps you will be so kind as to light me a cigarette?"

Mr Musgrave felt annoyed, and showed it.

"No," he answered bluntly. "At the risk of appearing discourteous, I decline to do that."

Peggy was not affronted. She would have thought less of him if he had complied. If one possessed principles, even when they chanced to be mistaken, one had to be consistent and act in accordance with them. Peggy was faithful to her own principles, and she liked sincerity in others.

At that moment, falling upon the sudden hush in the room which had followed John Musgrave's curt speech, starting on a single note, thrice repeated, and then bursting into a joyous peal, the Moresby chimes broke softly on the stillness, died away on the wind, and were borne back to their listening ears with a fuller, sweeter cadence, conveying the message of the centuries of peace and good-will upon earth. Peggy, when she caught the sound, rose slowly to her feet.

"They'll be assembling in the hall now," she said, and looked at John Musgrave. "We had better join them."

"Yes," he said.

Suddenly she held out her hand.

"Peace and good-will," she said, smiling. "We've got to be friends, you know, on Christmas morning."

"Yes," agreed John Musgrave, consulting the clock. "But it wants ten minutes to the hour yet."

Peggy broke into a little laugh and withdrew her hand hastily before he could take it.

"Your speech admits of only one interpretation," she said; "you don't wish to befriends before the hour strikes."

"My remark must have been very misleading to have conveyed that impression," he returned. "I was not aware that we were upon unfriendly terms. A difference of opinion does not necessitate the breaking of a friendship."

"Perhaps not," agreed Peggy, looking amused. "But it strains the relationship somewhat. Come along, Mr Musgrave, and toast the friendship in a bumper of milk punch."

Mr Musgrave accompanied her from the room, and emerging at her side into the great hall, already thronged with the other guests, was instantly separated from his companion by half a dozen eager young men, who bore Peggy away among them and left Mr Musgrave on the outskirts, as it were, of the festivities, looking, as he felt, utterly stranded and out of touch with his surroundings.

Miss Simpson, who had sought in vain for him throughout the evening, seeing him standing alone, so evidently out of his element, made her determined way across the width of the hall and joined him. Mr Musgrave did not feel as grateful to her as he might have felt. He spent much of his time on these social evenings in carefully avoiding her. But it is not always possible to evade a person whose purpose in life it is to frustrate this aim, particularly when the object of the pursuit shrinks from hurting the pursuer's feelings, Therefore when Miss Simpson hurried up to Mr Musgrave, with anxiety and determination in her eyes, he received her with the reserved politeness of a perfectly courteous person, accepting the inevitable with a fairly good grace.

"They are going to sing 'Auld Lang Syne,'" she said. "I loathe these stupid customs. But one cannot make one's self conspicuous; one has to do as the rest do."

"Assuredly," Mr Musgrave agreed, with his ear inclined towards Miss Simpson and his eye fixed on a huge punch-bowl standing on a table in the centre of the hall, presided over by the female butler and her helpers.

The scene in the hall, thronged with its brilliant assemblage of guests, many of whom wore, as Peggy did, the costumes in which they had appeared in the tableaux, suggested to Mr Musgrave's mind a scene from an opera. The broad oak staircase, leading up from either side and ending in a gallery connecting both, was crowded with young people. Peggy had joined one of the groups on the stairs, a group composed largely of young men, whose sallies seemed to be affording her considerable amusement. When the punch was served round and every one, glass in hand, waited for the striking of the hour, looking up to where she stood, leaning against the baluster in her emerald velvet robe, her round white arm upraised holding its glass aloft, Mr Musgrave met her eyes fully as the hour chimed forth, and, meeting them, was conscious that she was looking towards him deliberately, with a kindly smile parting her lips. She leaned down towards him, and, putting the glass to her lips, drank to him. John Musgrave made a slight inclination of his head and drank to her in return. Then, scarce knowing what his companion was saying, amid the hum of talk and laughter, and the curious abstraction of his thoughts, he observed sententiously:

"There is a sort of dignity in these old customs. I do not think I have ever enjoyed a Christmas party more."

And Miss Simpson, who had just remarked to him on the want of respect for the day which this hilarity betokened,

regarded him with a wondering reproach, and answered flatly:

"It is very gay, certainly—but—dignified! Do you really think so?"

Chapter Sixteen.

The vicar, as he took off his surplice after the early celebration on Christmas morning, and turned to hang it on its peg, became aware that Robert had entered the vestry, and was hovering about, busying himself unnecessarily, moving things ostentatiously and replacing them in the same positions, and watching the vicar furtively meanwhile, as a man might whose conscience is not altogether free from reproach. The vicar looked at his sexton with as much severity as he was capable of assuming towards Robert, whose failings were sufficiently familiar to him to have ceased to appear disproportionately grave. But Robert merited rebuke, and was apparently expecting it. In anticipation of reproof he attempted propitiation.

"Never seed a bigger congregation than we 'ad for 'Oly Commoonion this morning, sir," he observed. "Folks don't turn up most places like they do at our church."

Some of the credit for the large congregation he appropriated to himself. The vicar finished disrobing, and then faced deliberately round.

"I am at least relieved," he said, "that you were capable of putting in an appearance."

"Oh ay," Robert answered cheerfully. "I've never failed these thirty year—though there 'ave been times, I allow, when I'd rather a laid a-bed. But Hannah sees to that."

"I heard," the vicar said gravely, "that you were very drunk last night, Robert."

"I was, sir," Robert admitted, unabashed.

When an unpleasant situation had to be faced he liked to face it and get it over. Usually on these occasions he carried matters to a triumphant finish and got as much satisfaction out of them as tribulation. When a thing is done, it's done, was Robert's philosophy; no use grizzling over it.

"I am ashamed of you," the vicar said. "Your conduct was a serious abuse of hospitality. They tell me you were carried home utterly incapable."

"I was, sir," Robert admitted again.

"Hadn't Hannah something to say about that?" the vicar inquired, repressing an inclination to smile. His knowledge of the power and quality of Mrs Robert's eloquence on these occasions suggested that further reprimanding on his side was superfluous.

Robert slowly stroked his beard and looked, the vicar could not but observe, pleasantly reminiscent.

"I expect she 'ad, sir," he said. "But, thank God! I was too far gone to bear aught 'er said. Daresay she talked all night, too; she generally does."

Robert seized the vicar's overcoat and helped him into it, and, with unusual solicitude for his health, inquired if he had not thought of wearing a muffler.

"The cold's cruel," he said. "You ought to take care o' yer throat. Think o' the disappointment if you was laid by, and couldn't preach."

"I wish," the vicar observed drily, "that you would study your own constitution as carefully."

"That's all right, sir," Robert answered, wilfully misunderstanding. "I allays wears a old muffler when the weather's sharp."

He handed the vicar his hat, performing these supererogatory offices with the patronising air of a man humouring his superior's peculiarities.

"Milk punch they said it was," he muttered in the form of a soliloquy. "I thought a babby could 'a' swallowed it. Milk don't digest, I reckon, in a stummick come to my age. But 'twas pretty drinking, howsomever."

So much, the vicar mused, for Robert's repentance. It were as profitable to rebuke the weather for inclemency as Robert for his sins.

The vicar dismissed Robert from his mind on emerging into the open, and allowed his thoughts to dwell instead on something he had witnessed the previous night, and had reviewed so often since, that, brief as had been his glimpse of the scene, it was photographed on his memory with the distinctness of a picture actually present to his gaze. This scene which was so startlingly fresh in his mind was a glimpse he had obtained in passing the open door of the billiard-room, of John Musgrave holding Peggy Annersley's hand while he hung over the back of the settee on which she was seated and looked into the upturned face. So quiet had been the grouping of this picture, so utterly unexpected and unreal had it appeared to Walter Errol's surprised gaze, that it might have been the enactment of another tableau, such as those he had been witnessing in the room he had just left. One long astonished look he had given it, and then, utterly bewildered, like a man who feels his solid world reduced to unsubstantiality, he had passed on and mingled with the other guests in the hall. He had been a witness of the tardy appearance of John Musgrave

and Miss Annersley; and for the rest of the night was conscious of a watchful curiosity in regard to them which, against his volition, he found himself exercising until the party broke up.

"Coelebs!... Old Coelebs!" he mused, and laughed softly as he pursued his way to the vicarage, where, in the cosy morning-room, his wife and tiny daughter waited for him with their Christmas gifts.

A happy man was the vicar that Christmas morning, and comparing his comfortable, pleasant home with the lonely elegance of John Musgrave's house it gave him genuine satisfaction to recall the amazing picture of John Musgrave bending over pretty Peggy Annersley in an attitude which conveyed more to the impartial observer than a merely friendly interest in his charming companion. Possibly last night was the first occasion on which John Musgrave had ever held a girl's hand in this way and hung over her, looking into her eyes. Such conduct in the case of the average man would have counted for nothing, or for very little... But Coelebs... The man who never looked at a woman with the natural interest of the ordinary male...

The vicar broke into a smile at his own thoughts, and, since nothing had been said to raise a smile, was called upon by his wife to explain the cause of his good humour. His answer was ambiguous.

"I think," he said, "that Mrs Chadwick is succeeding in some of her schemes with most unlooked-for results."

"I fail to see that there was anything in last night's party to suggest extraordinary developments," Mrs Errol replied. She had not witnessed the scene which her husband had witnessed and he had not spoken of it to her. "And I don't find anything in that to smile about. You must enjoy an abnormal sense of humour."

"Perhaps I do," he allowed. "Tell me what you think of Miss Peggy Annersley."

Mrs Errol smiled in her turn, and glanced at her husband with the tolerant contempt women show towards their men when they suspect them of falling a victim to the fascinations of a popular member of their sex.

"You, too?" she said.

"There was nothing in my question to justify that remark," said the vicar, who did not, however, appear to resent it. "Like Miss Dartle, I asked for information."

"I think she is quite a nice girl," replied Mrs Errol ungrudgingly; "and, judging by the way in which the men flock after her, they share my opinion. Doctor Fairbridge is crazy about her."

"Oh!" said the vicar. Plainly this intelligence was not pleasing to him. Doctor Fairbridge was the Rushleigh practitioner, and he was young and good-looking, and unquestionably eligible. "You think that, do you? Should you say that he stands any chance of winning her?"

"She seems to like him," Mrs Errol answered. "It would be a very suitable match. He is the right age, and his practice is good. They say he is clever. At the same time, I don't fancy Miss Annersley is the kind of girl who is eager to get married. She will probably be difficult to please."

"H'm?" remarked the vicar, and looked a trifle serious. He began to entertain doubts of Miss Annersley. "You wouldn't, I suppose," he hazarded, "suspect her of being a flirt?"

"That depends on what you mean exactly. Given the opportunity, every woman is a flirt. I wouldn't accuse her of being unscrupulous. But all girls like attention; it is against human nature to discourage what one derives amusement from."

"I wish human nature were different in that respect," the vicar returned.

He was quite convinced that John Musgrave had no thought of flirting, and he did not like to believe that Miss Annersley was merely deriving amusement. She had looked, he recalled, on the previous night quite sweetly serious. But a woman might look serious and yet be inwardly amused. If Peggy Annersley was amusing herself at John Musgrave's expense it would be the finish, the vicar realised, of his friend's liking and respect for her sex. John Musgrave was not the type of man to make a heartbreak of it, but assuredly he would not essay a second time.

"I should like to know," Mrs Errol said, "why you are so particularly concerned with Miss Annersley's matrimonial affairs? Your interest is most extraordinary."

Then it was that the vicar told her of the scene he had accidentally witnessed the previous night. She was not so greatly impressed as he had expected her to be, but a scene described is less effective than the same scene actually beheld. He found that he could not adequately depict the expression on the two faces; he could only explain baldly that John seemed very much in earnest.

"John always is," she retorted. "That's what makes him so dull. You don't for one moment imagine, do you, that a pretty girl like Miss Annersley would fall in love with John?"

"I do not think that I took her feelings into consideration," he answered. "I have a very strong suspicion that John is falling in love with her."

"I'm not sure," returned Mrs Errol, smiling, "that that wouldn't be more amazing than the other thing. I can't credit it—but I hope he is."

"Time will show," the vicar said. "If she is nothing better than a little baggage I hope he isn't. He deserves a higher reward than the knowledge that he is affording Miss Annersley amusement."

The Errols were dining with Mr Musgrave that day; an early dinner, according to the invariable custom in Mr Musgrave's household on Christmas Day. The Musgrave party attended the morning service, at which the party from the Hall was also present. And to Mrs Errol's surprise—she had never seen him there before—Doctor Fairbridge, who had motored out from Rushleigh, was seated beside Peggy Annersley in one of the Hall pews. Subsequently he accepted Mrs Chadwick's invitation and returned with her party to the Hall.

Notwithstanding that Mrs Errol had professed scepticism of the romance her husband suspected in connection with John Musgrave and pretty Peggy, she found herself taking a greater interest in the principals in the little comedy, so that her attention wandered a good deal during the service and her watchful eyes travelled more than once from the demurely unconscious face of the girl to the strong, grave, immovable face of Mr Musgrave, which, for all its impassive expression, had once during the singing of the first hymn turned deliberately in Peggy's direction with a quickness and keenness of look which Mrs Errol described as searching. If there was anything in her husband's assumption—and she began to think there might be—John Musgrave would be well advised not to dally over his love-making, or the more energetic younger man would anticipate him in the bid for Miss Annersley's favour. Looking at the young doctor and comparing his youth with Mr Musgrave's somewhat austere middle-age, Mrs Errol formed the opinion that John's chances were not great.

After the service the opposing forces met in the churchyard and exchanged greetings. It occurred to Mrs Errol that Peggy, hedged about with a bodyguard of young men, was fairly inaccessible; nevertheless John Musgrave penetrated the group and shook hands with her. The girl, Mrs Errol observed, aided him in his purpose. She drew a little apart and remained chatting with him for some minutes—minutes during which Mr Musgrave's gaze never left the winsome face with its laughing eyes, which were raised in frank good-fellowship to his own. Whether there was any sentiment in his preference or not, the preference was undoubtedly there.

Mrs Sommers' eldest boy, John the second, aged five, broke away from his mother and flung himself upon Peggy, interrupting John the elder's tête-à-tête.

"I wish you were coming with us," he said.

"That's very sweet of you," replied Peggy, with her arm about the child.

"Persuade her to, John," said Mr Musgrave.

Peggy flashed a look at him.

"I wish I could," she said; "but..."

"Of course," he returned promptly. "I understand that it's not possible."

"Why can't you come?" urged John the second, tugging at her hand. "Uncle John wants you, and so do I. Why can't you come?"

"Miss Annersley has her aunt's guests to entertain, John," Mr Musgrave explained. "I am afraid we can't prefer our claim."

"She isn't Miss Annersley, she's Peggy," the boy corrected. "Aren't you?"

Peggy laughed.

"Sometimes I am," she admitted. "But that's a special privilege, John."

"What's that?" asked John junior.

Mr Musgrave, with a hand on his small nephew's shoulder, undertook to answer this question.

"It is something you enjoy on account of your youth, and from which I am debarred, though I should better appreciate it, on account of my age. Youth has advantages."

"I don't think," said Peggy, looking amused, "that he is the least bit wiser for your very able explanation."

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you can put it more plainly."

"A special privilege, John," she returned obligingly—and if she were addressing the child she looked directly at the man—"that sort of special privilege, is a favour one extends to a person one likes, in return for a similar favour. I don't think that is much clearer," she added, and suddenly felt herself blushing beneath Mr Musgrave's steady gaze.

"The definition is perfectly obvious," he replied. "But I fancy we have both been talking over John's head."

Peggy stooped abruptly and kissed the child. When she straightened herself she moved away with him and joined Mrs Sommers.

Chapter Seventeen.

John Musgrave Sommers was in disgrace. He had been guilty of impertinence to Eliza; worse, he had committed an assault by kicking her maliciously with intent to do bodily harm. Eliza had complained to Mr Musgrave, and had presented his nephew's conduct in the light of an enormity which she could not overlook until adequate measures had been taken to correct this infantile depravity, and so insure against a repetition of the offence.

Mr Musgrave carried the complaint to his sister and supported her with his presence, if with little else, in her attempt to bring the delinquent to a proper state of repentance. John Musgrave Sommers presented a defiant front and refused with all the obstinate inflexibility of his five years to acknowledge himself in the wrong.

"It was very wicked of you to kick Eliza," his mother insisted. "When you are in a better frame of mind you will realise that. You must go to her and tell her you are sorry."

"I'm not sorry," John returned stoutly, with a watchful eye on his uncle, whose displeasure was manifest and the quality of whose anger John, not being familiar with, was anxious to test before provoking it further with possible unpleasant results to himself.

This positive assertion of an unrepentant spirit nonplussed his elders. Belle looked helplessly at her brother for inspiration; but Mr Musgrave avoided her eye with a care which suggested a cowardly sympathy with the offender if not with the offence. The punishment of children, while he admitted its necessity, was peculiarly distressing to him. Master John Sommers, with a child's quick intuition, began to realise that he had very little to apprehend from his uncle, but his mother was a different matter; he had had contests with her before and he could not remember ever having come out of them triumphantly.

"John," she said gravely, and with a gentleness which John did not find reassuring, because his mother was always gentle even before and after she smacked him, "you are not going to be a naughty little boy and grieve mother. You know it is very wrong to be rude to anyone, and it is dreadful to kick. I insist on your telling Eliza you are sorry. You *must* be sorry."

"I'm not," John persisted.

Belle appealed to her brother direct.

"Uncle John, what is to be done with this very naughty little boy?"

Mr Musgrave flushed and looked almost as uncomfortable as though he were being reprimanded for the kicking of Eliza instead of the chubby, unrepentant little sinner before him. He stared at the culprit and frowned.

"Perhaps," he suggested hopefully, "if you let him run away and think about it he will change his mind."

"No," said Belle firmly, having grasped the fact that she would get no help in this quarter; "he has got to change his mind now. If you won't say you are sorry, John, you will be punished—severely."

John began to look sulky, but he showed no indication of a proper sense of his own wickedness. He had kicked Eliza deliberately, and had experienced immense satisfaction in the knowledge that he had thereby got a bit of his own back. Eliza was always annoying him and locking him out from the kitchen. He liked the kitchen. Martha gave him cakes when he found his way there; but Eliza balked him in his purpose whenever she could by closing the door in his face.

"But I'm not sorry," muttered John obstinately. "And you told me I mustn't tell stories."

It occurred to Mr Musgrave that the situation had come to a deadlock. He did not see how his sister would confute this argument. Clearly if John was not sorry he ought not to be compelled to make a false admission. To frighten a child into telling a lie was mistaken discipline.

Whether Mrs Sommers' diplomacy would have proved equal to coping with the difficulty remained an undetermined point, for at this moment Mr Sommers entered the room, and his wife, manifestly relieved at his opportune arrival, shifted the responsibility of parental authority to his shoulders. Mr Sommers, while he appreciated the enormity of the offence, admitted in his own mind—though he would not have allowed his son to suspect it—extenuating circumstances. Had he been thirty years younger he would probably have acted in a similar manner. Eliza would exasperate any small boy into committing an assault.

"Come here," said Charlie Sommers. He seated himself in a chair, and drew his son towards him and held him firmly between his knees. "Why did you kick Eliza?"

"Because she's a disagreeable cat," replied John.

