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Mrs Craddock

W Somerset Maugham

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

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MRS CRADDOCK

William Somerset Maugham was born in 1874 and lived in Paris until he was ten. He was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and at Heidelberg University. He spent some time at St Thomas' Hospital with the idea of practising medicine, but the success of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, published in 1897, won him over to letters. *Of Human Bondage*, the first of his masterpieces, came out in 1915, and with the publication in 1919 of *The Moon and Sixpence* his reputation as a novelist was established. At the same time his fame as a successful playwright and short story writer was being consolidated with acclaimed productions of various plays and the publication of *The Trembling of a Leaf*, subtitled *Little Stories of the South Sea Islands*, in 1921, which was followed by seven more collections. His other works include travel books, essays, criticism and the autobiographical *The Summing Up* and *A Writer's Notebook.*

In 1927 Somerset Maugham settled in the South of France and lived there until his death in 1965.

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Preface

This novel was written in 1900. It was thought extremely daring, and was refused by publisher after publisher, among others by William Heinemann; but it was at last read by Robertson Nicoll, a partner in the firm of Hodder and Stoughton, and he, though of opinion that it was not the sort of book his own firm should publish, thought well enough of it to urge William Heinemann to reconsider his decision. Heinemann read it himself and, on the condition that I took out passages that he found shocking, agreed to publish it. This was in 1902. It must have had something of a success, since it was reissued the following year, and again in 1908. Thirty years later it was republished. The new edition was printed from the original manuscript with the offensive parts left in, for I could not for the life of me imagine what they were, and I had not the patience to compare the manuscript with the printed copy. On the contrary, the propriety of the book seemed to me almost painful. I made, however, certain corrections.

The author had been dead for many years, and I used the manuscript as I would that of a departed friend whose book, unrevised by him, had been entrusted to me for publication. I left it as it was, with all its faults, and contented myself with minor emendations. The author’s punctuation was haphazard, and I did my best to put some method into it. I replaced the dashes which he used, I fear from ignorance of a complicated art, with colons, semicolons and commas; I omitted the rows of dots with which he sought to draw the reader’s attention to the elegance of a sentiment or the subtlety of an observation,

and I replaced with a full stop the marks of exclamation that stood all over the page, like telegraph poles, apparently to emphasise the author's astonishment at his own acumen. I cannot imagine why he had the affectation of treating the letter H as a vowel, and wrote of *an* horse, *an* house and *an* home; I struck out all I could find of these otiose Ns; but if any still remain, the reader is besought to pardon an aberration of youth and the carelessness of the editor. It is not an easy matter to decide how you should treat this particular letter and, searching for guidance, I have consulted a number of grammars. So far as I can make out, whether you treat H as a vowel or a consonant depends on the stress you naturally lay on the syllable it accom panies. So, it would be absurd to tell a friend, who wanted to write still another war novel, to have *an* heart; but not unreasonably to suggest that, if he must write, he would be better advised to write *an* historical romance.

A pleasant story is told about Alfred de Musset. He was sitting down one day at George Sand's to wait for her, and he took up one of her novels that lay on a table. He thought it uncommonly verbose. When she came in, she found him, pencil in hand, crossing out all the unnecessary adjectives; and they say that she did not take it very well. I sympathise with his impatience and with her irritation. But in this matter I used moderation. Some of the author's favourite words have now a strangely old-fashioned air, but I saw no reason to change them, since there is nothing to show that the modern ones which I might have put in their stead will not in a few years be just as dated. An epithet has its vogue and is forgotten, and the *amusing* of the moment will doubtless in a little ring as false as the *horrid* of the eighteen nineties. But I crossed out a great many *somes, certains* and *rathers,* for the author of this book had an unhappy disinclination to make an unqualified statement. I was ruthless with the adverbs. When he used five words to

say what could have been said in one, I replaced them with the one; and when it seemed to me that he had not said what he wanted to, I ventured to change what he said for what I could not but think he meant. English is a very difficult language, and the author, with whose work I was taking the liberties I have described, had never been taught it. The little he knew he had picked up here and there. No one had ever explained to him the difficulties of composition or the mysteries of style. He began to write as a child begins to walk. He took pains to study good models, but, with none to guide him, he did not always choose his models wisely, and he devoted much care to writers who now seem to most of us affected and jejune.

