Young Florence Ethel Mills

Coelebs: The Love Story of a Bachelor

Florence Young

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Содержание

Young F. E. Mills Florence Ethel Mills 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 sooicide, 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 kinema.

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 fanner 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.

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