"It is very rude to call people names," his father said with a severity he was far from feeling, his opinion coinciding with his son's. "And it is very rude to your uncle to behave in this way in his house. I expect he will not invite you again. Don't you know it is very wrong to kick?"

John deliberated this. He knew very well that it was wrong, but he had a strong disinclination towards admitting it. His father waited for an answer.

"Yes," he acknowledged grudgingly.

"And aren't you sorry for doing wrong?"

"No," the culprit replied with less hesitation this time.

"Then I must make you sorry," said Mr Sommers resolutely. "Do you want me to spank you, John?"

John began to whimper. Of the three adults present John Musgrave was the most unpleasantly affected by his namesake's tears; familiarity with John junior's little tricks had hardened his parents' sensibilities.

"Don't you think," said Mr Musgrave uneasily, "that you are—frightening the child?"

Charlie Sommers looked at his brother-in-law with amusement.

"He is less frightened than you are," he answered. "He is only bent on getting his own way. Ring the bell, Uncle John, for Eliza. John is going to tell her he is sorry."

"I'm n-not sorry," blubbered John.

"You will be presently. If you won't tell Eliza you are sorry for kicking her I am going to spank you."

Mr Musgrave rang the bell and Eliza answered it in person, looking more sour than usual by reason of her outraged feelings. When her glance fell on Master John Sommers, sulky and unrepentant, but decidedly less confident, she sniffed indignantly and looked with cold disapproval on the assembled group. Mr Musgrave walked away to the window and stood with his back to the room. For the first time since he had engaged her he was not sure that he approved of Eliza, and he had never before felt so irritated with her habit of sniffing.

"I regret to hear that my little boy has been rude to you," Mr Sommers said. "I have troubled you to come here in order that he shall apologise. Now, John, tell Eliza that you are sorry for being naughty."

"I'm—"

John felt the sudden tightening of the hand upon his arm, and hesitated. Then he faced Eliza with all the malevolence which a small boy is capable of expressing in his countenance, and muttered ungraciously:

"I'm sorry, because I've got to be."

"Try again," said Mr Sommers relentlessly; and Eliza sniffed louder, her light eyes on the child's angry face.

John capitulated before overwhelming odds.

"I'm sorry," he said more politely, and looked at his foot in preference to Eliza's hard face, the foot which had committed, the assault.

"I've never been accustomed to be treated like that by children," said Eliza acidly. "Boys are troublesome, I know, but they oughtn't to be rude. I'm not used to it. I wouldn't take a place where there were children, especially boys—"

"That will do, Eliza," observed Mr Musgrave, turning round. "You may go."

At the curt finality of his tone Eliza withered. For a moment she appeared to be about to break, forth again, but, changing her mind, sniffed herself out of the room and closed the door viciously. Charlie Sommers, still holding his son between his knees, gazed sternly into the small rebellious face.

"You cut away upstairs, John," he said. "And if ever you kick anyone again I'll whip you."

He got up when his son, obeying his instructions with extraordinary alacrity, had made his exit, and faced his brother-in-law with a laugh.

"John," he said, "I am of the opinion that the punishment was in excess of the fault. How can you endure that sour-faced she-devil in the house? The look of her is enough to put a man off his meals."

"She is perhaps a little unsympathetic," John Musgrave allowed, recalling the look in Eliza's eyes while they had rested on the boy. "But she serves my purpose. In a bachelor establishment a middle-aged woman is more satisfactory than a— a younger person."

"The single state has its disadvantages," Charlie Sommers said. "If to employ an Eliza is the penalty for bachelorhood I'd sooner be a Mormon."

"I really think," remarked Belle, who during this discussion had been pursuing a train of thought of her own, "that John ought not to be allowed to go to the kinema party this afternoon. He deserves some punishment. A disappointment like that would leave a more lasting impression."

"Isn't that," asked her brother quickly, "being unnecessarily severe? He is a very small sinner, remember."

"You old dear?" she said, smiling. "You spoil that child. One has to be severe with John; he forgets his sins so readily."

"So did you when you were his age," he answered. "As far as my memory serves, you were indulged more than John is; and I don't think it had a deteriorating effect on your character."

"That settles it," Charlie Sommers put in. "John goes to the Hall."

So John went to the Hall, and in a burst of confidence after the performance confessed to Peggy his wickedness of the morning, for which he expressed still an unrepentant spirit. Peggy carried him for punishment to the mistletoe and kissed him, struggling and resisting, beneath the bough, to Mr Musgrave's open amusement. He wriggled away from her, and pointing a chubby finger at his uncle commanded her to punish Uncle John too.

"But Uncle John doesn't merit punishment," she said, with a bright blush and laughter in her eyes.

"That form of punishment is another special privilege, John," Mr Musgrave remarked, with his gaze on Peggy's rosy

face.

"It is a special privilege which is any man's due," broke in Charlie Sommers, coming up and catching Peggy round the waist and kissing her soundly, "when a girl stands deliberately under the mistletoe."

Mr Musgrave, who had witnessed this attack with amazement, turned away with a sense of annoyance at his brother-in-law's bucolic humour. To kiss a woman beneath the mistletoe appeared to him as vulgar as kissing her without that flimsy excuse. He was surprised that Peggy did not show greater resentment at this treatment.

Charlie Sommers and Peggy looked at Mr Musgrave's retreating back, and then at one another, and smiled.

"You have disgusted Mr Musgrave," she said.

"I rather suspect him of jealousy," he replied. "He hadn't spunk enough or he'd have done the same himself."

She flushed quickly.

"John would never be guilty of impertinence," she returned.

"His sins are those of omission," he retorted. "I think John's an ass."

"I think he is an eminently discreet and comfortable person," she replied. "I should never feel afraid of mistletoe in his presence."

"It appears to me," he observed, eyeing the mistletoe above her head, "that you do not show particular trepidation in regard to the plant in anyone's presence."

Peggy received this remark in scornful silence. It is not always the case that a woman enjoys the last word.

But later in the afternoon, when John Musgrave was departing and she was wishing him good-bye, standing beneath the identical branch of mistletoe in the big dim hall, she saw his eyes travel to the bough and then to her lips, and she stood looking at him, smiling and ironical. John Musgrave might be an eminently discreet and comfortable person, but he was not without certain human weaknesses.

"The druids regarded it as a sacred plant," he remarked, feeling constrained to say something on observing her gaze follow his.

"Did they? They were rather musty old people, weren't they?"

"I think," he returned, "that perhaps I am a little musty too."

He took her hand and raised it and kissed it—under the mistletoe. There was in his action in doing this something so courtly and respectful, something so much more impressive in its significance than in Charlie Sommers' careless embrace, that Peggy found, herself blushing warmly, felt her cheeks glow and her eyes grow bright as Mr Musgrave very gently released her hand and stood again erect, tall and unsmiling, while he bade her farewell. She felt like one of the gentlewomen of bygone times who smiled down at her from faded frames on the walls and who would have curtsied sedately in response to this respectful salutation. Peggy had an idea that she ought to curtsy: instead she said gaily:

"I'm so glad you came. It has been a ripping afternoon, hasn't, it?"

Later, in the solitude of her own room, seated in a low chair before the fire, resting between the kinema entertainment of the afternoon, which had been for the young people of the village, and a similar entertainment to be held the same evening for the older inhabitants, her idle hands lying listlessly over the arms of her chair, a mischievous smile playing about her lips, she pictured the scene again, and Mr Musgrave's face, and laughed softly. A pleasing light of satisfaction shone in her eyes, the satisfaction which a woman knows when she realises the sense of her own power.

"I believe," she said, half aloud, which, since there was no one present to overhear her, was immaterial, "that John is falling in love with me."

The dimple at the corner of her mouth deepened and the laughter in her eyes increased. Peggy was conscious of a feeling of triumph. She liked people to fall in love with her. She experienced a distinct disinclination, however, to fall in love herself. She was a very long way, she believed, from falling in love with fossilised John Musgrave.

Chapter Eighteen.

With the New Year—or, rather, in advance of it—Peggy's youngest sister arrived at the Hall. Mrs Chadwick had invited the entire family; but the Midland doctor could not leave her practice, and the children of the married niece had inconveniently developed whooping-cough; so Sophy, the architect, had divided her holiday, spending Christmas with her married sister and coming on to the Hall for the finish of the festivities, which included a dance to be held on New Year's Eve and a round of somewhat dull dinners and similar entertainments wherewith the Chadwicks' guests sought to make a return of hospitality.

Sophy hated dinner-parties, but she looked forward with considerable enthusiasm to the coming dance. Mrs Chadwick had provided both nieces with dresses for the occasion, and, in order that these independent young women should not feel unduly indebted, she called these her Christmas gifts.

"Aunt Ruby is a brick," remarked Sophy, as she surveyed herself complacently in the mirror in her sister's room and wondered what use the gauzy creation would serve when she got back to her plans and her desk. "I look really *chic*, don't I?"

"You look sweet," Peggy said with warm sincerity; and her sister caught her round the waist and drew her to the glass and stood holding her and surveying their double reflections with critical, unenvious eyes.

"I look just a plain young gawk beside you," she said. "You *are* pretty, Peggy. You grow prettier every year. Is the masculine breast of Moresby susceptible?—or is Moresby wholly feminine? A bachelor—an eligible bachelor—would be an anomaly in a place like this."

"There is John," said Peggy, smiling.

Her sister's brows lifted ironically.

"John! Has it come to that already? Who is John?"

"We passed him on the road from Rushleigh," Peggy explained. "The comfortable-looking person in the motor with the fur on his coat."

Sophy laughed.

"Is that all Moresby can produce?... You poor dear! John looks about as romantic as a city alderman. I can tell you exactly the kind of man he is: he attends church regularly and collects the offertory, and he subscribes handsomely to all the local charities. His opinion carries weight, not because it is really worth anything, but because he is a local institution and because the motor and the fur coat give him an air of prosperous distinction. He stands for usage in Moresby; and usage, coupled with a substantial banking account, gains respect. I shall enter the lists and try to cut you out with John."

Peggy received this intimation with amusement.

"Your tongue is too sharp," she said. "John likes womanly women."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Sophy, with a curious little twist of the lips. "I hope he is prepared to match his ideal's womanliness with a corresponding manliness. That is a point these fastidious people are apt to overlook." She scrutinised her sister with a wicked little smile and touched the becoming dimple at the corner of Peggy's mouth with the tip of a long, well-shaped finger. "I believe you are cultivating the quality," she said.

"What quality?"

"Womanliness, my innocent," Sophy retorted, and laughed again. "Don't do it, my Pegtop. It is not womanly to tamper with a fastidious middle-aged heart."

"John wouldn't consider it womanly of us to be discussing him in this manner," Peggy returned.

"And I'm equally convinced he wouldn't consider it womanly of you to take liberties with his Christian name," said Sophy. "I think it will be a good day for John when Aunt Ruby takes you abroad in the spring. By the way, isn't John Mrs Sommers' brother? Yes! Well, she is all right. He can't be such an absolute bore, after all."

One thing Sophy discovered during the New Year's Eve ball, which was that if Moresby could not produce any young men, Rushleigh could; that one of these was well-favoured and agreeable; that, moreover, he was very unmistakably in love with her sister. It was significant in Sophy's opinion, that her sister, while speaking of John with such ready flippancy, had refrained from mentioning Doctor Fairbridge altogether. Clearly such unnatural reserve on Peggy's side did not originate from a lack of interest; no girl, Sophy's experience assured her, lacks interest in a good-looking man who favours her with a generous share of that same quality. The conclusion she arrived at, therefore, was that Peggy, being pleasantly embarrassed by his devotion, was desirous of appearing unconscious of it.

Peggy introduced Doctor Fairbridge to her sister; and Sophy danced with him several times, and found him extremely entertaining. He was, and she knew it, exerting himself to create a good impression, which amiability, though not disinterested, pleased Sophy. She ranged herself promptly on his side, prepared to champion him whole-heartedly in his bid for her sister's favour. John Musgrave she refused to consider in the light of a possible rival.

Mr Musgrave did not care about dancing, but he sat through one of the intervals beside Sophy in the warmth of the great fire in the hall and asked her several astonished questions relative to her work, and showed surprise when she informed him that she had drawn up some of the plans for the reconstruction of the home farm-buildings. He did not, she perceived, take either herself or her work quite seriously; but that did not trouble Sophy.

"It is such an amazing profession for a young lady," he remarked gravely.

"Why?" inquired Sophy.

"It seems so to me," he replied, unable, he found, to explain further. "These new ideas appear to me fantastic. It's a reversion of things. Women's sphere should be the home."

"Well," said Sophy, smiling, "that's where my sphere lies mainly. I plan homes—for other people. It isn't a new idea really. Abroad, you know, the women build the home—the blacks, I mean. Aunt Ruby says the women make all those jolly ill-constructed huts; they cut the poles, and do everything. I'd like to go out and teach them how to construct them properly, with some idea of ventilation other than a doorway." She laughed cheerfully, and held a daintily-

gloved hand to the flames. "Wouldn't it be awful if we had to sit here with the door open to let the smoke escape?"

Mr Musgrave looked round the beautiful old hall, looked at the several couples seated on the broad oak staircase, looked into his companion's young, fresh, smiling face, and smiled too.

"It would be unpleasantly draughty," he allowed.

She lifted her white shoulders expressively.

"I like modern comfort," she said. "I love everything beautiful and solid and good. I admire this house, and I admire Moresby. It is picturesque. But I wouldn't care to live here."

"No? Why?" he asked.

"I don't enjoy vegetating. I should turn into a cabbage if I had to remain here. It's the same with Peggy. We are all alike that way; we must have change."

"Ah!" he said. "That is a sign of the times, too."

For some reason or other he seemed ill-pleased with her last remark, though he could not have explained why a desire for change in a young lady whom he met for the first time should disturb him. Perhaps it was less the expression of Sophy's own inclination than that reference to a similar taste on her sister's part which vexed him; or it may have been that he resented the general tone of her remarks about the desirability of Moresby as a permanent dwelling-place. He had lived most of his life in Moresby, and he felt no nearer in kin to the vegetable world now than in the days of his more fervid youth.

"It is natural that the present generation should be representative of the times," observed Sophy cheerfully. "I wouldn't wish to be an anachronism."

She laughed gaily at the perplexed gravity of his face. Her sister's opinion, expressed earlier in the evening, to the effect that John would not like her because of the sharpness of her tongue, occurred to her as surprisingly astute. John certainly did not like her. Possibly he cherished antipathy towards most things which he failed to understand.

Mr Musgrave had never met such an astounding young woman before. By comparison, Peggy Annersley appeared a very simple and gracious contrast. He was getting perilously near to thinking of Peggy as womanly; and yet when he first met Peggy that flattering adjective was the last he would have applied as fittingly describing her. He had almost forgotten the abominable overalls. He certainly was not thinking of them when presently Peggy flitted up to them, a distractingly pleasing sight in blue, with blush roses at her breast. The roses had been made in Paris, but Mr Musgrave did not detect their artificiality. Peggy dexterously exchanged her own partner for her sister's escort, and sat down beside Mr Musgrave on the big oak seat.

"I'm tired," she said, and played absently with her fan, making the remark as though she considered some explanation of this rescue of her bored young sister necessary. Sophy's idea of enjoyment was not, she knew, consistent with sitting out when she might be dancing; and the band, hired for the occasion from Rushleigh, was playing a two-step.

She did not look tired when she made this admission. But Mr Musgrave was not observant, and he considered it becoming in a woman to confess to fatigue. Also the substitution of companions was entirely agreeable to him. Peggy was undeniably the more charming of the two sisters.

"Don't you dance?" she asked presently.

"These new dances are unfamiliar," he replied. "I used to waltz years ago; but, save for an occasional square dance, I have not engaged in the exercise for so long that I expect I have forgotten the steps. I like to look on."

He was not, however, indulging his liking; there was no view of the dancing from where they sat. The couples on the staircase had melted away with the first strains of the music, and Peggy and John Musgrave had the old hall to themselves.

"I don't care about looking on," said Peggy. "I like to take part, or get away from it altogether. It's nice sitting here; it's restful."

She lifted the little decorated programme hanging from her fan and studied it, wrinkling her pretty brows over the undecipherable initials which defaced its page.

"I don't believe you have asked me for a single dance," she said, the faintest trace of reproach perceptible in her voice.

Before this attack Mr Musgrave experienced some embarrassment. The rebuke in its directness was tantamount to an accusation of negligence; in its suggestion of an invitation it implied a compliment. John Musgrave was as much discomfited by the one as by the other.

"I—I didn't wish to trespass on your good nature to that extent," he replied.

"Isn't that just a little unkind?" hazarded Peggy, with a smile which brought the dimple into play.

Mr Musgrave fell to studying the dimple while Peggy studied her card, and became so intent in this pleasing form of research that he omitted to answer her question. Presently he took the card from her.

"Is it filled?" he inquired.

"There's one blank—a square, towards the end," replied Peggy demurely, not thinking it necessary to tell him with what difficulty she had preserved that blank space in her programme.

"I can't dance," he said, reddening. "I've forgotten how. It wouldn't be fair to spoil your enjoyment. So many people would be grateful for the privilege of dancing it with you."

Peggy shook her head.

"I do not feel like gratifying them," she said.

Very gravely and deliberately Mr Musgrave took hold of the tiny pencil hanging by its slender cord from the card, and, pencil in one large gloved hand and programme in the other, looked searchingly into the grey eyes that met his steadfast scrutiny with a kindly smile.

"Does that," he asked, "convey a gracious permission to me to write my name against the blank?"

"Not—unless to do so would be equally agreeable to you," Peggy answered.

Mr Musgrave did not immediately remove his gaze from hers. So long, indeed, did he continue looking at her that Peggy felt her cheeks grow warm beneath his earnest eyes. Then he transferred his attention from her face to the card he held, and wrote his name clearly, "John Musgrave," in the single blank space thereon.

"Thank you," he said, and returned her programme to her with a courteous bow.

Peggy, experiencing a timid embarrassment in having so easily gained her point, felt curiously inadequate to making any suitable reply. She took the card from him with nervous fingers and let it fall into her lap, and sat gazing into the fire abstractedly, concealing in this concentration on the flames the tiny gleam of triumph that lighted the grey eyes. The thought, shaping its form mutely in her mind in inelegant phraseology, was, in effect, that Moresby would sit up when it saw John treading a measure with herself. Had Mr Musgrave divined that thought it is safe to predict that he would never have led pretty Peggy Annersley out on the ballroom floor.

Chapter Nineteen.

Moresby did "sit up" when Mr Musgrave took the floor with Peggy.

His conduct in doing so was all the more remarkable inasmuch as he had not partnered anyone else during the evening.

Miss Simpson, seated against the wall, neglected save by the vicar, who sought to entertain her conversationally since he did not dance, saw him with amazed indignation take his place with Peggy in one of the sets on the floor. She could not discredit her own senses or she would have done so, but she was firmly convinced that the reason for his being there was governed less by inclination than by the designs of his partner, in which surmise she was not wholly incorrect. John Musgrave would assuredly never have faced such an ordeal but for the persuasive witchery of a certain fascinating dimple at the corner of a pretty mouth. He was as hopelessly out of his element as a damaged war-vessel in dry dock. Indeed, if one could imagine a war-vessel competing in a regatta against a number of racing yachts, one would have some idea of the utter incongruity of Mr John Musgrave forming one of the double-sided square dance, and going bewilderedly and lumberingly through the intricate mazes of the different figures, guided with unflinching watchfulness by his attentive partner.