Some months ago, a gallery in Cork Street had an exhibition of small French pictures painted early in the present century. Since I was often in Paris at that time and used to wander in and out of the shops in the Rue de la Boëtie or on the other side of the Seine where pictures were on view, I must have seen them, or others like them; but if I did, I would have dismissed them with a shrug of the shoulders as Salon pictures, and commonplace, for I had recently discovered Manet, Monet and Pissarro; and these little pictures of Paris, the quais, the boulevards, the shabby streets, the Champs-Elysées, said nothing to me; but when, after this long lapse of time I saw them again, I found them enchanting. The *fiacres,* the horse-drawn buses, the victorias with their pair of ‘spanking’ horses in which drove women, *femmes du monde* or celebrated *cocottes,* dressed in the height of fashion, on their way to the Bois, the queer uniforms of the little soldiers, the *nounous* with long satin streamers to their caps, pushing prams in the gardens of the Luxembourg – one had taken it all for granted; one had no idea that life was so gay and colourful. Whether these pictures were well painted or not, and most of them showed the competence of a sound

training at the Beaux Arts, was no matter; the years had given them a nostalgic charm that one had no wish to resist. They were *genre.* And now that for this new edition of *Mrs Craddock* I have re-read it, it is as a genre picture that I regard it. I smile and blush at its absurdities, but leave them because they belong to the period; and if the novel has any merit (and that the reader must decide for himself), it is because it is a picture, faithful, I believe, of life in a corner of England during the last years of the nineteenth century.

The action takes place between 1890 and 1900. The world was very different from what it is to-day. The telephone and the gramophone had been invented, but they were not till many years later necessities of life to be found in every house. The radio, of course, was unknown. The motor-car was still in the future and it was not till 1903 that the Wrights produced the first flying machine. The safety bicycle was all the rage and parties were made to ride it in Battersea Park or in country lanes. Women wore their hair long, piled up on their heads, and if they hadn’t enough, added a long switch made out of their combings. Perched up atop of these imposing erections, they wore large hats covered with flowers, fruit and feathers. They wore high collars and full skirts that reached the ground; corsets stiffened with whalebone and pulled as tight as they could bear it. Girls boasted of their eighteen-inch waists. For some years leg of mutton sleeves were vastly fashionable. Towards the end of the decade, in England at least, the hair was no longer brushed up on the top of the head, but done in a ‘bun’ on the nape of the neck, and every woman wore an elaborate (and often false) fringe. Maids wore caps and neat aprons, and a mistress would have looked upon it as an impertinence if one of hers appeared before her bare-headed.

Men wore top hats and frock coats to pay calls and to go to their clubs and offices. A few bold fellows wore morning coats with, of course, a silk hat. Bowlers were worn by bus conductors, drivers of hansom cabs, clerks and bounders. At night men wore full evening dress with black waistcoats and white ties. It was only the heavy swells who sported white waistcoats. The dinner jacket was unknown. Even in the country, when they were in tweeds and knickerbockers, not yet known as plus fours, men wore high, stiff collars and starched shirts.

It was the end of an era, but the landed gentry, who were soon to lose the power they had so long enjoyed, were the last to have a suspicion of it. Owing to the agricultural depression, land was no longer a source of profit, but, except for that, they were quite satisfied that things should go on as they had in the past. They had only disdain for the moneyed class that was already beginning to take their place. They were gentlefolk. It is true that for the most part they were narrow, stupid and intolerant; prudish, formal and punctilious. But they had their points, and I do not think the author was quite fair to them. They did their duty according to their lights. That some should be born to possess a fine estate, and others to work upon it at a miserable wage, was in the nature of things; and it was not for them to cavil at the decrees of inscrutable Providence. The landed gentry were on the whole decent, honourable and upright. They were devoid of envy. They had good manners and were kindly and hospitable. But they had outworn their use, and perhaps it was inevitable that the course of events should sweep them away. Their houses now lie derelict or are schools or homes for the aged, and on the broad acres which they have sold, enterprising builders have built houses, pubs and cinemas.

As is the common practice with novelists, the author of *Mrs Craddock,* with one exception, took as his models for

the persons who play their parts in it persons he knew. The exception is Miss Ley. She was founded on the portrait-statue of Agrippina in the museum at Naples. This sounds improbable, yet happens to be a fact. But on rereading this book it is the character of the author, manifest throughout, that has chiefly attracted my attention. He was evidently not a very nice young man. He had absurd prejudices. I cannot imagine why he despised Georgian architecture. I should have thought that nowhere has domestic architecture reached such a pitch of excellence as in England under the Georges. Its houses were dignified, elegant and commodious. Yet he never mentions the house in which his heroine lived without a sneer. He called it a blot on the landscape. I have an uneasy feeling that he greatly admired the red brick villas with casement windows and dormered roofs which architects were erecting all over the country. But this is merely a question of taste and, as we know, a man may have an indifferent character and exquisite taste. I do not know why unless he had learnt it from Matthew Arnold, he was of opinion that the English were philistines; and that for wit, brilliance and culture you must go to the French. He never missed a chance to have a fling at his own countrymen. With a certain naïveté he took the French at their own estimate of themselves, and never doubted that Paris was the centre of civilisation. He was better acquainted with the contemporary literature of France than with that of his own country. It was through the influence it had on him that he adopted some of the mannerisms, such as the rows of dots to which I have already referred, which the French writers of the time made excessive use of. The only excuse I can make for his attitude, besides his youth, is that for him England signified constraint and convention, whereas France signified freedom and adventure. I highly disapprove of a way he had now and then of stepping out of his novel and in

sarcastic terms directly addressing the reader. Where he learnt this bad practice I cannot tell.

