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keep his talents from growing rusty by constant reading, while he also contributed frequent articles—chiefly studies from nature—to various magazines. At one time the vicar had intended his only son for the church, but in view of his own struggle for existence and the boy's manifest objection, he abandoned the idea and sought vaguely for another. Then Albert suddenly and finally solved the question for himself by going into a bank.

Such was the family with whom Margaret spent most of the time when stopping at Appletree House. She liked them all, but Mildred was her favourite, because of her gentle selfless nature which was a source of perpetual admiration to Margaret. She felt also a sincere sympathy for the disappointed scholar who was eating out his heart in this lonely country corner, unable through straitened means to take those occasional journeys into the greater world which would have done so much to break the dull monotony of his existence.

Given a wider sphere of action, this studious man and brilliant scholar would have been able to make use of the rare talents he possessed, but as it was, his sermons usually passed over the heads of his congregation, being too exalted for their comprehension; the shy and reserved man, conscious of this, shrank still more into his shell and turned to a literary career as a more congenial field for his labours.

Mildred was the only one who, to any degree, realized the bitter disappointment of her father's life, and the irreparable loss which had fallen upon him when her mother was taken away. As far as lay in her power she strove to fill the vacant place in the home, and was to him, more than all his other children, his real companion—more and more he came to lean upon her—more and more she felt that his need for sympathy was great.

The vicar was now concentrating all his energies on his big work on the "flora" of Cornwall, and secretly building hopes upon its ultimate success. In parish matters, as in all others, he leaned greatly upon Mildred, trusting to her judgment and sure of her ready common sense. And Mildred was content to give of her best so that she could lighten his burdens and brighten his solitary life.

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

##### An Unpleasant Episode.

MARGARET ASSITAS had been at Appletree House a month when it was decided they should return home. Miss Pragg and Peggy had threshed the matter out. The White Maisonette was finished and ready for its mistress, and Miss Pragg was getting restless and wanted to be in the thick of things again. She had a new novel working in her blood and never wrote so well as when she was in the seething life of the Metropolis. After a time the country bored her, she frankly admitted the fact without shame or concealment. She grew tired of her country clothes, which at first she had revelled in, she knew perfectly well she looked a fright in them.

It was all very well for Peggy with her slim graceful figure to go out in a short tweed skirt above her ankles, a knitted coat and a soft corduroy hat pulled down over her fair hair—but Miss Pragg, while aping in the same style, felt the effect was entirely different, and despite her years and her bulk, was not yet entirely indifferent to her appearance.

Her tweed skirt looked too skimpy on her over-generous figure, it was too short and gave the public an ample view of thick, shapeless ankles and square-toed man-like boots, the soft felt hat she adopted in the country was jabbed on to her grey hair with one over-long hat pin which protruded dangerously at both ends and failed entirely to secure the hat, which wobbled on to the back of her head or hung dejectedly over one ear, while the bridge of her strong hawk-like nose protruded aggressively forward as if daring the world to laugh at her.

In the car her appearance was even more disreputable, enveloped as she was in an old mackintosh coat, with

her felt hat tied on with a mud coloured motor veil. She rigidly adhered to this get-up from some mistaken fetish that it was the "correct" thing to look as obnoxious as possible when leading a simple life.

In London, Miss Pragg also dressed up to her surroundings, usually in the best of taste, suitable to her age and station. But John Grey experienced a fresh shock whenever she emerged from Appletree House, and there were times when he could with difficulty repress a smile.

Having decided in the morning upon the date of their departure, Margaret drove to the links in the afternoon, to collect all the vicarage girls for tea and a game of croquet afterwards.

Albert had entered upon his duties at the bank that very week, and, having his own share of the family imagination, already pictured himself as a future bank manager, or—later on perhaps—as the founder even of a bank of his own. Somewhere at the back of his mind hovered a dim vision of Peggy as the future mistress of his home when he should have achieved the desirable position he dreamt of; fortunately, Peggy was so blissfully unconscious of this disposal of her life that it did not disturb the amiable balance of their friendship.

The day was perfect, an autumn day, mild and sunny with a soft breeze blowing from the sea—Margaret felt it was good to be alive, and also a keen regret at leaving so much beauty behind for the noise and bustle of London.

"You lucky—lucky—girl," chorused Mabel and Maud, when she told them of her near departure from Appletree. "Don't we wish we were in your shoes, instead of having to poke along here all winter."

"I WONDER if anyone is really quite satisfied with their life?" queried Margaret thoughtfully.

"I know we aren't," declared Mabel energetically. "I've a chance to escape from it soon—but there is poor Dad—and Mildred," she sighed. "Albert can get out of it, too, for a bit, even if he does come home at night, he sees something fresh every day, but poor Mildred is just a prisoner."

"I don't mind," said Mildred hastily. "I am quite happy, and I couldn't leave Dad!"

Margaret looked at her and smiled, it sounded so like Mildred, she wondered in her heart, how it was that Mildred had reached thirty years in her life without winning the love of a good man, she was so sweet, so lovable, so capable, so selfless, so eminently womanly, yet no lover had as yet found her out!

"It is a good thing for us Mildred is so contented," said Mabel easily, "I can't think how she can be—I feel choked—suffocated in this place—I am weary of it to my very soul." She spoke tragically.

"You have a glorious voice," said Mildred quietly—"and I have nothing, I am just an ordinary being whose proper place is at home."

"Ordinary beings are very useful dear," said Margaret, giving the girl a kiss and feeling sure that Mildred had smothered a sigh.

"It is scrumptious having a car to ride in," declared Maud as she sprang in after her elder sisters, "I'm afraid we shall never have one of our own," this regretfully.

"One never knows," laughed Peggy, "everyone seems to get a car in these days, and there is Mabel going to make a fortune with her voice."

"Oh! I hope so—won't it be ripping! No one really can appreciate money, unless they have had to skimp and screw and do without every blessed thing they ever wanted," cried the girl vehemently.

Mildred looked distressed, and there was a moment's silence while the car flashed along the open country road past the "swans' lake" a large natural sheet of water where black and white swans were serenely sailing about.

"There is Dad before us," exclaimed Mildred, as the car climbed up a steep hill, and the vicar's tall figure came into view, intent upon some bot-