Fair hands reached out for his direction, bright eyes watched his hesitation good-naturedly, and their owners obligingly pulled and pushed and guided him to his positions, entering with such zest into the business of keeping him to time that it could not be said he spoilt their pleasure in the dance, however little enjoyment he derived from it himself. Also, it was the one set in the room that was danced with punctilious observance of the regular figures; to have taken the liberties which modern interpretation encourages with the time-honoured dance would have been unthinkable with Mr Musgrave's serious presence, his courtly bows, his painstaking and conscientious performance dominating the set. If the other men found it slow they resigned themselves to the inevitable; their partners at least appeared very well amused.

"You see," Mr Musgrave said to Peggy, his breathing laboured, as he paused beside her at the finish of the grand chain, "I have forgotten how to dance."

"You dance beautifully," Peggy assured him, smiling up into his serious face. "The different figures are a little puzzling to remember. I am enjoying this immensely."

"Are you?" he said, in some surprise. "It is very kind of you to say so."

A regard for truth prevented Mr Musgrave from echoing her sentiments: to sacrifice sincerity in an effort to be courteous was not Mr Musgrave's way; but the knowledge that he was giving her pleasure atoned in a measure for his own lack of enjoyment. That his actions were exciting comment, that heads were turned to watch him, that those in the room who were not dancing were more interested in himself than in the other dancers, was not remarked by him. Mr Musgrave was sufficiently modest to remain unconscious of the attention he received. The dance was to him an ordeal of the utmost gravity, because of his stupidity and his fear of spoiling others' pleasure in it; it was not, however, a humiliating ordeal, as it might have been to a vainer man. In his absorbed attention he missed the smiles and the glances and the whispered comments; missed Miss Simpson's flushed displeasure, and the vicar's amazed

and smiling observation of his old friend's surprising energy; missed, too, his sister's bright glance of quickened interest, and his brother-in-law's amused grin.

"Coelebs?" murmured the vicar under his breath, and caught Belle's eye and smiled at her.

Later he made his way to her, when the room cleared of the dancers and Peggy and her partner disappeared with the stream drifting towards the hall and the conservatory, and other convenient places fitted up for sitting out. Their eyes met in a glance of sympathetic understanding; then Belle linked a hand within his arm and suggested a retreat into the conservatory.

"Is your faith in the power of your sex increasing at all?" he asked, as, having led her to a secluded corner, he seated himself near her, and leaned back in a low chair with an air of thorough enjoyment.

"Ah!" she said, her face turned towards his, amused and retrospective. "You remember that conversation."

"You did not believe, when you challenged Mrs Chadwick, that she would succeed to the extent we have witnessed to-night," he said.

Belle became suddenly grave.

"Would you ascribe the success altogether to Mrs Chadwick?" she asked.

"Well, perhaps not," he allowed. "It is a vicarious triumph. But the success is unquestionable. I experienced in watching John a return of my own youth."

"I wish," Belle remarked with some irrelevance, "that she was a little older."

"Why?" asked the vicar, divining her reason even while putting the question. The wish found an echo in his own thoughts, and had its origin in the same grave doubt.

"I don't think a girl like Peggy will fall in love with John," she said.

"The mere fact that John danced with her does not prove that he is in any immediate danger of falling in love with her," he returned. "I don't suppose such an idea ever entered his head."

Belle laughed.

"I don't suppose it did," she agreed. "But I think she has the power to inspire the emotion in him. It would be regrettable if she succeeded in doing that without intending it."

"It would," he allowed, and was silent for a space, recognising the inability of John's friends to safeguard him against the danger if Miss Peggy Annersley chose to work in opposition to them. "She seems," he suggested hopefully, "to be quite kind and sincere."

"She is an incorrigible little flirt," Belle replied, smiling at his rather obvious attempt to reassure her. "I know her a good deal better than you do."

"All good women, I understand," he returned, recalling his wife's remarks on the same subject, "flirt, given the opportunity. Since you mention the propensity in connection with her, I have reason to believe she flirts with Robert. He has a poor opinion of her courage and a great idea of her amiability."

"I can forgive her for flirting with Robert," said Belle; "he is such a quaint old dear. But... John!"

"I refuse," said the vicar with gentle firmness, "to entertain any unworthy thought of her in that connection. She has probably succeeded in discovering in John what you and I have failed in discovering—the vein of youthfulness he has concealed so successfully all these years. Forty is the prime of life. It will not surprise me in the least if John proves himself to be more youthful than Miss Annersley."

"She is only twenty-eight," said Belle.

"John is younger than that in experience," he replied. "I am beginning to believe that at heart he is still a boy. No man who was not a boy at heart could have concentrated so much energy and earnest endeavour upon an exercise at once unfamiliar and distasteful. A boy will do what he dislikes doing if he recognises that the doing is expected of him; a man studies in preference his inclination. You cannot urge that John's inclination tends, towards dancing."

"No," she answered. "But I can dispute your point, because plainly John's inclination tends towards pleasing Peggy."

"Well, yes," the vicar conceded. "I begin to believe you are right."

If he entertained the smallest doubt on that head, the doubt would have been dispelled could he have looked at the moment upon the picture of Mr Musgrave seated with his late partner in a retired spot, screened from the curious by tall palms and other pot-plants, to which retreat Peggy had led him, as she led only her favoured partners, at the finish of the dance. Mr Musgrave sat forward in his seat, fingering one of the blush roses which had fallen from Peggy's dress when she left the ballroom. A clumsy movement of his own towards the finish of the dance had been responsible for the damage, as he was well aware. He had picked up the rose when it fell, and he was now smoothing and touching its petals as he held it lightly between his fingers, as once he had smoothed and touched, and idly played with and destroyed, a glove which she had dropped.

"I fear," he said, "I am in fault for the detachment of this. You will begin to think me a very clumsy person."

"Those little accidents happen so often when one is dancing," she replied. "It is of no consequence."

"It could, perhaps," he suggested, "be sewn on again."

"I don't think it is worth bothering about," she answered. "Besides, it is broken off at the head. Never mind the rose; it isn't a real one. I hope you weren't horribly bored at dancing with me? I believe you only danced because—"

She paused. Mr Musgrave, still fingering the silken petals of the rose, looked up inquiringly.

"Why do you think I danced?" he asked.

"Because I asked you to," she answered, smiling.

He smiled too.

"No," he contradicted. "The idea certainly arose from your suggestion. I doubt whether I should have the courage to inflict myself on anyone as a dance partner without that encouragement. But I had another reason."

"Tell me," she said softly, and looked at him with so demure an expression, and then looked away again even more demurely, so that had the vicar chanced upon this tableau also he would assuredly have applied to her the term he had once made use of to his wife in speaking of her; he would have called her a little baggage. But the vicar was not there to see, and John Musgrave rather liked the demure expression. He had an altogether different term for it, which was "womanly."

"If it interests you to know," he said, "I had in remembrance the occasion when I declined to oblige you in the matter of the tableaux. I did not desire to appear ungracious a second time."

"Then," said Peggy, in a low voice, and still without looking at him, "you danced to please me."

"You have stated my reason correctly this time," John Musgrave answered quietly. "I wanted to please you."

He rose as the sound of the music broke upon their ears, and offered her his arm.

"And now I am going to please myself," he said, "and watch you dancing this."

When he led her back to the ballroom and delivered her to her partner he became aware as he stood for a moment alone at the entrance to the crowded room that he still held the silken rose in his hand. He looked at it in some perplexity. Mr Musgrave was a man of tidy habits; to drop the rose upon the floor was not a tidy habit; it would, moreover, be in the way, and it would certainly get crushed. He slipped it instead into his pocket. Clearly in the circumstances that was the best thing to do with it. The present difficulty of the disposal of the rose being thus overcome, Mr Musgrave dismissed from his mind the embarrassment of its further disposal and turned his attention to the agreeable occupation of observing the graceful evolutions of the various couples on the floor; and if his eyes followed one figure more particularly, other eyes were doing the same, so that it could not be said of him that he was in any way peculiar in his preference for watching the prettiest and most graceful dancer in the room.

Chapter Twenty.

When Peggy Annersley got out of her ball-dress in the early hours of that New Year's morning she slipped on a comfortable dressing-gown and sat down before the fire and lighted a cigarette, while she awaited the arrival of her sister, whose room adjoined hers, and who, on separating outside the bedroom door, had stated her intention of joining her to talk over the evening before going to bed. Peggy was very agreeable to talk over anything. She was not in the least sleepy, and only pleasantly tired. Excitement with her acted as a nerve-tonic, and the night had not been without its excitements.

Sophy entering in a similarly comfortable deshabelle, and approaching the hearth, hairbrush in hand, surprised her sister looking contemplatively into the flames and smiling at her thoughts. She was wondering—and it was this speculation which brought the smile to her lips—what John had done with her rose. She had made some search for it after he had left and had failed to discover it. It crossed her mind that perhaps John made a practice of collecting such souvenirs.

"You look," said Sophy, as she stood for a moment and scrutinised the smiling face, "wicked. A lifelong acquaintance with your facial expressions leads me to conclude that you are indulging in a review of your conquests. Vanity will be your undoing, Peg o' my heart."

"Sit down," said Peggy, "and have a cigarette."

Sophy took a cigarette, but she did not immediately light it. She put her slippers on the fender and continued her study of her sister's face. Seen in the flicker of the firelight, with the brown curls falling about her shoulders, Peggy made a charming picture. She looked so surprisingly young and so full of the joy of life. But she was not young, Sophy reflected. In a few years she would be thirty, and after thirty a woman loses her youth.

"I like Doctor Fairbridge," Sophy remarked, with an abruptness that caused the smile to fade, though the challenge did not, she observed, produce any other effect.

"So do I," agreed Peggy.

"He is in love with you," said Sophy.

"He thinks he is," Peggy corrected. "I expect he often finds himself in that condition."

"That's hedging, Peggy. He isn't half bad. You might do worse."

"I might. I daresay I shall," returned Peggy unmoved.

"You'll die an old maid, my Pegtop; men are none too plentiful."

"I can even contemplate that condition undismayed," Peggy replied calmly. "The unmarried woman is the best off, if she would only recognise it. Marriage is—"

She paused, at a loss for a fitting definition, and during the pause Sophy lighted her cigarette and smoked it thoughtfully and looked into the fire.

"Marriage isn't the heaven many people think, I know," she allowed; "but it—settles one."

"It settles two as a rule," Peggy retorted flippantly.

She wrinkled her brows and stared into the fire likewise, and was silent awhile.

"I have never heard you so eloquent on marriage before," she said presently. "I don't believe, as a matter of fact, I have heard you discuss the subject until now. Are you contemplating it?"

Sophy laughed consciously.

"There's some one," she confided, and hesitated, aware of her sister's quickened interest. "But he's poor," she added hastily. "He's an architect too. One day, perhaps..."

"One day, of course," Peggy returned softly, and got up and kissed the young, earnest face.

"I'm so glad, dear. I want to hear all about him."

"Another time," said Sophy, smiling. "I am a little shy of talking about him yet. But he is a dear."

"I am sure he is, or you wouldn't care for him."

Peggy stood in front of the fire with her back to it, and regarded her sister critically. She regretted that Sophy's romance had not sooner revealed itself. Assuredly, if their aunt had known of it, the dear would have been included in the Hall party.

"And so we have the reason for your newly-awakened interest in the affairs of the heart of less fortunate folk," she remarked presently. "That's rather nice of you, Sophy. Most people when they have 'settled' themselves don't care a flick of the fingers about the settlement of the world in general."

"I don't suppose I feel especially concerned about the world in general myself," replied Sophy. "You can scarcely class yourself in that category."

"Oh, it's I?" said Peggy, smiling ironically. "I thought it was Doctor Fairbridge you were particularly interested in."

"He is nice," Sophy insisted.

"Is he? He didn't happen to tell you, I suppose, as he did me when we first met, with an air of weary resignation to the obligation of his profession, that he had to marry because unmarried medical men were at a disadvantage?"

Sophy looked amused.

"I don't think if he had I should have placed undue importance on that," she replied.

"Perhaps not, since you have no intention to assist him in his difficulty. But imagine what a complacent reflection it will be for his wife when she realises that she owes the honour of the bestowal of his name upon her to the accident which made him a doctor, and to the super-sensitiveness of the feminine portion of his practice."

"And because of that unfortunate remark of his," Sophy observed with an air of reproach, "you intend to snub him badly one day."

"Snubbing," Peggy returned, "is a wholesome corrective for conceited men."

"I don't think he is nearly so conceited," Sophy contended, "as the pompous person you delight in encouraging to make a fool of himself."

It was significant that although no mention was made of Mr Musgrave's name, although her sister's description was so little accurate as to be, in Peggy's opinion, a libel, she nevertheless had no difficulty in recognising to whom Sophy thus unflatteringly alluded. For a moment she did not answer, having no answer ready, which was unusual. She met Sophy's steadfast eye with a slightly deprecating look, as though she acknowledged reluctantly the justice of the rebuke to herself contained in the other's speech. Then she laughed. There was a quality of mischief in the satisfied ring of the laugh, a captivating infectiousness in its quiet enjoyment. Sophy laughed with her.

"It's too bad of you, Peggy," she protested.

"You have not, for all your shrewdness," observed Peggy deliberately, "gauged Mr Musgrave's character correctly. He couldn't make a fool of himself, because he has no foolish impulses. He is the antithesis of a conceited person. He is a simple, kindly soul, with a number of false ideas of life, and a few ready-made beliefs which he is too conservative to correct or individualise. Aunt Ruby is bent on modernising him; but to modernise John Musgrave would be like pulling down a Norman tower and reconstructing on its foundation a factory-chimney of red brick. I prefer Norman towers myself, though they may have less commercial value."

"You don't mean," said Sophy, opening her eyes very wide, "that you like John Musgrave?"

"As for that," returned Peggy provokingly, "he is, I think, a very likeable person. I believe," she added, with another quiet laugh, "that he entertains a similar opinion of me."

"Does he know you smoke?" inquired Sophy with sarcasm.

"He does. He has attempted unsuccessfully to check the habit."

Sophy appeared to find this amusing. Her merriment had the effect of making Peggy serious again.

"I think being in love is transforming you into a sentimental goose," she remarked with some severity. "It is plain that you consider every one must be suffering from the same, idiotic complaint. It will be a relief when you are married. That is the surest cure for sentiment that has been discovered up to the present."

Sophy threw the end of her cigarette in the fire and started to brush her hair.

"On the next occasion when I visit the Hall," she observed maliciously, "I anticipate there will be no smoking allowed in your bedroom."

"It is a vile practice in anyone's bedroom," Peggy returned amiably.

"Besides," added Sophy with a laugh, "it is so unwomanly."

Mr Musgrave also was engaging in his after-dance reflections as he prepared for bed in a room in which there burned no comforting fire. He had taken the rose from his pocket on removing his dress-coat because his man when he brushed the coat in the morning was very likely to go through his pockets, and Mr Musgrave had no wish for him to discover anything so altogether foreign to a gentleman's effects in his possession. He placed the rose on his dressing-table, and was so embarrassed at the sight of this incongruous object among his hair-brushes, and other manly accessories of the toilet, that he was unable to proceed with his undressing for staring at the thing. Odd how disconcerting a trifle such as an artificial rose can become adrift from its natural environment. Seen in the front of Peggy's dress the effect had been simply pleasing; seen in his own bedroom the flimsy thing of dyed silk became a symbol—a significant, sentient thing, inexplicably and closely associated with its late wearer. It was as though in looking at it he looked at Peggy Annersley; looked at her as in a mirror, darkly, from which her smiling face, looked back at him.

Perplexed and immeasurably disconcerted, he stared about him, searching for some safe place in which to secrete the thing. Finally he took it up, unlocked a drawer in a writing-table before the window, and hurriedly, and with a guilty sense of acting in a manner unusual, if not absolutely foolish, he thrust the rose out of sight in the farthest corner of the drawer, where it came in contact with another frivolous feminine article; to which article also, besides its natural scent of kid, clung the same subtle, elusive fragrance of violets which clung about the silken petals of the rose; which clung, as a matter of fact, about everything that Peggy wore.

Mr Musgrave shut the drawer hurriedly and locked it, and threw the bunch of keys on the dressing-table where he could not fail to see them when dressing in the morning, and be reminded by the sight of them to transfer them to his pocket. The drawer in the writing-table was the repository for the few and very innocent secrets which John Musgrave jealously guarded from all eyes but his own.

Chapter Twenty One.

A few days after the dance at the Hall Doctor Fairbridge motored out from Rushleigh to pay a call upon Mrs Chadwick. Nominally the call was upon Mrs Chadwick; the object of his visit, however, was to see her niece. It was an object shared by so many that his chance of getting Peggy alone seemed very uncertain. It would appear as though every one were bent on frustrating his attempts to draw her aside from the rest; as though Peggy herself abetted them in their unkind design.

There were staying in the house a number of young people of both sexes. It seemed to Doctor Fairbridge that many of the girls were quite amiable and charming; nevertheless, the majority of the men evinced a predilection for Peggy's society, which predilection, since he shared in it, he might better have understood.

When a man has made up his mind that he wants to marry; when, moreover, he is equally decided in his selection of his future wife, there is on the face of it no reason for delay. Doctor Fairbridge was fully determined on both points; he was also conscious of the danger of delay in the case of a girl so popular as Peggy; therefore he decided to press his suit on the first opportunity, and he hoped the opportunity would present itself that afternoon. Since it showed no likelihood of offering itself, since Peggy betrayed no readiness to assist him, desperation emboldened him to ask her to go with him into the conservatory for a few minutes' private talk.

"Oh!" murmured Peggy, changing colour, "that sounds so dreadfully mysterious."

She accompanied him, nevertheless. Mrs Chadwick, looking after them as they passed through the glass doors and stepped into the moist and enervating atmosphere of the fernery, which led out from the long drawing-room, looked anxious. She was so certain as to what Doctor Fairbridge intended saying, and so uncertain what Peggy would say in response, that she felt strongly tempted to propose a general move in the same direction. But for the conviction that putting off the inevitable is not to put an end to it, she would have proposed this; instead she diverted the general attention by starting one of her inimitable anecdotes; and in the uproarious laughter which greeted the story the retreat of Peggy and her cavalier was successfully covered.

The sound of the merriment penetrated to the fernery, and brought a smile of sympathy to Peggy's lips. She looked for some response at her companion, but Doctor Fairbridge was so extraordinarily grave that the brightness faded from Peggy's face and left her serious too, and a little embarrassed by the silence which fell between them, which he appeared unequal to break. She started to talk in a professional manner about the ferns; but Doctor Fairbridge had no intention of wasting his time on horticultural matters, and he plunged forthwith into the subject he had so keenly at heart. A little halting in his speech, and less assured in manner than when he had solicited the interview, he stood before Peggy, and looked earnestly into the wilful grey eyes, which at the moment were serious enough.

"Miss Annersley," he began—and finding this address too formal for the occasion, hastily substituted her Christian name—"Peggy, I think you can't be altogether unprepared for what I am about to say. You must know by now how things are with me. I love you. I have loved you ever since I first met you."

He spoke as though the meeting had taken place years before instead of two months ago.

