

bankers—and when she had cashed the cheque which Muriel handed her “instead of references,” Lady Mary began to feel that the wind had indeed been marvellously tempered to suit her fleecelless state, and went round in a most cheerful frame of mind to give her usual annual order for the hired victoria (or brougham, as befitted time and weather) for the season.

Muriel proved to be the most gentle, docile, amiable creature in the world. She appeared to have no wishes of her own; her one idea was to please Lady Mary. She consulted her *chaperon* about everything that she did, and deferred to her opinion so charmingly, that Lady Mary was delighted. Even when they went to choose *chiffons* and arrange about the dress which Muriel was to wear at the Drawing Room, the girl was content to trust more to her friend's judgment than her own.

“But, my dear,” expostulated Lady Mary, “Surely you must have some preference of your own? When I was your age I should not have cared for a dress that was entirely arranged for me.”

“I am so inexperienced,” said Muriel, in her deep contralto voice. “I would rather trust to your taste than to my own, should so like to look well.”

In short, Lady Mary had not enjoyed her shopping so much for a long time, and she exerted herself with such goodwill to reform Muriel's wardrobe in points where she considered it defective, that she very soon transformed the simply-clad country girl into a perfect peacock as regards her plumage.

She was very glad to find that Muriel was fond of walking, and did not care for riding in London. Muriel never refused or fidgeted because this or that thing did not go right, never lost her head in a crowd or rushed into the jaws of death at a crossing. She took life easily and enjoyed it with a quiet air of amusement as if she thought it very entertaining.

“It is so new to me,” she explained one day when Lady Mary asked her why she smiled. “So different to the country that it surprises me at times.”

She completely won Lady Mary's heart by the keen attention with which she listened to the old lady's old stories of her flirtations, her cleverness in managing her swains, her triumphs and coquetties of earlier days, and also of the misdeeds or successes of other *protégés*, with all of whom Lady Mary, according to her own account, was “distantly connected.” Nor did Muriel ever manifest a desire to assume the lead in the conversation. She could be very amusing when she chose, and entertained her *chaperon* very much by her clever satirical comments on things and people, but as a rule she allowed the main burden of the conversation to fall on the shoulders of the elder lady, who bore it without any sign of fatigue.

There were only two points on which she did not approve of Muriel. She considered that the latter's appetite was far too good for a fashionable young lady; she was foolishly vexed because in consequence of the extreme delicacy of the girl's constitution she was to be presented in a high dress.

Before Muriel had been a week with her, Lady Mary was completely devoted to her, and took as much interest in the approaching *debut* as if she had been the girl's mother.

“You are a dear, sweet girl, and you have quite won my heart,” she said to her one afternoon, when they had just returned from driving; and then, in an impulse of unusual affection, she kissed her for the first time on the side of the mouth, as women do to one another, and the girl's cheek touched her face.

At this touch she drew back abruptly as if she had received a shock. Then she scrutinised Muriel closely and curiously, drawing back a little, while a look of surprise, almost of terror, came into her eyes.

“Is anything the matter?” inquired Muriel, as Lady Mary walked hastily across the room.

“No—yes—I don't know. I am not sure,” replied the lady, stopping by the table, and eyeing her guest from head to foot with an air of the greatest perplexity. “It seems absurd. Have you ever looked at my work?—catch——” and she abruptly tossed a

bundle of wool skewered into a ball by knitting needles towards her unsuspecting companion.

Startled into rapid action, Muriel, by an irresistible impulse, brought her knees close together, and, catching the bundle clumsily through her fingers, saved the fall with her knees in a rough and ready manner that considerably disturbed the set of her draperies. Then she raised her head to see Lady Mary's face turn ashy white and her eyes dilate with rage and horror.

“You wretch, you villain,” she cried, in a scarcely human voice. “What devil has prompted you to do this villainous thing?”

Then she fell forward in a dead faint.

“I was scared at the suddenness of the thing,” said Bertie, when he told the story afterwards, “and my one idea was to bolt as soon as possible. So I rang for the servants, told them their mistress had fainted, rushed upstairs as fast as those confounded skirts would let me, hustled into my jacket and hat, and slipped out and took the first hansom home, where I was fortunate enough to get in unperceived. But, to tell the truth, now that it is over, I am rather ashamed of the thing, and I have made a vow never to tell her name.”

“And to tell the truth, Bertie,” said Ronny Cochrane, who had listened with much disapprobation, “I think you would be a scoundrel if you did.”

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