

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Crane turned his back upon the younger man and busied himself wondrously over the manipulation of a chair. A strange dread crept into Mortimer's heart; it smothered him; he felt dizzy. Why did Allis look so happy—why were there smiles on her lips when she must know there were ashes of gloom in his soul? Why was she alone there with Crane? Was it but another devilish trick of the misfortune that pursued him?

"Good afternoon, Miss—" the words stuck in Mortimer's throat, and he completed his greeting with a most dreadfully formal bow.

The girl laughed outright; how droll it was to see a man trying to make himself unhappy when there was nothing but happiness in the world. Through the open window she could hear the birds singing, and through it came the perfume of clover-buried fields; across the floor streamed warm, bright sunlight from a blue sky in which was no cloud. And from their lives, Mortimer's and her own, had been swept the dark cloud—and here, in the midst of all this joy was her lover with a long, sad face, trying to reproach her with a stiff, awkward bow.

Her laugh twirled Crane about like a top. He saw the odd situation; there was something incongruous in Mortimer's stiff attitude. Crane had a big cloud of his own not quite driven from his sky, but a smile hovered on his thin lips. This happiness was worth catching.

Mortimer noticed the distasteful mirth reflected in the other man's face, and he repeated with asperity, "You sent for me, sir—may I ask—"

"Will you take a chair," said Crane, and he pushed the one he had been toying with toward Mortimer. The latter remained standing.