"Tell me," he added, with eager persuasiveness, "do you like me?... just a little?"

Now Peggy was a young woman who had listened to such confidences often, and who, by reason of the numbers of her admirers, had grown hardened to their appeals. She found them, however, sufficiently embarrassing to cause her to regret, not so much wounding her lovers, as the trouble she was put to in order to wound them as little as possible. It showed a want of consideration on the part of the men she wished to be friendly with when they made that agreeable condition no longer possible. Youth and beauty in a woman handicap her in the matter of masculine friendship; yet eliminate the disqualifying attributes, and the difficulty of friendship with the opposite sex is even greater. The position therefore becomes well-nigh impossible.

Peggy looked back at the young man with such disconcerting candour in the grey eyes that he began to feel somewhat foolish and found himself reddening awkwardly. A girl when she receives a proposal of marriage has no right to appear so composed.

"I like you so well," Peggy answered him quietly, "that I hope you won't say anything more. It's—such a pity," she faltered, losing something of her former calmness, "to spoil everything. Let us take a mutual liking for granted, and leave it at that."

This sounded like a brilliant inspiration, but was in reality a repetition of a suggestion made on a similar occasion to an entirely different suppliant. The experience of its ill-success on the former occasion might have prepared her for its inefficacy now, but it was the only thing which flashed into her mind at the moment, and she said it a little breathlessly in the hope that it would decide Doctor Fairbridge in favour of retreat. It failed, however, of the desired effect. He caught at the leaf of a palm near his arm and began unthinkingly on its destruction, not looking at the mischievous work of his fingers, but staring at Peggy.

"I can't leave it at that," he said. "It—it isn't liking with me. I love you. I... Please be patient with me, Miss Annersley. I find it so difficult to express all I feel. Of course, I can't expect that you should love me as I love you... How should you? But I am hoping that perhaps—in time—"

He broke off, so manifestly at a loss in face of the discouragement he read in her indifferent look, so awkward and disturbed and reproachful at her lack of reciprocity, that he found it impossible to proceed with his appeal. He had, in rehearsing the interview in bed on the previous night, brought it to such an entirely different issue that the situation as it actually befell found him unprepared. The virile eloquence of the previous night did not fit the present occasion.

"I want to marry," he finished lamely.

That, in the circumstances, was an unfortunate admission. A gleam, expressive of amusement rather than of tenderness, shone in Peggy's eyes.

"I know," she said. "You told me so before... on account of the practice."

He glared at her, flushed and angry.

"Hang the practice!" he said rudely. "I want to marry you."

This bomb, which had been clumsily preparing from the outset, exploded with little effect. Peggy certainly lowered her eyes, and the warm blood mounted to her cheeks; but she did not appear overwhelmed by this frank declaration. It was, indeed, whatever emotion swayed the speaker, so shorn of sentiment in itself that the girl was relieved of any fear she might have entertained of hurting him with a refusal. Had she been as much in love with him as he had professed to be with her, her answer would still have been "No."

"I am sorry," she said, a trifle unsympathetically. "I don't, you see, want to marry you."

"Don't say 'no' without at least considering my proposal," he urged blankly. "I'll wait—as long as you wish. But I can't

take 'no' like that. I've never wanted anything in all my life as I want you. Don't be so unkind, Peggy, as to refuse me a little hope. I'm an ass, I know. And perhaps I have been a little abrupt—"

"Well, a little," agreed Peggy.

"Do you mind," she added quickly, seeing him clutch desperately at a second palm-leaf in his agitation, "keeping to the leaf you have already spoiled?"

He dropped the worried leaf as though it had stung him, and half turned from her.

"You are heartless," he exclaimed with bitterness, taking his defeat ill, recognising that it was a defeat even while he refused to accept her answer as final. He had been so confident of success that his failure was the more humiliating in consequence of his former assurance.

"I feel certain," he resumed more quietly, "that later you will be a little sorry for your unkindness to me. I never loved anyone till I met you. I love you very earnestly."

"I'm sorry," said Peggy again. "I would be a little more sympathetic if I knew how. But, you see, I have never been in love in my life."

"I think I could teach you to love," he said, in all good faith. "I am going to try."

She laughed.

"I never had any aptitude," she said, "unless it was for gardening. You had better give me up, Doctor Fairbridge, as hopeless, and find an abler pupil."

"I shall never," he pronounced solemnly, "give you up. I do not change. I have met the one woman in the world for me. Oh, Miss Annersley," he added, ceasing to be rhetorical and becoming therefore a much more interesting study to Peggy, "don't be too hard on a fellow. I won't bother you any more now. But one day I hope you will listen to me more patiently, and be a little kinder to me. I'm awfully keen on this."

"Yes," said Peggy. "I wish you weren't. I'm just going to forget all you've said, and we will go on being friendly. I am a good deal keener on friendship than on the other relationship."

"Are you?" he said, surprised, as though that were an attitude he had never contemplated before; that he found, indeed, difficult to reconcile with his ideas of girls. "I'm not. But the half loaf, you know... I will content myself with that for the present—only for the present."

How, he wondered, when he returned with Peggy to the drawing-room—which he would have preferred not to do, and only agreed to on her showing him that it might be remarked if he left without taking leave in the usual manner—had he been deceived into making such a miscalculation? Clearly Peggy was a heartless little flirt. She had assuredly encouraged him. He was conscious as he entered the drawing-room in her wake of a slight diminution in his regard for her. There is nothing like a wound to the pride for clearing a man's vision.

"For goodness' sake," exclaimed Peggy, looking back at him over her shoulder as he emerged behind her through the glass doors, "don't wear so long a face. It will be remarked."

Doctor Fairbridge, who felt little inclination towards cheerfulness, mended his expression none the less; but the smile which he summoned to his aid was rather forced.

"I can't act," he said reproachfully. "You've hurt me. I'm feeling sore, Miss Annersley."

"Don't be silly," Peggy admonished him. "You needn't look sore, anyhow."

She led him towards her sister, and left him with her, feeling assured that Sophy would administer an anodyne; Sophy had helped to heal wounds of her making before. She had the knack of putting a man in better conceit with himself; it is a knack which springs from the dictates of a kindly nature.

Peggy herself joined a group of young people who were listening with sceptical amusement to the history of the Hall ghost which Mr Errol, newly arrived, was relating. Peggy seated herself near him.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" she asked.

"Well," he replied with gravity, "there is so much which is incomprehensible that I cannot discredit things merely because I fail to understand them."

She looked at him with interest, while the scepticism of the rest strove courteously to efface itself.

"I heard of the ghost from Robert," she announced. "Hannah has seen it. But Robert didn't seem to know very much about it. It is respectable to have a ghost. I hope it is a pleasant one."

"There are two," he said.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Peggy. "Two misty apparitions! Hannah doesn't own to seeing two. I might be able to stand one, but two would be the death of me. Who are they?"

"One is a hound," he explained; "the other is a lady. They have been seen walking on the terrace in the dusk. They walk the length of the terrace and back, look towards the west, and disappear."

"And then does something awful happen?" inquired one of the listeners.

"No; I never heard that anything happened. Nor does the apparition appear regularly. It has only been seen about three times, and always after dusk."

"I shall watch for it," said Peggy. "I am not in the least alarmed now I know there is a dog. I have never been afraid of a living dog; I couldn't fear a dead dog. I feel nearly as brave as Robert."

She described, almost in Robert's own words, and with a droll mimicry of Robert's manner, his professed contempt for what he could put his hand through and his gruesome familiarity with old bones. Robert was so well known a figure in Moresby, was known even to the guests staying at the Hall, that Peggy's imitation of the sexton's manner provoked the merriment of all her hearers. The vicar was as greatly amused as the rest.

"Robert may be very brave in the matter of ghosts," he said; "but I have known him quail before something not usually considered terrifying."

"What is that?" inquired Peggy.

"A woman," he answered, and met her eyes and smiled.

Chapter Twenty Two.

With the finish of the holidays the guests at the Hall went their several ways, and there was a lull in the feverish round of gaiety which had moved Moresby out of its accustomed calm, and had introduced into the usually contented breasts of the rustic portion of the community a dissatisfaction with their former quiet life and a profound respect for the new residents, quite apart from the prestige that descended upon them by virtue of their dwelling at the Hall. Even in the matter of the home farm, managed and worked entirely by women—which innovation had been looked on distrustfully by the sons of the soil—the Chadwicks were accorded a grudging recognition of success. The home farm was like to prosper. Moreover, it would not interfere with local farmers. Everything which it would produce was to be disposed of in markets which Moresby did not reach. Mrs Chadwick had no intention of using her wealth to the injury of her neighbours; and she made that clear to them before she set about stocking her farm.

Since there was capital at the back of the enterprise, since the farm was stocked with the best, and everything was up to date, and managers and workers alike were keen and experienced, Mrs Chadwick had no misgivings as to the ultimate result of this venture. It was a hobby of hers, and one upon which she spent much time and thought. A woman living in the country needed some outlet for her energy, she opined.

Robert, although he approved highly of Mrs Chadwick, was sternly opposed to the idea of women farming. Hadn't he seen a woman "orched"? And didn't he know how fearsome they were with cattle? Why, even the milking was done by men nowadays, and a lot better done, in his opinion.

Mrs Chadwick invited him to inspect the farm and the model dairy, and, because Robert interested her, she personally conducted his tour and explained things to him, and listened to his comments attentively, approving when he made a wise suggestion, which was seldom, and maintaining silence before his cavilling remarks. One proposal which she made out of the kindness of her heart threw Robert into such a fever of angry trepidation that for the time his admiration for Mrs Chadwick was seriously jeopardised—the proposal being that she should offer Bob's young woman a position in the model dairy. Robert stood still in the path and eyed her stonily.

"Don't you do it, mum," he said, with such earnestness of manner, so much angry opposition in his eyes, that Mrs Chadwick showed the surprise she felt. "Don't you do it," he repeated.

"But why?" she asked. "I hoped I might be doing you, through Bob, a little service."

"You'll be doin' me a much greater service in leavin' Bob's young woman where 'er be," he replied. "If 'er comes yere Bob'll follow."

"I should have thought you and Hannah would be pleased at that," she said.

"Maybe Hannah would. I don't doubt 'er would, 'cause 'er knows I'd be vexed. Do you suppose," he added reproachfully, "that 'aving to go to church more'n once o' Sundays, and sometimes in the week, I want to be kep' awake o' nights listenin' to Bob 'ollerin' to the Lord? Hannah don't mind, 'cause it isn't 'er profession; but when a man makes 'is livin' through the Church 'e wants 'is off-time free o' it."

"I see," she said. "Yes; I had forgotten that. We will leave Bob's young woman where she is."

"Don't think I'm not obliged to you, mum," Robert hastened to say, relenting before her amiable reasonableness, "for thinking of it. But it wouldn't be to your interest nohow. Bob's young woman would give more time to 'er prayers than to your dairy. It's all soul wi' they, and nothin' o' conscience. I wouldn't like you to be cheated like that there; no, I wouldn't. A lady wot is so generous as you be ought to 'ave 'er interests studied."

Robert's zeal, like the zeal of many conscientious objectors to the self-seeking of others, placed him beyond the proscribed limits of profiting through Mrs Chadwick's generosity. He had profited handsomely during the Christmas week; he profited again on that crisp sunny morning when he parted from her after his inspection of the farm, and left her walking leisurely across the fields with the pekinese disporting itself beside her, running ahead of her in pursuit of imaginary rabbits and running back again for approbation of its sporting proclivities.

Where the fields were bisected by a country road Will Chadwick had undertaken to meet her and motor her back. It was rather beyond the hour fixed for the meeting, but Mr Chadwick was a patient man, and a knowledge of his wife's habits prepared him for delay. He had brought Diogenes with him in the car because Diogenes had expressed the wish to accompany him; and Diogenes, not being blessed with the same amount of patience, had been allowed to dismount, and was putting in his time, as the pekinese was doing, in searching the hedges for possible sport. Diogenes was not a sporting dog; but when he saw a cat, or any other legitimate form of chase, he tried to cheat onlookers into believing that he was. A pose is detestable in man or beast; it not infrequently leads to his undoing. Diogenes posed so enthusiastically that he almost deceived himself into mistaking the pose for the quality it sought to emulate.

It was unfortunate that on this occasion, when he was especially bent on imposing on himself, and was pursuing his snuffling search for hidden prey among the dank fern-stalks and soft mould in the hedge, the pekinese should at the same moment be engaged in a similar form of deception on the farther side of the hedge. Diogenes detected the fur of its long coat through the wet, shining leaves, and though familiarity with the pekinese should have accustomed him to discriminate between it and a cat, the practice of self-deception had become such an obsession that he wilfully ignored this distinction and, with a low growl, burst through the hedge and seized his quarry and shook it playfully in a transport of delight, then laid the little limp body down and stood over it in an attitude of satisfied triumph and barked a cheerful accompaniment to Mrs Chadwick's screams.

Mrs Chadwick made a dart forward and struck at Diogenes with her hand, to Diogenes' pained surprise; then she gathered the pekinese up in her arms and fell to lamenting loudly.

Diogenes walked back to the car with an air of injured disgust and wagged a short, tentative tail at his master; but Mr Chadwick, ignoring these overtures, passed him, and was over the hedge in a trice and beside his disconsolate wife.

"Oh, I say, Ruby, I am sorry!" was all that he could articulate, as he gazed at the limp bit of fur in her arms and then into her weeping face.

He blamed himself for having brought Diogenes, but most of all he blamed Diogenes for doing the last thing on earth that might have been expected of him. As Mrs Chadwick continued to lament, and continued to hold the dead dog in her arms, his perturbation increased to the extent of causing him to swear.

"Damn that dog!" he exclaimed in exasperation, and put his arm about his wife's shoulders, and took with his disengaged hand the limp, lifeless thing from her. "He didn't suffer at all," he assured her. "It was so quick, he couldn't have realised that he was hurt."

This knowledge was, of course, consoling to the bereaved mistress; but, beside her grief at the loss of her tiny pet, the consolation was insufficient to balance her distress. She laid her head on her husband's shoulder and wept unrestrainedly, to the distrustful amazement of a cow which lifted its head above the hedge to stare at this singular grouping. Fortunately for the cow's peace of mind Diogenes was by now thoroughly subdued, having gathered from the unusual noises disturbing the tranquillity of the day that this game, like another game he had played with Mr Musgrave's cat, promised a less agreeable ending than he had foreseen. He recalled that on that occasion he had been beaten; so he lay down docilely beside the motor and feigned slumber, in the hope that when the fuss was over the cause of it would be forgotten. But Diogenes' fate was even then being sealed on the other side of the hedge.

"Don't cry, Ruby," Mr Chadwick said. "It won't bring the little beggar to life, you know; and you'll make yourself sick. I'll get you another pet, dear."

This promise, though well meaning, was mistaken. In the first shock of her grief Mrs Chadwick recoiled from the suggestion.

"I couldn't have another pet," she wailed. "I loved him so. I couldn't bear another dog in his place. I d-don't want to see a dog again."

"All right," he said. "But buck up, Ruby. Come and get into the car, and I'll drive you home."

"I couldn't endure to have that brute in with me," she sobbed angrily.

"No, of course not. We'll leave the beast behind. You shan't be worried with the sight of him again. I'll shoot him."

He made the promise glibly, in the hope that this threat would rouse her. It roused her effectually, but not in the way in which he had intended. She looked up with a gleam of vindictive satisfaction in her eyes, showing through her tears.

"Oh, do!" she said. "Shoot him to-day. I couldn't see him about after this."

"All right," he acquiesced, none too heartily. Diogenes was a valuable dog, and had, moreover, a winning way with him towards the people whom he liked, and Will Chadwick was certainly one of these. Mr Chadwick could no more have shot the dog with his own hand than he could have shot a child.

"I'll see to it," he said.

The first intimation Diogenes had that it was expected of him that he should walk home was when the car started and left him, mute and bewildered and bespattered with mud, in the road gazing after it. No word had been vouchsafed him, no look. From the silence and the absence of interest in himself he had been deluded into supposing that he was not held responsible for the evil that had been done; but with the disappearance of the car vague doubts disturbed him, and he started in a sour, halfhearted way to follow the car and face his destiny. Even had his intelligence been

equal to grasping what that destiny was, so great is the force of habit that he would have returned inevitably to meet it.

Diogenes got back some time after the car, and was met at the entrance by one of the few men employed at the Hall. This person, who had apparently been waiting for him, fastened a lead to his collar and took up a gun which he had rested against a tree, seeming as though he too were bent on posing as a sportsman, which he was not, save in the humble capacity of cleaning his master's guns.

"You come along with me, old fellow," he said, and tried to look grim, but softened on meeting Diogenes' inquiring eye. "Shame, I call it," he ejaculated in a voice of disgust. "Anyone might 'a' made the mistake of taking that there for a rabbit. Blest if I rekernised it for a dog when I seed it first."

He led Diogenes out through the gate and down the road towards a field. The gate of the field was troublesome to open. While he fumbled with the padlock, his gun resting against the gatepost for the greater freedom of his hands, a joyous bark from Diogenes, who previously had worn a surprisingly docile and depressed mien, as though aware of what was going forward which these preparations portended, caused him to desist from the business of unfastening the gate to look up. When he saw who it was whose hurrying figure Diogenes thus joyfully hailed, he did not trouble to go on with his job, but waited for Peggy to approach. She came up at a run, and caught at Diogenes' lead, and, holding it, stared at the man.

"What were you going to do with him?" she asked, her accusing eyes going from his face to the gun, and from the gun back again to his face.

"Shoot 'im, miss," he answered. "It's the master's orders."

"Absurd!" cried Peggy angrily. "I won't have it done."

"Sorry, miss," the man replied, looking at her with a mingling of doubt and submission in his glance. "But I'm afraid it'll 'ave to be. Shoot 'im, without delay. Them's my orders."

"Well, you can't obey them," replied Peggy, as calmly as her agitation allowed, "because, you see, I won't let you. You can't shoot him while I hold him, can you?"

"No, miss," he replied. "But it's as much as my place is worth—"

Peggy cut him short.

"I am going to take him away," she said. "I'll hide him... send him away from the place. But I won't have him sacrificed for—for a silly accident like that. Both Mr and Mrs Chadwick will regret it later. He's a very valuable dog."

"Yes, miss," he said. "I allow it's a shame. But the master was very short and emphatic. What am I to say when 'e asks me if it's done?"

"He won't ask," Peggy answered, as confident that her uncle would be nearly as pained at Diogenes' death as her aunt was over the pekinese. "He will take it for granted, of course, that it is done. Go into the field and fire off your gun, and then return to the house. I'll see to Diogenes."

"You are quite sure, miss," the man said doubtfully, "that you won't let no one see that there dog? If the master thought that I'd deceived him—"

"No one shall see him," Peggy answered, not considering at the moment the magnitude of this promise. "I take all responsibility. You leave him with me."

"Very good, miss," he said cheerfully, as much relieved to be free from the task appointed him as Peggy was to watch him vault the gate and disappear, gun in hand, into the field.