Because for his age the author of *Mrs Craddock* had travelled extensively in Europe and could speak quite adequately four foreign languages, because he had read much, not only in English and French, but also in German, Spanish and Italian, he had a very good opinion of himself. During his various sojourns on the Continent he came in contact with a number of men, some young, some not so young, who shared his prejudices. With private means adequate to those inexpensive days, they had come down from Oxford or Cambridge with a pass degree and led desultory lives in Paris, Florence, Rome and Capri. He was too ingenuous to see how ineffectual they were. They did not hesitate to call themselves aesthetes and liked to think that they burnt with a hard, gemlike flame. They looked upon Oscar Wilde as the greatest master of English prose in the nineteenth century. Though not insensible to the fact that they thought him immature, in fact a bit of a philistine, he did his best to meet their high standards. He dutifully admired the works of art they admired and despised those they despised. He was not only a foolish young man; he was supercilious, cocksure and often wrong-headed. If I met him now I should take an immediate dislike to him.

1955. W.S.M.

1

This book might be called also *The Triumph of Love*.

Bertha was looking out of the window at the bleakness of the day. The sky was grey and the clouds were heavy and low; the neglected drive leading to the gates was swept by the bitter wind, and the elm trees that bordered it were bare of leaf; their naked branches seemed to shiver with horror of the cold. It was the end of November and the day was cheerless. The dying year seemed to have cast over all nature the terror of death; the imagination would not bring to the wearied mind thoughts of the merciful sunshine, thoughts of the spring coming as a maiden to scatter from her baskets the flowers and the green leaves.

Bertha turned round and looked at her aunt cutting the leaves of a new *Spectator*. Wondering what book to get down from Mudie's, Miss Ley read the autumn lists and the laudatory expressions that the adroitness of publishers extracts from unfavourable reviews.

'You're very restless this afternoon, Bertha,' she remarked, in answer to her niece's steady gaze.

'I think I shall walk down to the gate.'

'You've already done that twice in the last hour. Do you find in it something alarmingly novel?'

Bertha did not reply, but turned again to the window; the scene in the last two hours had fixed itself upon her mind with monotonous accuracy.

'What are you thinking about, Aunt Polly?' she asked, suddenly, turning back to her aunt and catching the eyes fixed upon her.

‘I was thinking that one must be very penetrative to discover a woman’s emotions from the view of her back hair.’

Bertha laughed: ‘I don’t think I have any emotions to discover. I feel –’ she sought for some way of expressing the sensation. ‘I feel as if I should like to take my hair down.’

Miss Ley made no rejoinder, but looked down at her paper. She hardly wondered what her niece meant, having long ceased to be astonished at Bertha’s ways and doings; indeed, her only surprise was that they never sufficiently corroborated the common opinion that Bertha was an independent young woman from whom anything might be expected. In the three years they had spent together since the death of Bertha’s father the two women had learned to tolerate one another extremely well. Their mutual affection was mild and perfectly respectable, in every way suitable to ladylike persons bound together by ties of convenience and decorum. Miss Ley, called to the death-bed of her brother in Italy, made Bertha’s acquaintance over the dead man’s grave, and she was then too old and of too independent character to accept a stranger’s authority; nor had Miss Ley the smallest desire to exert authority over anybody. She was a very indolent woman, who wished nothing more than to leave people alone and be left alone by them. But if it was obviously her duty to take charge of an orphan niece, it was also an advantage that Bertha was eighteen and but for conventions of decent society could very well take charge of herself. Miss Ley was not unthankful to a merciful providence on the discovery that her ward had every intention of going her own way, and none whatever of hanging about the skirts of a maiden aunt who was passionately devoted to her liberty.

They travelled on the continent, seeing many churches, pictures and cities, in the examination of which their chief desire appeared to be to conceal from one another the

emotions they felt. Like the Red Indian, who will suffer the most horrid tortures without wincing, Miss Ley would have thought it highly disgraceful to display feeling at some touching scene. She used polite cynicism as a cloak for sentimentality, laughing that she might not cry – and her want of originality herein, the old repetition of Grimaldi's doubleness, made her snigger at herself; she felt that tears were unbecoming and foolish.