The next thing she and Diogenes heard was the report of the gun as this pseudo-murderer killed an imaginary dog in the field with bloodthirsty zest.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The sound of the gun, although it was discharged harmlessly into the unoffending ground, brought home to Peggy the full significance of the sentence that had been passed upon Diogenes, and the narrow shave by which she had prevented its being carried into effect. Diogenes too seemed to realise instinctively the seriousness of the occasion and the vastness of the service rendered him through Peggy's intervention. He pushed his ungainly body against her skirt, instead of straining from the leash as was his practice, and when the report of the gun startled him, as it startled the girl and made her shiver, he lifted his soft eyes to her face wistfully, and pushed a cold nose into her hand for comfort, and licked the hand in humble testimony of his gratitude. Peggy looked down on him and her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Diogenes!" she cried. "Why did you do it?... Oh, Diogenes?"

Diogenes wagged his foolish tail and licked her hand again with yet more effusive demonstrations of affection. So much distressful weeping troubled him. Save when a child screamed at the sight of him, or a foolish person, like Eliza, his experience had not led him to expect tears. Yet to-day here were two people whom he had never seen cry before, lamenting tearfully in a manner which seemed somehow associated with himself. Diogenes could not

understand it; and so he sidled consolingly against Peggy, to the incommoding of her progress as she hurried him away down the road.

Where she intended taking him, or what she purposed doing with him, were reflections which so far her mind had not burdened itself with; getting him away from the Hall and beyond the view of anyone connected with the place was sufficient concern for the moment.

When she had covered a distance of about half a mile the difficult question of the safe disposal of Diogenes arose, and, finding her unprepared with any solution of the problem, left her dismayed and perplexed, standing in the road with the subdued Diogenes beside her, at a complete loss what to do next. She looked at Diogenes, looked down the road, looked again at Diogenes, and frowned.

"Oh, you tiresome animal!" she exclaimed. "What am I to do now?"

One thing she dared not do, and that was take Diogenes back.

Peggy sat down in the hedge, risking chills and all the evils attendant on sitting upon damp ground, and drew Diogenes close to her, while she turned over in her busy brain the people she knew who would be most likely to assist her out of this difficulty. The obvious person, the one to whom she would have turned most readily to assist her with every assurance of his helpful sympathy but for that unfortunate interview in the conservatory, was Doctor Fairbridge. She felt incensed when she reflected upon that absurd scene and realised that the man had thereby made his friendship useless to her; that at this crisis when he could have served her she was debarred from seeking his aid, would have been unable to accept it had it been offered. Yet Doctor Fairbridge could have taken Diogenes, would have taken him, she knew, and might have kept him successfully concealed at Rushleigh. Why, in the name of all that was annoying, had he been so inconsiderate as to propose to her?

"I don't know what I am to do with you, Diogenes," she said. "I don't know where to hide you in a silly little place like this."

Peggy was upset, and so worried with the whole affair, not only with the business of hiding Diogenes, but at the thought of having to part from this good companion who belonged to her in every sense save that of lawful ownership, that she here broke down and began to cry in earnest. Diogenes lifted a bandy paw and scratched her knee.

"I'm a snivelling idiot, Diogenes," she sobbed. "But I c-can't help it. You little know what you've done. I wonder whether you will be sorry when you never see me any more?"

Diogenes appeared sufficiently contrite as it was to have settled that doubt. Finding one paw ineffectual, he put both in her lap and licked her downcast face, whereupon Peggy flung her arms about his neck and wept in its thick creases.

It was at this juncture that Mr Musgrave, returning from a country walk, chanced inadvertently upon this affecting scene. So amazed was he on rounding the curve to come all unprepared upon Miss Annersley, seated in the hedge like any vagrant, and weeping more disconsolately than any vagrant he had ever seen, that he came abruptly to a standstill in front of her, and surveying the picture with a sympathy which was none the less real on account of his complete ignorance as to the cause of her grief, he exclaimed in his astonishment:

"Miss Annersley! You'll catch a chill if you sit on the damp grass like that."

Peggy, as much amazed at this interruption of her lamentation as the interruptor had been at sight of her lamenting, looked up with a little gasp, and then struggled to her feet, upsetting Diogenes, but not releasing her grasp on the lead, one idea alone unalterably fixed in her mind—the necessity to hold on to Diogenes in any circumstance.

"Oh, Mr Musgrave," she cried a little wildly, "what does it matter what I catch, since I am so miserable?"

"But why," asked John Musgrave, not unreasonably, "if you are in trouble should you add to your distress the physical incapacity to battle with it? It is very unwise to sit on the ground so early in the season."

Peggy emitted a little strangled laugh.

"I don't think I am very wise," she admitted. "I am like Diogenes, all made up of impulses and tardy repentances."

Mr Musgrave eyed Diogenes with marked disfavour. Whether it was due to a suggestion conveyed unconsciously in Peggy's speech or to the unnaturally subdued air which Diogenes wore, he gathered the impression that the source of Peggy's tears might be traced to the evil doings of this ferocious-looking animal.

"What," he asked, "has Diogenes been doing now?"

The "now" was an ungenerous slip which Mr Musgrave's good feeling would not have permitted had he reflected before speaking; it proved that Diogenes' past misdeeds were present in his thoughts. But Peggy was too unhappy to take notice of this, as assuredly she would have done in a calmer moment.

"Diogenes," she said, and leaned down to pat the big flat head, "has committed murder. It is only the pekinese," she added hastily, on observing Mr Musgrave's horrified expression. "He pretended it was a rabbit, and hunted it. I have just saved him from capital punishment and he's in hiding. But it's so difficult to hide him in Moresby. My uncle and aunt believe that he is shot. If they knew he wasn't they'd be—well, they'd be glad later, I know, but just at present they would be very angry. I have got to find a home for him right away, and I don't know where to find it. I don't know what to do with him."

She looked up at John Musgrave dolefully, with an appeal in the darkly grey eyes which Mr Musgrave found difficult to resist. They almost seemed to suggest that he, as a tower of strength, might aid her in this matter. Mr Musgrave began to revolve in his mind whether he could not aid her. He did not like Diogenes, and he recalled the damage Diogenes had effected in his own kitchen. That crime weighed with him more than the slaughter of the pekinese; the death of the pekinese did not concern Mr Musgrave. Had it been a case simply of the rescue of Diogenes from a perfectly just punishment it is doubtful whether Mr Musgrave's kindness of heart would have proved equal to the sacrifice; but the assisting of Peggy Annersley was an altogether different matter. It was a matter which commended itself to Mr Musgrave as worthy of his endeavour.

"Can I not help you," he suggested, with the faintest show of hesitation, which hesitation vanished before her radiant look, "by removing Diogenes to—to Rushleigh, or some more distant place, and getting some one to dispose of him for you? I could take him in to-day in the car."

"Oh, will you?" Peggy cried eagerly. "Oh, Mr Musgrave, I shall be eternally grateful to you if you will."

Mr Musgrave, although slightly embarrassed, was not indisposed to become an object for Miss Annersley's lasting gratitude; he liked the eager impulsiveness of her speech; it made him feel that he was rendering her an inestimable service; and to render valuable service with so slight personal inconvenience was agreeable; it conveyed a comfortable sense of being useful.

"Certainly I will do that," he said. "It is a small service. I wish I could help you more effectively."

Mr Musgrave was quite sincere in the expression of this wish. He was well aware of Peggy's affection for the ugly brute which was her constant companion, and he knew what a wrench it would be for her to part with Diogenes; but Diogenes' banishment was inevitable. That point was very clear.

"If you think he will come with me I will take him now," he said.

Diogenes appeared so very reluctant to accompany Mr Musgrave and so very determined to follow Peggy that Peggy finally suggested taking him herself, and leaving him secure under lock and key in Mr Musgrave's garage. If this arrangement occurred to Mr Musgrave as somewhat unconventional he lost sight of its inadvisability on that account in view of the greater inadvisability of attempting to drag an unwilling bull-dog, whose unfailing gentleness he had reason to question, away from the only person who appeared to have any sort of control over him. Mr Musgrave therefore relinquished the lead and prepared to accompany Peggy and the bull-dog back to his orderly home.

A good deed may carry its own reward; but in the days that were to follow, in the weeks and months that followed, Mr Musgrave was moved to doubt the infallibility of providential recognition of unselfish deeds. It is fortunate for the persistence in the instinct for obeying a generous impulse that the future is mercifully shrouded in the obscurity of unseen things.

Arrived at the house, Mr Musgrave and Peggy and Diogenes behaved very much after the manner of three conspirators. In a sense they were conspirators, and the third was a criminal conspirator. Diogenes, with agreeable recollections of former sport connected with Mr Musgrave's back entrance, plucked up his spirit on passing through the gate and looked expectantly round for Mr Musgrave's cat; Peggy, with less pleasant memories of that former occasion, tightened her hold on the lead and kept an attentive eye on her charge; Mr Musgrave, conscious of nothing save the undesirability of being seen by the servants under existing circumstances, walked with a sheepish and cautious air past the back of his dwelling, and on reaching the stables threw open the door with guilty haste and drew it after him as he followed close upon Peggy's heels. Once inside, safe from observation, with the door shut against intrusion, he assumed his normal manner, and ceased to look like a middle-aged Guy Fawkes, or a gentlemanly dog-stealer.

Chapter Twenty Four.

"What jolly stables!" Peggy cried, breathing herself more freely since the imminent discovery of Diogenes was a danger past. They had met no one in the road, had been seen by no one from the house. "You will be quite happy here, Diogenes. You must be very good, and give no trouble, mind."

Diogenes, who was engaged on an inspection of his temporary quarters, disregarded these injunctions; he was snuffling round for rats. Peggy looked at Mr Musgrave. By a strange coincidence Mr Musgrave was looking at Peggy, looking with a close and curious scrutiny.

"You *are* kind," she said. "I can never thank you."

Her gratitude had the effect of inclining Mr Musgrave towards a greater kindness; but, since he had undertaken to perform the sole service that presented itself as practicable, he could bethink him of nothing kinder, and so modestly deprecated her thanks.

"If Diogenes had been shot," she said, and shivered, "it would have made me very unhappy. I'm unhappy enough as it is. I hate the thought of losing him. I can't bear to think of never seeing him in the future."

To hide the sudden rush of tears which she realised would be as embarrassing for John Musgrave to witness as for her to shed before him, she dropped on her knees in the straw and drew Diogenes to her and put her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Diogenes, my poor dear?" she sobbed. "Why ever did you do it? I've got to let you go, Diogenes. I shan't see you any more, ever. We'll never go for walks together again. If I'd only been with him," she said, lifting to John

Musgrave her tear-dimmed eyes, "it wouldn't have happened."

John Musgrave, with the scene of his wrecked china, and Diogenes standing triumphant amid the wreckage, with Peggy, dismayed and helpless, beside him, had a passing doubt whether her presence would have availed in preventing the tragedy. But, with those upturned, tear-filled eyes appealing for his sympathy, to remind her that her authority was sometimes in default was a brutality of which he was incapable.

"I am exceedingly sorry," he said gently, "for your distress. I wish I could help you."

"But you are helping me," she cried. "You have taken such a load off my mind. I daresay in time I'll get used to being without him. But he was such a—chum."

As she knelt almost at his feet, with her arms about the ugly brute from which she was so loth to separate, she presented a picture at once so appealing and pathetic that Mr Musgrave found himself struggling with all manner of absurd impulses in his very earnest and not unnatural desire to see her grief change to gladness, and the tears melt away in smiles. He had the same feeling of uncomfortable distress in witnessing her trouble as he experienced over the lesser but more assertive troubles of John Sommers. Her tears hurt him.

"I suppose," he said, with a certain halting indecision of manner, "we couldn't, perhaps, find a home for him somewhere not too far away—somewhere, in fact, near enough for you to see him occasionally? I wonder... Perhaps that might be managed."

Peggy brightened visibly and looked up at him with such a light of hope in her eyes that Mr Musgrave, from thinking that this might be managed, finally decided that it must be managed; that he, in short, must manage it. This resolve once firmly established in his mind, his thoughts busied themselves with ways and means for the safe and convenient disposal of Diogenes. But the only way which presented itself was so disturbing to Mr Musgrave that, after first considering it, he paused to reflect, and looking upon Diogenes, and having very clearly in mind the great personal inconvenience that would result from such a course, he promptly rejected it. Having rejected it, finally, as he believed, he paused again for reflection; and looking this time not upon Diogenes but straight into those clear, hopeful eyes, which seemed to look to him with such a perfect confidence in his ability to solve this difficulty that to disappoint her expectation seemed cruel after having raised her hopes, Mr Musgrave felt it imperative on him to reconsider the matter. After a somewhat protracted silence, he said: "Do you think it would be possible for me to keep him?"

Peggy was so amazed at this proposal, which in her wildest moments she had not conceived, that she released Diogenes and stood up slowly, fixing upon John Musgrave a look so charged with gratitude and admiration and an emotion which partook of neither of these qualities, but which was so expressive of itself as to move Mr Musgrave to a desire to house Diogenes, or any other beast, in order to oblige her. She approached and put her two hands into his, and, oddly, John Musgrave did not feel embarrassed. He held the small hands firmly, and looked gravely into the earnest face.

"I never thought of that," she said. "I never thought of anything half so good as that. I don't know what to say... It doesn't seem fair to let you do it. I expect he'll be an awful nuisance for a time."

Mr Musgrave was very certain that he would be a nuisance; but he was warming to the business, and felt equal to any undertaking with that soft look in the grey eyes melting his reluctance and the small hands gripping his with such eager warmth.

"I don't suppose we should get through without a little trouble," he answered, smiling. "It will certainly be necessary to keep him for some weeks on the chain. I could take him for a run every day—in the early morning, and after dusk. The greatest difficulty I foresee is in the matter of his identity. I should not like to annoy Mr Chadwick. It seems acting not quite properly towards him."

"Uncle would be as grateful as I am," Peggy assured him, "if he knew. He hated the thought of having Diogenes destroyed. Couldn't we disguise him somehow—paint him? I believe he could be dyed."

"I'll take him into Rushleigh and see what can be contrived," he replied. "And, anyway, if necessary he can be sent away later. For the present I will adopt him. And—and any time you wish to see him you can come in and take him off the chain."

Peggy grasped his hands more tightly.

"You are so kind, so very kind," she said. "I will never forget. I wish there was something I could do for you."

She looked so earnest in expressing this wish so really anxious to prove her gratitude, that Mr Musgrave felt himself sufficiently rewarded for the service he was rendering. The charge of a dog, even of a dog with such a record as Diogenes, was after, all no superhuman undertaking.

"You overestimate the service," he said. "There is really no need for you to feel under any obligation."

But Peggy would not allow this.

"Once," she said slowly, taking her hands from his and moving a pace or two away, "you asked me to do something to oblige you—and I refused; refused because I saw no reason, I told you, for complying with the request." She suddenly smiled as she met his quiet scrutiny, and made a slight gesture with her hand in the direction of the dog. "You might quite as aptly apply that argument in this case; there really isn't any reason why you should oblige me now."

"Not so," he interrupted. "The reason lies in my wish to oblige you." Peggy nodded.

"That is a reason I also have discovered," she said. "I can give the promise now which you asked me for on Christmas Eve—do you remember?... about the smoking... because the argument I used then doesn't hold any longer. I wish," she added, "that I had given the promise at the time."

"Thank you," John Musgrave returned quietly.

It was a curious fact, in consideration of how objectionable the practice of smoking in women had once appeared to Mr Musgrave, that he should experience so little triumph in this victory. He had seen Peggy smoke on two separate occasions, and, although the sight had pleased him ill, he had reluctantly admitted that with some women the habit, if deplorable, was not unbecoming. The reason Peggy allowed for making the promise, rather than the promise itself, gave John Musgrave pleasure.

Peggy took an affectionate farewell of the wondering Diogenes, enjoining on him the necessity for behaving with the utmost propriety; and then, while Mr Musgrave held the door cautiously ajar, she slipped out after him through the narrow opening and left Diogenes, indignantly protesting, on the other side.

Peggy returned home with a heart so lightened that she found it difficult to dissemble before the Chadwicks and wear a mien becoming to the double tragedy that had robbed Mrs Chadwick of her pampered pet and herself of her daily companion.

"I am awfully sorry, Peggy," her uncle said, putting an arm through hers as they went in to lunch together, "about Diogenes. I know you will miss him a lot. But your aunt was so upset there was nothing else for it. He had to be got rid of."

"He had to be got rid of," echoed Peggy, and lifted a pair of reproachful eyes to his face. "You might have thought of a kinder way out," she said. "You could quite easily have found him a home, and have got rid of him that way. Poor Diogenes!"

"I wish I had," he said. "But Ruby worried me. There wasn't time to think... Well, his troubles are over now, poor brute!"

Whereat Peggy involuntarily smiled. Diogenes' troubles, like John Musgrave's, were, she realised, only just beginning.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The troubles of Mr Musgrave as the owner of a bull-dog began forthwith and multiplied exceedingly. Diogenes was driven into Rushleigh that afternoon in the car, and subsequently, to his secret disgust, returned disguised as a brindle, which disguise he diligently sought to remove with so much success that the journeys to Rushleigh became periodic, and Diogenes underwent chameleon-like changes in the intervals.

A large dog-kennel and brand-new chain were purchased, and, save when Mr Musgrave took Diogenes for the daily run, and Peggy, availing herself of his permission, slipped in through the tradesmen's entrance and released her excited pet, Diogenes spent his days in complaining inactivity, with ample time in which to reflect upon his misdeeds.

The arrival of Diogenes affected some change in Mr Musgrave's household. Eliza promptly gave notice. She would, she informed the surprised master of the establishment, as soon remain in a place with an elephant. Martha, who would have suffered elephants and other undesirable pets rather than quit Mr Musgrave's service, sought to propitiate Diogenes, and, being a disciple of the famous explorer who phrased the axiom that the stomach governs the world, she carried bones and other delicacies to Diogenes' kennel, to the detriment of his figure, and so won his affections that after Peggy, whom he adored, and Mr Musgrave, to whom he became speedily attached, Martha ranked as his very good friend.

The chauffeur had his doubts about Diogenes, and he nursed darker doubts in regard to his employer. To take a white bull-dog into Rushleigh and fetch home a brindle that was constantly changing its coat occurred to King is a highly suspicious circumstance.

"There'll be a police case over that dog," he remarked to Martha. "You mark my words. I've known similar cases and they've always been found out. The governor's asking for trouble."

The weight upon Mr Musgrave's conscience attendant on the duplicity which he of necessity was called upon to practise daily was so burdensome that he was imperatively moved to confide in some one, and thereby share, if not shift, the responsibility. Some idea of confiding in Walter Errol had been with him from the first; and, meeting the vicar one morning when he was returning from an early walk with Diogenes, the desire to unburden his mind hardened to a determination upon perceiving the amazement in the vicar's eyes as they rested upon the dog he led an unwilling captive on the chain.

The vicar halted in the road and laughed.

"I heard you were starting kennels," he said; "but, upon my word! I didn't believe it. Wherever did you buy that dog?"

Mr Musgrave had not bought Diogenes and he had no intention of pretending that he had.

"It was given to me," he said.

"Oh, that explains it," the vicar answered.

But even while he spoke it occurred to Mr Musgrave that the dog had not been given to him; he had offered to take it.

"I am taking care of it for some one," he corrected himself.

The vicar looked mystified and faintly amused.

"That's doing a lot for friendship, isn't it, John?" he asked.

John Musgrave reddened.

"Is obliging a friend an excessive courtesy?" he inquired.

"Well, no. I stand rebuked."

The vicar stooped and patted Diogenes and looked him over critically.

"It's a funny thing," he said, "but he's extraordinarily like the bull they had up at the Hall—except, of course, for his colour."

"He is," Mr Musgrave said, firing off his bomb as calmly as though he were making a very ordinary statement, "the same dog."

"Oh!" said the vicar, and straightened himself and looked John Musgrave squarely in the eyes. "I understood," he said, "that Diogenes was shot."

"Diogenes ought to have been shot," replied Mr Musgrave, and it ran through his mind at the moment to wish that Diogenes had been shot, but he checked the ungenerous thought, and added: "Miss Annersley rescued him and smuggled him away. He is, as a matter of fact, in hiding from the authorities."

"Which accounts," remarked the vicar, "for his colour." He stooped to pat Diogenes again in order to conceal from his friend's eyes the smile in his own. "And Miss Annersley brought him to you?" he said, with the mental addition, "Little baggage?"

"No," said Mr Musgrave, and proceeded with great care to outline the facts of the case, omitting details as far as possible. "She was so very upset," he finished. "And really it seemed regrettable to sacrifice a valuable dog after the mischief was done. The only uneasiness I feel in the matter is in regard to the Chadwicks. I should not like to annoy them."

"I think you may put that fear out of your thoughts at least," Mr Errol replied. "Only yesterday Mr Chadwick was telling me how vexed he was to have been obliged to destroy the dog. He expressed the wish that he had sent him away instead."

Reassured on this head, Mr Musgrave looked relieved.

"I'm glad to know that," he said. "Quite possibly Diogenes will be received back into the family later on, when time has softened Mrs Chadwick's chagrin."

"In the meanwhile," Walter Errol said, laughing, "I foresee your attachment for the—dog having grown to the extent of refusing to part with him."

John Musgrave was by nature literal, nor did he on this occasion depart from his habit of interpreting his friend's speech to the letter rather than the spirit.

"My affection for Diogenes," he returned, "will be tempered always with anxiety. And in any case the motive which led to my adoption of him will qualify any distress I may feel in parting with him. It will give me immense pleasure to restore her pet to Miss Annersley."

"Yes," agreed the vicar decidedly, "Miss Annersley, of course, must have Diogenes back."

He returned to the vicarage for breakfast in a highly amused frame of mind, but, having been sworn by John Musgrave to secrecy, was denied the pleasure of relating this amazing tale of Mr Musgrave's benevolence for the benefit of his wife. The story of Diogenes must for the present remain a secret.

But as a secret shared by an increasing number of persons it stood in considerable danger of ultimate disclosure. The risk of discovery in the quarter in which discovery was most to be avoided was minimised by the departure, of the Chadwicks for the Continent a month earlier than had been intended. The responsibility for hastening the departure rested with Mr Chadwick, who, worried with his wife's constant bewailing her pet's untimely end, and equally harassed by his niece's uncomplaining but very obvious regret for her faithful four-footed companion, decided that change of scene might help them to forget these small troubles which depressed the atmosphere of his hitherto genial home.

Peggy, from motives quite apart from the distress she successfully feigned, encouraged him in this belief, and once away from Moresby brightened so suddenly and became so surprisingly cheerful that her uncle was puzzled to understand why his wife did not show a corresponding gaiety, but continued to bemoan her loss as she had done at home.

Because the murder of Diogenes had lain heavily on his conscience in consideration of the girl's affection for the dog,

the reaction of Peggy's spirits occasioned Mr Chadwick immense relief. She could not, he decided, have been so devoted to the brute as he had supposed. But in any case he felt grateful to her for her generosity in sparing him reproach. The only reproach he received in respect of Diogenes' end came from a quarter whence he least expected it, and from whence it was least deserved. So little prepared was he to hear his wife denounce the execution of Diogenes as mistaken and absurd, and to complain of this ill-advised act as vexatious to herself, that he found no words in which to answer her. It was significant of the unreasonableness of human nature, he reflected, that she could hurl such a charge at him, and feel herself ill-used by a prompt obedience to her expressed wish. Also it pointed to the unwisdom of carrying out a death sentence within twenty-four hours of its delivery. The road was already in the making along which Diogenes would eventually return.

Peggy decided that when they got home she would bring Diogenes to life by degrees. She was not specially desirous of bringing him to life in a hurry, her reasons for a gradual resuscitation being governed by considerations of so complex and feminine a character that Mr Musgrave would have failed to follow them. The vicar, on the other hand, would have apprehended her motives very readily; he had a surer grasp than John Musgrave on the complexities of the human mind.

To one person in Moresby the addition of Diogenes to Mr Musgrave's establishment afforded entire satisfaction; that person was Miss Simpson. For the bull-dog at the Hall she had confessed to absolute terror; but Mr Musgrave's brindle was a dear, so much handsomer and more gentle.

She noted the hour for Mr Musgrave's walk in Diogenes' company and, though he changed the direction of his walk daily, almost invariably the pertinacious spinster ran him to earth, and, to his intense annoyance, joined him and entreated permission to hold Diogenes' chain.

That was the greatest of the many embarrassments Diogenes occasioned Mr Musgrave. He began unconsciously to look for Miss Simpson's spare figure furtively behind trees and hedges as he proceeded on his way; when it flashed abruptly upon him, appearing unexpectedly round a bend of the road, or starting up, as it seemed to his surprised eyes, out of the very ground, he experienced a desire to loosen Diogenes' chain and set him at her. He was growing to hate the sight of her thin, eager face. And her comparisons of the two dogs, which were one dog, disconcerted him. He came near to taking her into the secret at times. It puzzled him to think what she would make of it if she learned the truth.

Miss Simpson was so anxious to establish the fact of the marked similarity in their tastes that she blundered into the declaration that she doted on dogs, particularly bull-dogs. Mr Musgrave received this statement coldly.

"I am afraid I cannot sympathise with your enthusiasm," he replied. "I dislike dogs—particularly bull-dogs."

"Then why," asked Miss Simpson very naturally, "do you keep a bull-dog?"

"I am only taking care of it for a friend," he explained.

"How very kind of you," she gushed. "Such a responsibility, other people's pets."

She embarked upon a windy dissertation about a cat she had once taken charge of for some one, and the trouble and expense this ungrateful animal had caused her.

"But you can't chain up a cat," she explained. "People are so selfish. They never consider how they trespass on one's kindness."

"If service called for no sacrifice it would not be kindness," Mr Musgrave replied sententiously.

"Ah, how true that is!" exclaimed Miss Simpson. "You have such a comprehensive way of putting things. One *ought* to be kind, of course."

"I think," he replied with emphasis, "if the desire to be kind is lacking, it is just as well to leave it alone."

"Yes," she acquiesced flatly. "That's true, too. But we most of us desire to be kind, don't we?"

"No," he returned in his bluntest manner; he was feeling too annoyed to wish to be civil. "I fancy in the majority of us that desire is a negligible quantity."

"But not in you," she said insinuatingly.

"In me most pronouncedly," he asserted with conviction.

If this quality were not lacking in himself in a general sense he knew at that moment it was most assuredly lacking in relation to her. Mr Musgrave, having been guilty of ungraciousness, was immediately ashamed of his irritation, and during the remainder of the walk he sought to atone for his former discourtesy by a greater amiability than Miss Simpson was accustomed to from him—a mistaken form of kindness which led to the encouragement of all manner of false hopes in Miss Simpson's maiden mind.

Chapter Twenty Six.

John Musgrave sat at his solitary breakfast-table and regarded the covered dishes before him with, for the first time within his memory, so little interest in their contents that he felt a strange disinclination to uncover them. This lack of appetite, he decided, resulted either from indisposition or from approaching age. Since he felt no indisposition, he

attributed it to the latter cause. Persons of advancing middle-age were less hearty than youth at the beginning of the day. That was only natural. Therefore he did not lift the covers, but made an indifferent breakfast of toast and coffee.

Nevertheless, as the day advanced, he made the further discomfiting discovery that this lack of interest was not confined solely to the table, but spread itself like a blight over the ordinary affairs of life. He was oddly disinclined to follow any of his usual pursuits. Mr Musgrave was unaccountably bored with everything. He experienced a restlessness foreign to his habitual placidity, which restlessness, by reason of its strangeness, worried him considerably. It was inconceivable that after forty years of tranquil contentment he should develop the quality which of all others he had found so difficult to comprehend or sympathise with. Yet restless he was, and dissatisfied—dissatisfied, with Moresby and the even tenor of his days. He wanted inexplicably to fling things into a portmanteau and start off for some place—any place that was fairly distant.

He did not, of course, yield to this extraordinary impulse. Being moved by such an impulse was sufficiently amazing; to have obeyed it would have been more amazing, still. He went instead into the garden and freed Diogenes from the chain, and allowed him to exercise unchecked over the flower borders, to the indignant astonishment of Bond, who was preparing the beds for the spring planting.

“Blest if he ain’t gone dotty over that there dog,” he complained.

And the cat, who was airing herself in the belief that her enemy was confined to the restricted limits of the chain, sought refuge up a tree, and gloomily watched Diogenes as he gambolled below. She had refused to follow Eliza’s example and evacuate in the enemy’s favour, but her resentment of Diogenes’ presence was bitter and prolonged; it declined to soften before Diogenes’ persistent overtures towards a greater friendliness. Her disapproval remained closely associated with that first unfortunate meeting, which proved an unforgiving spirit. Diogenes and Mr Musgrave had decided to forget that occasion and were, as a result, firm friends.

When Diogenes was again on the chain, and Mr Musgrave was once more facing the unwanted viands on his table, looking about him round the large empty room—empty that is, in the matter of companionship—he made the biggest and most startling discovery of the lay: he was lonely—really lonely, as he had not been since the months immediately following his sister’s marriage. Why, in the name of mystery, should he, who had not enjoyed companionship in his home since his sister had left it, who had not, save in a vague fashion when she left him solitary after one of her brief return visits, felt the need of companionship, be suddenly gripped with this desolating sense of loneliness? He could not understand it; and it was the more disconcerting on account of his inability to comprehend this obsession which fretted him, and prevented him from settling calmly to the ordinary routine of the lay.

Mr Musgrave lunched sparingly and later set out for the vicarage for a chat with the vicar. He remained for tea, and in the genial society of the Errols forgot his depression to the extent of believing himself cured of the inconvenience. But the depression had lightened merely temporarily under the influence of that cheery little home circle: out again in the open, facing the keen east wind, John Musgrave felt the heaviness of his mood descending upon him once more, and with an odd distaste for his lonely fireside he fetched Diogenes and took him for a long walk.

On returning from this walk Mr Musgrave did an unexampled thing. Instead of taking Diogenes back to his kennel he led him into the house, into the drawing-room, having removed the chain in the hall and left it hanging there. Diogenes, with the *noblesse oblige* of good breeding, accepted all this as a matter of course, and, having first made a snuffing tour of inspection round the room, walked to the big skin rug before the fire and lay down. So uncertain was he of the enduring nature of this concession that he did not permit himself to sleep, but lay, winking complacently at the flames, and furtively every now and again blinking at Mr Musgrave. Mr Musgrave seated himself wearily in a chair and stared reflectively at Diogenes.

“I begin to believe,” he said half aloud, “that there is considerable companionableness in a dog. I wonder that I never kept a dog.”

Diogenes, under the impression that he was being directly addressed, got up and moved nearer to Mr Musgrave and sat on his haunches, looking with his bulging, affectionate eyes into Mr Musgrave’s face. The man put out a hand and caressed the big head.

“I daresay you are lonely too,” he said. “You miss your mistress, I expect.”

The bulging eyes were eloquent.

“I think, Diogenes,” Mr Musgrave added, “that you are sufficiently well behaved to be allowed indoors. I—like to see you here.”

Diogenes thumped the carpet with his tail, which was tantamount to replying that he liked being there and was very well satisfied to remain.

Mr Musgrave continued caressing the big head and talking fragmentally with his dumb friend, until the booming of the gong warned him of the hour. He rose to go to his room to dress, and, when Diogenes would have accompanied him, pointed to the rug and bade him lie there and wait. Perplexed, but obedient, Diogenes returned to the fire, and Mr Musgrave left him there, and stepping forth into the hall and closing the door behind him, was surprised to find himself confronted with Martha, Martha hot and red in the face from the exertions of preparing the evening meal, and so manifestly worried that something more than Mr Musgrave’s dinner must have been bearing on her mind.

Mr Musgrave halted and regarded her inquiringly, and Martha, with the fear of King’s warning relative to the police and the criminal nature of concealing dogs exciting her worst apprehensions, informed him dolefully that some one must have taken Diogenes away.

"I went out to 'is blessed kennel to take him a few bones," she explained, "an' the turn it give me to find the dear hanimal gone—chain an' all, sir."

Mr Musgrave with the utmost gravity pointed to the door at his back.

"Diogenes is in there," he announced. "I forgot his feeding time."

Martha gasped.

"In the *drawing-room*, sir?" she ejaculated.

"I was lonely," Mr Musgrave explained. From force of long habit he treated Martha as a tried and trusted friend. "I find him companionable."

"Lor'!" remarked Martha. She scrutinised her master attentively, the idea that he must be sickening for something suggesting itself to her mind. "Dogs are company, that's certain," she said. "When he's 'ad 'is supper you'd like 'im back in the drawing-room, I suppose, sir?"

"Yes," he answered. "I think he is sufficiently at home now to be allowed to run about as he likes."

Martha took Diogenes to the kitchen and fed him, contemplating him with renewed interest while he gnawed his bones under the table.

"There's something about that hanimal as I don't understand," she mused. "If that ain't the same dog, though different, as burst in after the cat with the young lady from the 'All, I'll eat my apron. It's the same young lady comes to see 'im, anyway. If it isn't 'er dog what does she come for? And if it is 'er dog what's the master doing with it? It's my belief," she further reflected, wiping the perspiration from her face with the apron she had dedicated to gastronomic purposes, "that the master is courtin' the young lady, or the young lady is courtin' the master, through that blessed dog. Now I wonder," and Martha turned to the stove and went through mysterious manoeuvres with the vessels upon it, "how that will work? Come to my time o' life and his, change—that kind of change—makes for trouble as a rule."

Small wonder that in the disturbed preoccupation of his cook's mind Mr Musgrave's dinner that night suffered in the cooking. But Mr Musgrave was himself too preoccupied to notice this; the business of eating had no interest for him.

He was relieved on returning to the drawing-room to find Diogenes in occupation of the rug once more; and Diogenes, who had the gregarious instinct even more deeply implanted than Mr Musgrave, in whom it was a recent development, welcomed him effusively and finally stretched himself at Mr Musgrave's feet and snorted contentedly, while the master, of the house sat back in his chair and read, and—which did not astonish Diogenes, though it would have amazed anyone intimate with John Musgrave's lifetime habits—violated another rule by smoking a cigar while he read.

The grouping of the man and the dog in the warm, firelit room made a pleasing, homelike picture, so different in effect from the ordinary picture of John Musgrave reading in scholarly solitude by his shaded lamp, without the solace of tobacco even, that it scarcely seemed the same room or the same man seated in the big chair wreathed in ascending clouds of blue smoke spirals.

This picture, as it impressed the vicar, when a few evenings later he was shown in and beheld a similar grouping, so similar that it appeared as if the man and dog had remained in the same positions without interruption, was so surprising, despite its cosy, natural air, that he entirely forgot the object of his visit, nor remembered it until he was on his homeward way.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, as John Musgrave rose to greet him, and, removing the cigar from his mouth, wrung his hand warmly. "You look jolly comfortable. The wind is bitter to-night. It is good to shelter in a room like this."

"Sit down," said Mr Musgrave. He pushed the cigars towards his friend. "Will you smoke?" he asked.

Walter Errol's eyes twinkled as he accepted a cigar and snipped the end with a contemplative stare at Diogenes. He did not, however, betray the amazement he felt, but appeared to regard these innovations as very ordinary events.

The big dog sprawling before the hearth and the smoke-laden atmosphere of the room which, until Mrs Chadwick had first profaned it, had been preserved from the fumes of tobacco, were surprisingly agreeable novelties. The vicar had seldom enjoyed an evening in John Musgrave's drawing-room so much as he enjoyed that evening, sitting chatting with his friend over old college days and acquaintances. It was late when he rose to go, and still he had not mentioned the matter about which he had come, did not mention it at all; it had slipped from his mind entirely.

"It's so comfortable here," he said, with his jolly laugh, "that I'm loth to go, John. There is only one substitution I could suggest, and one addition, to improve the picture."

"What are they?" asked Mr Musgrave, his glance travelling round the homelike room.

The vicar paused and seemed to reflect.

"Well," he said at last, "I would substitute a child in place of the dog, and... But you don't need to inquire what form the addition would take. We've discussed all that before. I'm not sure I wouldn't make them both additions," he added, "and let the dog remain."

Mr Musgrave reddened.

"Don't you think," he suggested, with a diffidence altogether at variance with his usual manner of receiving this advice, "that I am rather old for such changes?"

"You are just over forty," the other answered, "and forty is the prime of life... Any age is the prime of life when a man is disposed to regard it so. You grow younger every day, John."

When the vicar left him John Musgrave returned to the fire and stood beside Diogenes on the rug, staring thoughtfully down into the flames. In the heart of the flames he saw a picture of an upturned face, of a pair of darkly grey eyes gazing earnestly into his.

"You are so kind, so very kind." The words repeated themselves in his memory. "I wish there was something I could do for you..."

John Musgrave stirred restlessly. Were the words sincere, he wondered? They had been sincere at the time, he knew; but possibly they had been prompted by the gratitude of the moment; and gratitude is no more enduring than any other quality. He glanced at Diogenes, who, with a much-wrinkled brow, was also contemplating the flames.

"I think it would be extortionate to demand payment for the service, Diogenes," he said.

Diogenes looked up and snorted approval.

"It is, after all, a privilege to feel that one has rendered some service and has received her thanks. I don't think it would be fair—to her—to expect more."

Chapter Twenty Seven.

May was well advanced before the Chadwicks returned from their wanderings. They came home unexpectedly towards the middle of the month, cutting short their stay in London because certain matters in Moresby called imperatively for Mrs Chadwick's immediate attention; and Peggy, for another reason which she did not explain, was very ready to fling aside the holiday mood and return to work.

The first intimation John Musgrave received of the Chadwicks' return came from the fountain head, being conveyed to him in a manner and at a moment when, glad though he was to learn that the family was home again, he would have preferred to have remained in ignorance until a more favourable opportunity. As matters fell out, however, he made the best of them, and wore as composed a mien as possible in face of an embarrassing situation.

Mr Musgrave was starting out for his customary morning walk in Diogenes' company when outside his gate he came very unexpectedly full upon Will Chadwick. Had Diogenes' memory been less faithful the meeting might have passed off without awkwardness; but Diogenes, recognising his former master, became so wildly effusive in his welcome that Mr Chadwick during the first few moments could not disentangle himself from the dog's excited embraces, or return Mr Musgrave's greeting. He laughed when finally he shook John Musgrave's hand.

"Your dog seems to have taken a violent fancy to me," he said.

"Quiet, Diogenes!" Mr Musgrave commanded unthinkingly. "Down, sir!"

Will Chadwick looked at Diogenes, and from the dog to Mr Musgrave. Then he looked again at Diogenes more attentively. There was in the protracted scrutiny, in the queer glint in the indolent blue eyes, a hint of something very like suspicion, as though Mr Musgrave's ingenuousness were being questioned. King's face, when Mr Musgrave took the dog into Rushleigh for purposes of the toilet, wore much the same expression.

"This is a surprise," exclaimed Mr Musgrave. "I had no idea you were back."

"We got home last night. Motored from town; a good run, but tiring."

"I trust," Mr Musgrave said, "that the ladies are well?"

"First rate, thanks." Will Chadwick watched Mr Musgrave as, having succeeded in grasping Diogenes' collar, he promptly fixed the chain. "New dog, eh?" he said.

"I have had him some months," Mr Musgrave replied. "But I prefer to keep him on the chain when we get outside the gate. He is a bit wild."

"Seems to be—yes."

Mr Chadwick continued to regard the dog reflectively. He had heard of people turning suddenly white through shock; he was wondering whether change of residence could have the effect of changing a white bull-dog into a brindle.

"You call him Diogenes?" he observed. "It's odd, but he is so like the dog we had I could almost swear it is the same. Same stock, perhaps. What's his pedigree?"

"I really haven't an idea," Mr Musgrave replied, feeling increasingly uncomfortable. "The resemblance you speak of to your dog is very marked. I have observed it myself. I call him Diogenes on that account."

"Oh!" said Mr Chadwick.

The talk hung for a time. Mr Chadwick was debating whether a strong family likeness between two animals might

extend to the affections in so far as to incline them towards the same persons. Mr Musgrave's brindle betrayed the fawning devotion towards himself that he had been accustomed to from his own dog.

"He's a nice-looking beast," he remarked, still scrutinising Diogenes closely. "Might be a prize dog if it wasn't for his coat."

"What is wrong with his coat?" inquired Mr Musgrave anxiously.

"That is what I should like to be able to state definitely. The colour isn't good."

The speaker here examined the dog at a nearer range, to Mr Musgrave's further discomfiture. When he faced Mr Musgrave again there was a puzzled questioning in his eyes, but he made no further allusion to the dog; the subject was tacitly dropped.

The wisdom of having Diogenes on the chain was manifested when the moment arrived for Mr Chadwick to separate from Diogenes and his new master and proceed on his homeward way. Diogenes, despite a very real attachment for his new owner, was faithful to the old allegiance and showed so strong a desire to follow Will Chadwick to the Hall that Mr Musgrave had to exert his strength in order to restrain him. The business of holding Diogenes as he tugged determinedly at the chain put Mr Musgrave to the undignified necessity of tugging also. Mr Chadwick left them struggling in the road and proceeded on his way with an amused smile; a smile which broadened and finally ended in a laugh.

"I wonder what he smears on the coat to make him that colour?" he mused as he walked. Then he laughed again.

With the knowledge of the Chadwicks' return Mr Musgrave realised the necessity for keeping Diogenes once more strictly on the chain, save only when he had the dog with him in the house; and Diogenes, resenting this return to captivity, sulked in his kennel and brooded dark plans of escape during his compulsory inactivity. The desire to escape hardened into an unalterable resolve following on a visit from Peggy, which visit moved him to such transports of delight that Peggy found it as much as she could do to prevent herself from being knocked over. She clung, laughing, to Mr Musgrave's arm for support when Diogenes hurled himself upon her; and King, who at the moment of her arrival had been engaged in the motor-house with Mr Musgrave, regarded the grouping with disfavour, until, catching Mr Musgrave's eye, he left what he was doing and retired.

"Oh," cried Peggy, "isn't he glad to see me?"

She let go of Mr Musgrave's arm and busied herself with Diogenes, while Mr Musgrave looked on, feeling unaccountably very much out in the cold.

"He is looking well," she said, glancing up at John Musgrave and flushing brightly as she met his eye. "He has grown quite stout."

"That," said Mr Musgrave, "is Martha's fault. She can't understand that over-feeding is as injurious as the other extreme. She shows her affection for Diogenes by pandering to his appetite."

"Martha is a dear," the girl said warmly. "You are a lucky dog, Diogenes, to have found so kind a home. I hope he is good, that he doesn't give any trouble. Has he broken anything more?"

"No," said Mr Musgrave, and smiled at the memories her words recalled. "He behaves excellently. Of late I have accustomed him to the house. I find him companionable, and he dislikes being chained here."

Peggy looked amazed.

"But I thought you—didn't allow dogs indoors?" she said.

"I have never had a dog before," he replied. "I allow Diogenes the run of the house. The concession was made when you went away, because—because he seemed to miss you."

"You dear?" Peggy said, hugging Diogenes.

It was not very clear whether the term of endearment referred to Mr Musgrave or the dog; but, since it was Diogenes who received the embrace, the verbal caress might have been intended for the man. Peggy stood up, and turned to John Musgrave impulsively.

"What can I say," she cried, "what can I do to prove how grateful I am?"

"I don't think any proof of your gratitude is needed," he replied. "Besides, there is no reason why you should feel grateful. In the first place, it was a small thing to do; and in the second, I have grown attached to the dog, and am glad of his company. My fireside would seem very solitary without him."

Peggy's bright face clouded.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, thinking of her plans for the resurrection of Diogenes. "Then you will want to keep him?"

He shook his head.

"I quite appreciate the fact that he is only a trust. When you are ready for him he will be more than glad to return."

"But," she protested, "that wouldn't be fair—to you."

Unwittingly Mr Musgrave had roused her sympathy by that reference to his solitary fireside. It seemed rather selfish to claim Diogenes when he had grown attached to the dog.

"It wouldn't be fair to you," he returned, "or to Diogenes, if I kept him. That was not a part of the contract."

"Was there any contract?" she asked, smiling. "I understood that you sacrificed your personal inclination in order to get Diogenes and me out of a hole. It was a hole, wasn't it?"

She laughed. It was easy to laugh now over the miseries of that morning, but it had been no laughing matter at the time. John Musgrave had rendered her an unforgettable service in rescuing her from that dilemma.

"It was a hole—yes," he admitted. He looked at her fixedly. "If, as you say, I sacrificed my inclination on that occasion, I have been adequately rewarded since; and so, you see, I can't look on the matter as one requiring thanks. I will keep Diogenes until you are quite ready for him; then you can come in and fetch him, as you do now—and not bring him back again."

While he spoke it was abruptly borne in on John Musgrave's consciousness that he would miss, besides Diogenes, these surreptitious visits of Peggy Annersley's to which he was growing accustomed, though he did not always see her when she slipped in at his back entrance; but when he purposely put himself in the way, as upon the present occasion, he felt increasingly obliged to Diogenes, and to the accident of circumstances that was responsible for bringing her there.

"I believe," Peggy said unexpectedly, "that I shall be rather sorry when that day comes. It's such fun sharing a jolly secret like this. There is a feeling of adventure... a sort of alliance of conspiracy. If Moresby only knew!"

If Moresby did not actually know, it suspected more than Miss Annersley guessed, and it was beginning to talk. Mr Musgrave's reputation, which had stood the test of years, was suddenly observed to be inclining dangerously, upsetting the popular belief in the rocklike foundations of its structural character; suggesting, indeed, the sandy nature of the soil which formed its basis. The best of servants will talk; and, save for Martha, Mr Musgrave's servants were not superior in this respect to any others. Miss Peggy Annersley's visits to Mr Musgrave's establishment were fairly generally known and discussed in the village.

"When I take Diogenes from you," Peggy added, "you will have to come and visit him. He'll feel hurt if you don't."

"I shall come," John Musgrave answered quietly, "often. After all, I have a certain right in the dog."

Peggy nodded.

"He's yours and mine," she rejoined, with a beautiful disregard for the fact that Diogenes was in reality Mr Chadwick's property. "He's really more yours than mine, because he would have had to go to strangers if you hadn't saved him, and then I should never have seen him again. It's rather amusing being joint owners in a dog. Do you remember telling me you didn't like dogs? I knew you must be mistaken."

"I am beginning to believe," he replied, "that that was only one of many mistaken ideas. It is, as a matter of fact, a mistake to express a decided opinion on any subject in which one is inexperienced."

Peggy glanced at him with newly-kindled interest, a little puzzled as well as pleased at his frank admission. Then meeting his gaze fully she abruptly lowered her own, and looked delightfully shy.

"I think," she said irrelevantly, "I'll take Diogenes for his walk."

Mr Musgrave stooped and unfastened the chain. There was no need for a lead when Diogenes went abroad with Peggy.

"Come with me," she said coaxingly, when they reached the gate, "as far as the second field. There are bulls in it."

Mr Musgrave thought it very proper that Peggy should be afraid of bulls; he therefore very willingly accompanied her for her protection. And when the danger was past, having in mind that possibly the bulls would be still there when she returned from her walk, he suggested the advisability of his accompanying her all the way.

"Will you?" Peggy cried. "That will be nice. You are sure you don't mind?"

Mr Musgrave was very positive on this point. Indeed, he minded so little that when they met the vicar, and subsequently Miss Simpson, he experienced so little embarrassment in being seen in Miss Annersley's company that he felt rather pleased than disconcerted when these encounters sprang unexpectedly upon them. Mr John Musgrave was, in the light of Moresby tradition, "walking out."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Mr Errol, seated in his pleasant drawing-room scanning a newspaper while his wife occupied herself with some sewing in the twilight hour before the lamps were lighted, suddenly lowered his paper, and looked with surprised eyes towards the window, which he faced. For a moment he doubted the evidence of his senses. Had his eyesight been less keen and his mind less evenly balanced, he might have been deceived into believing that his imagination was playing him tricks; but, after the first moment of doubt, he realised that the amazing sight of Mr Musgrave peeping surreptitiously in through the window and almost immediately withdrawing with the guilty alacrity of a person caught in some unlawful act was no optical illusion, but a very astounding actuality.

He glanced at his wife to discover whether she had observed these unusual proceedings, and, finding that her attention was absorbed in her occupation, he rose quietly, and without saying anything to her went out to investigate matters. Why, in the name of mystery, should John Musgrave prowling about outside the house after the manner of a clumsy trespasser, instead of ringing the bell and stating his business in the ordinary way?

The vicar opened the front door and stepped out on the gravelled path, whereupon Mr Musgrave came quickly forward from his place of concealment, and, still looking nervous and painfully self-conscious, approached him.

"I am so glad you have come," he said. "I was not sure whether you saw me."

"Oh, I saw you," the vicar answered. "Anyone might have seen you. If it had not been yourself, I should have suspected a design on my spoons. Why didn't you come in?"

"I wanted to see you alone—on a very private matter. I want your help."

The vicar looked faintly surprised. He had on occasions required John Musgrave's help, though not in any personal sense, but he could not remember in all their long acquaintance that John Musgrave had made a demand of this nature before. It puzzled him to think what form the request would take.

"Whatever the service may be, you can count it as promised," he said.

"Thank you," Mr Musgrave returned warmly. "I know I can rely both on your assistance and on your discretion. The fact is, Walter, I have a—a—ahem! a note which I wish delivered to Miss Annersley by a trusty messenger. It must not reach any hand but her own, and—and I do not wish to send it by one of my servants. I would prefer that the messenger should be ignorant as to whom the note comes from."

"Won't the post serve?" the vicar asked, feeling strongly tempted to laugh.

"There isn't time for the post; she must have the note this evening."

"So imperative as all that!"

Walter Errol looked curiously at the perturbed Mr Musgrave and reflected awhile. Mr Musgrave filled in the pause by explaining the nature of the communication which he was so anxious that Miss Annersley should receive without delay. The explanation robbed the adventure of the quality of romance with which Walter Errol had been colouring it, and thereby detracted considerably from the interest of the enterprise. Had John Musgrave been more experienced in the ways of the world he would have given the explanation first and then have preferred his request, having disarmed suspicion in advance. But Mr Musgrave was so concerned with the necessity for secrecy and dispatch that he lost sight altogether of certain aspects of the case which would have struck anyone less simple of purpose; which did, in fact, strike the vicar, in whose mind the picture of John Musgrave accompanying Miss Annersley and Diogenes on their walk was still sufficiently vivid to predispose his thoughts towards speculations which John Musgrave would never have dreamed of.

The purpose of Mr Musgrave's communication to Miss Annersley was to warn her of the escape of Diogenes, who had broken bounds when Mr Musgrave, having freed him from the chain, imagined him to be following him as usual into the house. Without a doubt Diogenes would return to the Hall. The note was to warn Peggy of his possible appearance.

"It would seem," observed Mr Errol with a quiet laugh, "that it is impossible to have Miss Annersley and Diogenes both in Moresby and keep them apart. I should advise you to confer together, John, and come to some better arrangement. Otherwise it looks as though you will have trouble."

"I do not mind the trouble," replied Mr Musgrave seriously. "But I should like Miss Annersley to be prepared. It might prove embarrassing for her if Diogenes suddenly revealed himself to her aunt. I don't fancy Mrs Chadwick would be deceived."

"I think it highly improbable," the vicar agreed.

He turned the note which Mr Musgrave had delivered to him on his palm, and seemed to weigh it while he scrutinised the writer, weighing other matters in his mind with equal deliberation.

"I'll see to this. Miss Annersley shall have it. I'm expecting Robert every minute—he should be here now. When he comes I will send him up to the Hall straight away. You need not fear to trust its safe delivery to Robert; he will take very good care that it reaches no hand but the right one."

And thus it transpired that Robert, who generally officiated in all the more important events in the lives and after the lives of the inhabitants of Moresby, became mixed up in the affairs of Mr Musgrave; though when he received the letter from the hand of his vicar, with the latter's careful and explicit instructions, Robert had no idea that he was acting as secret agent between Mr John Musgrave and the young lady at the Hall. He cherished, indeed, a dark suspicion that Mr Errol was corresponding with the young lady, and was unmindful that his wife should know it. For the first time since they had worked together the sexton entertained grave doubts of his vicar, and while he pursued his leisurely way to the Hall in the deepening dusk of advancing night he recalled the story of the strong man with the shorn locks and the woman whose beauty had robbed him of his strength. Robert held Samson in as great contempt as he held Saint Paul in veneration. It was a relief to him to reflect that the vicar wore his hair clipped close to his head.

Robert, while he walked to the Hall, engaged in a pleasant reverie of his own in which a prospective reward for his services figured prominently. A young lady receiving a *billet doux*—Robert did not call it thus, being no sympathiser

with foreign languages—would naturally reward the messenger. Since he carried in his pocket a shilling which John Musgrave had left with the note, these, reflections savoured of a mercenary spirit; but payment in advance is rather an earnest of good-will than a reward for service; the discharge of the obligation should undoubtedly follow the faithful discharge of the duty.

As an earnest of good-will on his side Robert halted at the village inn and wasted more valuable time there than Mr Musgrave would have approved of in consideration of the urgent nature of his message. When eventually Robert proceeded on his way the shadows had gathered with sufficient density to turn his thoughts into the less pleasing direction of the misty horrors associated with the Hall, which in the broad light of day he was wont to deride.

Thinking of these things against his volition, he quickened his steps; and it was possibly due to the rapidity of his pace and not to extreme nervousness that, in passing under the dense overbranching elm-trees in the drive, which entirely excluded the last faint glimmering of light, the perspiration started on his forehead in large beads and a curious thrill ran down his spine. It was not until he came within view of the house that these uncomfortable symptoms of over-exertion abated somewhat, and he was complacently comparing his masculine temerity with Hannah's foolish feminine fears of ghosts and such things, when abruptly something, unearthly of shape and terrible in appearance, started up out of the shadows and dashed past him, nearly upsetting him in its furious charge, and disappearing again in the shelter of the trees.

With a yell, more terrifying than any ghostly apparition, Robert started to run, and ran on, passing Mr Chadwick, who, cigar in mouth, was taking an evening stroll, and whom the sexton in his alarm mistook for the Evil One, emitting fire from his mouth. And while Mr Chadwick turned to stare after the amazing sight of the little man running for dear life, and while Diogenes, having hunted an imaginary night-bird, returned more leisurely to the drive and joined Mr Chadwick in his walk, Robert gained the house, gained admittance by the back door, and frightened the Hall servants badly with his blood-curdling description of the horrors he had encountered on the way. It was the cook's firm conviction, and nothing Robert found to say in expostulation could shake her belief, that he had been drinking.

"If you aren't drunk," she announced in conclusion, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. A grown man to be scared out of his wits by a ghost!"

So unreasonable is feminine logic!

It took Robert some little while to collect his scattered thoughts sufficiently to be able to state the business that brought him there. Had it not been for a glass of wine which a sympathetic parlourmaid brought him, and held for him while he drank, he might not even then have remembered the note in his pocket, and the vicar's explicit instructions that he was to hand it to Miss Annersley himself. His insistent demand to see the young lady confirmed the cook in her opinion of him; but the sympathetic parlourmaid undertook to acquaint Miss Annersley with the news of his presence and his wish to see her, and finally Robert was conducted to a room which was known as the library, where Peggy, a shining white figure against the dusky background of book-lined walls, received him, with manifest wonder in her grey eyes—a wonder which changed by imperceptible degrees to amusement as, having received and read her note, she listened to Robert's eloquent tale of the misty sort of thing which had risen out of the ground at his feet, had almost knocked him over, and had then vanished into the ground again.

"And you weren't afraid?" said Peggy, her hand resting on the writing-table beside which she stood, her admiring gaze on Robert's ashen face. "But that's splendid. I wish I were as brave as you. If I had been nearly knocked down by a misty sort of thing I should never be able to pass the spot again. Yet you'll go back presently, and won't mind in the least. That's real courage."

Robert looked uncomfortable. He wished she had not reminded him of the return journey. He felt far from happy when he thought of it; far from confident that he dared pass the spot again. He had it in his mind to invite the sympathetic parlourmaid to accompany him.

"Are you quite sure it was a ghost?" Peggy asked suddenly. "I don't see how a misty sort of thing could knock anyone down. Wasn't it, perhaps, a dog?"

Robert felt offended, and showed it.

"I reckon I knows a dog when I sees one," he replied with dignity, "an' I reckon I knows a ghost. Hannah always allows she seen the ghost in the elm avenue, and it was in the avenue as I seed it. Big, it was—big as a elephant, and misty like. There was two of 'em."

"Two?" said Peggy, with a questioning intonation. "That's strange, Robert, because there are supposed to be two ghosts—a lady and a dog. Are you quite sure there wasn't a dog, after all?"

"There mid 'a' been a dog," Robert conceded reluctantly. "But it warn't like a human dog, nohow. Its eyes was like flames, an' it didn' seem to 'ave any legs, seemed to move wi'out touching of the ground. Why not come an' see for yourself?" he suggested cunningly, "if you don't believe me. I'll take care of 'ee."

Peggy looked thoughtfully at the trembling sexton and appeared to deliberate. It was plain to her that Robert was badly shaken, that his nerve was not equal to the strain of making the return journey alone. She was shrewd enough to penetrate his design in suggesting that she should accompany him, and being of a naturally kindly disposition she fell in with the idea, the more readily because, since reading the note, she was anxious to meet Robert's ghost, and secure it.

"I don't disbelieve you," she returned. "But I should like to see for myself. I should never feel afraid with you."

So subtle was this flattery and so seemingly sincere, that Robert unconsciously assumed the courageous bearing

expected of him; and, when Miss Annersley led him out through a side door into the grounds, he drew himself up and expanded his chest, and bade her keep close to him and he would see she came to no harm. Peggy laughed softly as she drew nearer to him, and the contact of the tall slender figure afforded Robert that comfortable sense of human companionship which helps to minimise the unknown terrors of the dark, even a darkness peopled with misty apparitions. He began to believe quite firmly in his intrepidity.

At the entrance to the avenue they encountered Mr Chadwick; and for a moment it seemed as though Robert's vaunted courage would desert him, as Diogenes bounded forward out of the gloom and sprang excitedly upon Peggy, greeting her with an effusiveness which, with her uncle looking on, Peggy found secretly embarrassing.

"Is this your ghost?" she asked, glancing up at Robert, while she attempted to restrain the dog, which, in the first moments of joyful recognition, was an impossibility. "I begin to believe we are about to solve the mystery."

Robert drew his squat figure up to its full height, which was insignificant enough, and eyed her with contemptuous disapproval.

"Be that hanimal as big as a elephant?" he asked. "Be 'e misty like? Would you say, now, that 'e could move wi'out walking, or that 'e shot flames from his eyes? Would you, now?"

"No," Peggy answered. "I don't think he tallies with that description."

"Then 'ow can thicky be wot I seed?"

"True," she mused. "Plainly it wasn't Diogenes. We'll walk on, I think, and look for your ghost."

Peggy was anxious to walk on. Mr Chadwick was advancing towards them and she was not prepared just then for an encounter. She waved a hand to him.

"I am going to the gate with Robert," she called to him, "to look for spooks. You can come to meet me, to see that I am not carried away on a broomstick."

Robert did not approve of the levity of her manner. He felt, indeed, so resentful as he hurried along the avenue at her side, with Diogenes in attendance, that he was doubly relieved when they reached the lodge gates without any further supernatural visitation, the absence of which he attributed, he informed her, to the presence of the dog. But the transfer of half a crown from Peggy's slim hand to Robert's horny palm softened his resentment sufficiently to allow him to wish her a friendly good-night, and to further express the hope that "nothing dreadful" met her on the way back.

Nothing more dreadful than Mr Chadwick awaited her in the elm avenue; but Peggy at the moment would almost as soon have encountered a ghost as her uncle; a ghost, at least, would not have asked awkward questions.

"What did Robert want?" Mr Chadwick inquired.

"He came with a message—for me."

"What about?"

"A private message," Peggy replied.

"Oh?" he said. He threw away his cigar and linked an arm within Peggy's. "I thought he might have come to fetch Musgrave's dog. That animal seems pretty much at home here."

"Y-es," Peggy returned dubiously.

"I wonder if Musgrave would be inclined to sell him. I've half a mind to ask him."

"Oh, please don't do that!" Peggy said quickly.

"Why not?"

"I think—he wouldn't like it. He is so fond of the dog."

Will Chadwick laughed, and since his niece did not express any curiosity as to the cause of his amusement, he did not explain it. But he wondered why, when they changed the colour of Diogenes' coat, they had not taken the precaution to buy him a new collar. He had been interested that evening in inspecting the collar and reading his own name and address inscribed thereon.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

When Mr Musgrave entered the yard on the following morning, from force of habit rather than in the expectation of finding Diogenes there, it was to discover Diogenes in his kennel, for all the world as though he had never absented himself in the interval.

Diogenes' welcome of Mr Musgrave was almost as effusive as his greeting of Peggy on the previous evening; he was beginning to realise his position as a dog with two homes and a divided allegiance. Doubtless were he received back at the Hall he would on occasion find his way to Mr Musgrave's home as a matter of course. There were many things in Mr Musgrave's home that Diogenes approved of. He approved of Martha's attentions in the matter of table

delicacies, and he appreciated the thick skin rug before the fire in Mr Musgrave's drawing-room; but the kennel and the chain were indignities against which he felt constrained to protest.

Mr Musgrave unfastened the chain and took Diogenes for his walk, an attention which Diogenes did not merit, but Mr Musgrave felt so ridiculously pleased to see him again that he forgave the overnight defection, as he had forgiven the smashing of his dinner-service; he simply ignored it.

In view of this magnanimous treatment it was distinctly ungracious of Diogenes to repeat his truant performance within a fortnight of his previous escapade; yet repeat it he did, as soon as by his docile behaviour he had allayed Mr Musgrave's doubts of him so far as to lead to a decrease of vigilance, and a greater laxity in the matter of open doors.

Diogenes broke bounds again at about the same hour on a balmy evening in June; and Mr Musgrave hastened as before to the vicarage with a second note to be entrusted to the handy sexton. But here a check awaited him. Robert, on being appealed to by the vicar, stoutly refused to go to the Hall on any business after dusk.

"Not if you was to offer me a hund'ed pounds, sir," he affirmed earnestly. "I wouldn' go up thicky avenue in the dimpsy again, not for a thousand—no, I wouldn'. Leave it bide till the mornin' an' I'll take it."

Mr Errol returned to John Musgrave with the tale of his non-success.

"I daresay I could find someone else to take it, John," he said, with a whimsical smile. "But my reputation is likely to suffer, unless you sanction the note being delivered at the door, instead of into Miss Annersley's own hand. That stipulation is highly compromising."

Mr Musgrave flushed.

"I am afraid I didn't think of that," he said, and took the note from the vicar and tore it in half. "I am glad you mentioned it. It is not fair, either, to Miss Annersley."

"What is to be done now?" the vicar said.

"I will," returned Mr Musgrave quietly, "go to the Hall myself, and bring Diogenes back."

"Well, I rather wonder you didn't do that before."

Mr Musgrave wondered also. The idea had not, as a matter of fact, presented itself to him until the delicacy of entrusting the mission to a third person had been pointed out. Now that it had presented itself it occurred to him not only as the proper course to pursue, but the more agreeable. He therefore scattered the fragments of his note to the winds of heaven, and set forth on his walk to the Hall.

It was dusk when he started; when he arrived at the gates and passed through, the dusk appeared to deepen perceptibly, and as he pursued his way, as Robert had done, along the avenue beneath the green archway of interlacing boughs, it seemed to him that night descended abruptly and dispersed the last lingering gleams of departing day.

Mr Musgrave was not superstitious, and his thoughts, unlike his footsteps, did not follow in the direction which Robert's had taken. Nothing was farther from his mind at the moment than ghosts; therefore when an ungainly-looking object pounded towards him in the gloom, instead of his imagination playing him tricks, he recognised immediately the clumsy, familiar figure of Diogenes, even before Diogenes rushed at him with a joyous bark of welcome. Mr Musgrave's thought on the spur of the moment was to secure Diogenes and take him home; but, as though suspicious of his motives in grabbing at his collar, Diogenes broke away from the controlling hand, and dived hastily for cover, making for some bushes of rhododendrons, into which Mr Musgrave plunged recklessly in pursuit, so intent on the capture of his elusive trust that he failed to note the figure of a man, which, bearing in sight as he broke into the bushes, hurried forward in hot pursuit, and, following close upon his heels, seized him with a pair of strong arms and dragged him, choking and amazed, into the open path.

"Musgrave!" said Mr Chadwick. He released Mr Musgrave's collar, and stood back and stared at his captive. "What, in the name of fortune, are you up to?"

Mr Musgrave inserted two fingers inside his collar, felt his throat tenderly, and coughed.

"You need not have been so rough," he complained.

"Upon my word, I mistook you for a tramp," Mr Chadwick explained, laughing. "What on earth were you playing hide-and-seek in the bushes for? I begin to believe this path must be bewitched, by the extraordinary manner in which people using it behave. Have you been seeing ghosts too?"

"I saw my dog," Mr Musgrave explained with dignity. "I was following him."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, you had better come on to the house. I expect we shall find Diogenes there. He was, before you arrived, taking a stroll with me. Seems to be pretty much at home here. Why can't you keep him at your place?"

"He is—" Mr Musgrave coughed again, as though his throat still troubled him—"very much attached to Miss Annersley."

"Rather sudden in his attachments, isn't he?" Mr Chadwick suggested.

"Miss Annersley takes considerable notice of him," Mr Musgrave replied. "I have been thinking that, subject to your permission, I would like to make her a present of the dog."

"I am at least gratified to find that you realise I have a right to a say in the matter," Diogenes' lawful owner remarked with irony. "I should like to ask you a question, Musgrave. Possession being nine-tenths of the law, should you say that constituted the right to give away what doesn't, in the strict sense of the word, belong to you?"

Mr Musgrave, experiencing further difficulty with his throat, was thereby prevented from replying to this question. His interlocutor tapped him lightly on the chest.

"There is another inquiry I would like to put while we are on the subject," he said. "Don't you think you might offer to pay for the collar?"

John Musgrave regained his voice and his composure at the same time.

"No," he said; "I don't. If there has been any ill-practice over this transaction, my conscience at least is clear."

Abruptly Will Chadwick put out a hand and grasped the speaker's.

"Come along to the house," he said, "and make your offering to Peggy."

When they were within full view of the house Mr Musgrave became suddenly aware of two significant facts; these, in their order, being the presence of Peggy walking on the terrace accompanied by Diogenes, and the disturbing knowledge that the sight of her pacing leisurely among the shadows beyond the lighted windows filled him with a strange, almost overwhelming shyness, an emotion at once so unaccountable and so impossible to subdue that, had it not been for the restraining influence of Mr Chadwick's presence at his elbow, he would in all probability have beaten a retreat.

Arrived below the terrace he halted, and Peggy, having advanced to meet them as they approached, leaned down over the low stone parapet and gave him her hand.

"You!" she said softly.

This greeting struck Mr Chadwick as peculiar. He was conscious of an immense curiosity to hear Mr Musgrave's response; he was also conscious of feeling *de trop*. Plainly he and Diogenes had no place in this conspiracy. They had both been hoodwinked.

"You must not blame me," Mr Musgrave said. "It is Diogenes who has given us away. I fear the secret is out."

"You don't flatter my intelligence," Mr Chadwick interposed, "by suggesting there was any secret to come out. If it hadn't been for implicating my niece I would have run you in for dog-stealing. A fine figure you'd cut in court, Musgrave."

Peggy laughed quietly.

"Don't take any notice of uncle, Mr Musgrave," she said. "He is really obliged to you. So am I," she added, and the grey eyes, looking straight into John Musgrave's, were very kind. "Come up here and talk to me," she said.

John Musgrave ascended the steps, and, since the invitation had not seemed to include himself, Mr Chadwick turned on his heel and continued the stroll which Mr Musgrave's arrival had interrupted. Peggy and John Musgrave paced the terrace slowly side by side; and Mrs Chadwick, reading a novel in solitary enjoyment in the drawing-room, listened to the low hum of their voices as they passed and re-passed the windows, and wondered between the diversion of her story who Peggy was talking with.

"You came to fetch Diogenes?" Peggy said.

"Not altogether," Mr Musgrave replied. "I wanted... to see you... You haven't been down for some days."

"No," Peggy admitted, and blushed in the darkness.

"Why?" he asked.

The blush deepened. Had it been light enough to see her face Mr Musgrave must have observed how shy she looked at his question. Since it was impossible to explain that those visits, once so light-heartedly made to Diogenes in Mr Musgrave's stable-yard, had become an embarrassment for reasons too subtle to analyse, she remained silent, in her self-conscious agitation playing with a rose in her belt with nervous, inconsequent fingers.

"I believe," Mr Musgrave continued, "that Diogenes has felt neglected."

"He is forgiving," she answered. "He came to find me."

John Musgrave looked at her steadily.

"Do you think it is altogether kind—to Diogenes," he asked, "to stay away so long? Don't you think that perhaps he misses you—badly?"

Peggy smiled faintly.

"I think it is better he should forget," she replied.

"It isn't always possible to forget," he returned slowly. "I am so sure he will never forget that I am glad our secret is exposed. I am going to return you your pet, Miss Annersley."

Peggy turned to him quickly in protest, and put out a small hand and laid it on his sleeve.

"No," she cried, "no. You have more right to him than anyone. You are fond of him too. You must keep him. I *want* you to keep him."

John Musgrave looked at the hand on his sleeve. He had seen it there once before, and the sight of it had caused him embarrassment. It did not cause him embarrassment now; he enjoyed the feel of the slight pressure on his arm. Suddenly, without pausing to consider, he put his own hand over it, and kept it there.

"I want you to have him, and I want to keep him too," he said. "How are we going to get over that?"

Peggy laughed nervously.

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't see how that can be."

"I hoped you would see," he returned gravely, and halted and imprisoned her other hand, and stood facing her. "There is a way, if only I wasn't so old and dull for your bright youth." He released her hands gently. "I suppose you are right, and it isn't possible."

"You don't appear old or dull to me," she said softly. "I—didn't mean that."

He went closer to her and remained gazing earnestly into the downcast face, his own tense features and motionless pose not more still than the girl's, as she waited quietly in the silent dusk with a heart which thumped so violently that it seemed to her he must hear its rapid beat.

"It appears to me preposterous," he said, in a voice which held a ring of wonder in its tones, "that I, so much older than you, so unsuited in every sense, should find the courage to tell you how greatly I love you. It is scarcely to be expected that you can care for me sufficiently to allow me any hope... And yet... Miss Annersley, am I too presumptuous?"

"No," Peggy whispered. She slipped a hand shyly into his and laughed softly. "I think you have discovered the best way of settling the ownership of our dog," she said.

"I am not thinking of the dog," he answered, bending over her.

"I wasn't thinking of the dog either," she replied.

With her hand still in John Musgrave's she walked to the parapet and sat down. Mr Musgrave seated himself beside her, and, gaining courage from the contact of the warm hand lying so confidently in his own, he felt emboldened to proceed with his avowal of love.

"My feeling for you, Miss Annersley, is as unchangeable as it is deep. It has developed so imperceptibly that, until you went away, and I realised how greatly I missed you, what a blank in my days your absence made, I never suspected how dear you were becoming to me. When I suspected it I was distressed, because it seemed to me incredible that you, young and beautiful and so greatly admired, could ever entertain for me any kinder feeling than that of friendship. I can scarcely believe even now that you feel more than friendship for me. I must appear old to you, and my ideas are old-fashioned, and, I begin to see now, intolerant."

"Not intolerant," Peggy corrected. "If I wasn't confident that your heart is so kind, and your sympathies so wide, that it will be as easy for you to give and take as for me to meet you in this respect, I should be afraid to risk the happiness of both our futures. But I haven't any fears at all. I think I have loved you from the moment when you met me weeping in the road, and took charge of Diogenes."

"That," he said a little doubtfully, "is gratitude."

She shook her head.

"No," she insisted, "it is something more enduring than that."

At which interesting point in the discussion, to John Musgrave's annoyance, a shrill scream penetrated the stillness, and Mrs Chadwick's voice was heard exclaiming in accents of astonishment and delight:

"Oh, Diogenes, Diogenes, dear old fellow!... Wherever did you come from? And how did you get your coat in that horrible mess?"

Diogenes, finding it slow on the terrace, had sauntered into the drawing-room and discovered himself to Mrs Chadwick.

Peggy glanced swiftly into the face of the man beside her and laughed happily, and John Musgrave, finding to his vast amazement the laughing face held firmly between his two hands, bent his head suddenly and kissed the curving lips.

It is possible that could he have looked back into the days before he knew Peggy he would have failed to recognise as himself the man who, in response to the vicar's assertion that occasionally people married for love, had made the shocked ejaculation: "Do they, indeed?" John Musgrave was learning.

Chapter Thirty.

The Rev. Walter Errol, removing his surplice in the little vestry at the finish of one of the simplest and most pleasing ceremonies at which he had ever been required to officiate, looked forth through the mullioned window to watch his oldest and best-loved friend passing along the gravelled path in the sunlight with his bride upon his arm.

The sight of John Musgrave married gave him greater satisfaction than anything that had befallen since his own happy marriage-day. The one thing lacking to make his friend the most lovable of men was supplied in the newly-made contract which bound him for good and ill to the woman at his side. There would be, in the vicar's opinion, so much of good in the union that ill would be crowded out and find no place in the lives of this well-assorted pair, who, during the brief period of their engagement, had practised so successfully that deference to each other's opinions which smooths away difficulties and prevents a dissimilarity in ideas from approaching disagreement. The future happiness of Mr and Mrs John Musgrave was based on the sure foundation of mutual respect.

While the vicar stood at the window, arrested in the business of disrobing by the engrossment of his thoughts, Robert, having finished rolling up the red carpet in the aisle, entered the vestry and approached the window and stood, as he so often did, at the vicar's elbow, and gazed also after the newly-married couple, a frown knitting his heavy brows, and, notwithstanding the handsome fee in his pocket, an expression of most unmistakable contempt in his eyes as they rested upon the bridegroom.

"They be done for, sir," he said, with a gloomy jerk of the head in the direction of the vanishing pair.

The vicar turned his face towards the speaker, the old whimsical smile lighting his features.

"Not done for, Robert. They are just beginning life," he said.

"They be done for," Robert persisted obstinately, and stared at the open register which John Musgrave and his wife had signed. "Ay, they be done for."

"When you married Hannah were you done for?" the vicar inquired.

"Yes, sir, I were," Robert answered with sour conviction.

It passed through Walter Errol's mind to wonder whether the non-success of Robert's marital relations was due solely to Hannah's fault.

"How came you to marry Hannah?" he asked.

"Did I never tell you 'ow that came about?" Robert said. "I didn' go wi' Hannah, not first along. I went wi' a young woman from Cross-ways. Me an' 'er had been walking out for a goodish while when 'er says to me one night, 'Will 'ee come in a-Toosday?' I says, 'Yes, I will.' Well, sir, you never seed rain like it rained that Toosday. I wasn't goin' to get into my best clothes to go out there an' get soaked to the skin in; so I brushed myself up as I was, an' changed my boots; an' when I got out 'er turned up 'er nose at me. So I went straight off an' took up with Hannah."

"I think," observed the vicar, "that you were a little hasty."

"I've thought so since, sir," Robert admitted. "The mistake I made was in 'avin' further truck wi' any of them. Leave the wimmin alone, I says, if you want to be comfortable. A man when 'e marries is done for."

Walter Errol, having finished disrobing, took his soft hat and went out to the motor, which had returned from the Hall to fetch him, and was driven swiftly to the scene of the festivities, the joyous pealing of the bells sounding harmoniously in the lazy stillness of the summer day. Past John Musgrave's home the motor bore him; past Miss Simpson's comfortable house, where the blinds were jealously lowered as though a funeral, instead of a wedding, were in progress. And, indeed, for the Moresby spinster the chiming of the marriage-peal was as the funeral knell ringing the last rites over the grave of her dead hopes. Miss Simpson was the only person in Moresby who sympathised with the sexton's opinion that John Musgrave was done for.

At the Hall only the immediate members of both families were present, with the exception of the vicar and his wife. John Musgrave had stipulated for a quiet wedding. Very proud and happy he looked as, with his wife beside him, he greeted his oldest friend; and the vicar, with an affectionate hand on his shoulder, exclaimed:

"It isn't Coelebs any longer, John. You were a wise man and waited patiently for the right woman."

"I hope I shall prove to be the right woman, John," Peggy whispered, drawing more closely to him as the vicar passed on, and looking up in her husband's face with wide, diffident grey eyes, eyes that were wells of happiness, despite their anxious questioning.

"My only doubt," John Musgrave answered gently, "is whether I shall prove worthy of your love, my wife."

The End.

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