'Weeping makes a fright even of a good-looking woman,' she said, 'but if she is ugly they make her simply repulsive.'

Finally, letting her own flat in London, Miss Ley settled down with Bertha to cultivate rural delights at Court Leys near Blackstable, in the county of Kent. The two ladies lived together with much harmony, although the demonstrations of their affection did not exceed a single kiss morning and night, given and received with almost equal indifference. Each had considerable respect for the other's abilities, and particularly for the wit that occasionally exhibited itself in little friendly sarcasms. But they were too clever to get on badly, and since they neither hated nor loved one another excessively, there was really no reason why they should not continue to live together on the best of terms. The general result of their relations was that Bertha's restlessness on this particular day aroused in Miss Ley no more question than was easily explained by the warmth of her young blood; and her eccentric curiosity in respect of the gate on a very cold and unpleasant winter afternoon did not even elicit from her a shrug of disapproval or an upraising of the eyebrows in wonder.

Bertha put on a hat and walked out. The avenue of elm trees reaching from the façade of Court Leys in a straight line to the gates had once been rather an imposing sight, but now announced clearly the ruin of an ancient house. Here and there a tree had died and fallen, leaving an

unsightly gap, and one huge trunk still lay upon the ground after a terrific storm of the preceding year, left there to rot in the indifference of bailiffs and tenants. On either side of the elm trees was a broad strip of meadow that once had been a well-kept lawn, but now was foul with docks and rank weeds; a few sheep nibbled the grass where once upon a time fine ladies in hoops and gentlemen with tie-wigs had sauntered, discussing the wars and the last volumes of Mr Richardson. Beyond was an ill-trimmed hedge and then the broad fields of the Ley estate. Bertha walked down, looking at the highway beyond the gate; it was a relief no longer to feel Miss Ley's cold eyes fixed upon her. She had emotions enough in her breast, they beat against one another like birds in a net struggling to get free; but not for worlds would she have bidden anyone look into her heart, full of expect ation, of longing and of a hundred strange desires. She went out on the high-road that led from Blackstable to Tercanbury; she looked up and down with a tremor and a quick beating of the heart. But the road was empty, swept by the winter wind, and she almost sobbed with disappointment.

She could not return to the house; a roof just then would stifle her, and the walls seemed like a prison; there was a certain pleasure in the biting wind that blew through her clothes and chilled her to the bone. The waiting was terrible. She entered the grounds and looked up the carriage-drive to the big white house that was hers. The very roadway was in need of repair, and the dead leaves that none troubled about rustled hither and thither in the gusts of wind. The house stood out in its squareness without relation to its environment. Built in the reign of George II, it seemed to have acquired no hold upon the land that bore it; with its plain front and many windows, the Doric portico exactly in the middle, it looked as if it were merely placed upon the ground as a house of cards is

built upon the floor, with no foundations. The passing years had given it no beauty, and it stood now, as for more than a century it had stood, a blot upon the landscape, vulgar and new. Surrounded by the fields, it had no garden but for a few beds planted about its feet, and in them the flowers, uncared for, had grown wild or withered away.

The day was declining and the lowering clouds seemed to shut out the light. Bertha gave up hope. But she looked once more down the hill, and her heart gave a great thud against her chest. She felt herself blushing furiously. Her blood seemed to be rushing through the vessels with sudden rapidity, and in dismay at her want of composure she had an impulse to turn quickly and go back to the house. She forgot the sickening expectation and the hours that she had spent in looking for the figure that tramped up the hill.

He came nearer, a tall fellow of twenty-seven, massively set together, big-boned, with long arms and legs and a magnificent breadth of chest. One could well believe him as strong as an ox. Bertha recognised the costume that always pleased her, the knickerbockers and gaiters, the Norfolk jacket of rough tweed, the white stock and the cap – all redolent of the country which for his sake she was beginning to love, and all intensely masculine. Even the huge boots that covered his feet gave her by their very size a thrill of pleasure; their dimensions suggested a firmness of character and a masterfulness that were intensely reassuring. The style of dress fitted perfectly the background of brown road and ploughed field. Bertha wondered if he knew that he was exceedingly picturesque as he climbed the hill.

‘Afternoon, Miss Bertha,’ the man said as he passed. He showed no sign of stopping, and the girl’s heart sank at the thought that he might go on with only a commonplace word of greeting.

‘I thought it was you I saw coming up the hill,’ she said, stretching out her hand.

He stopped and shook it. The touch of his big, firm fingers, made her tremble. His hand was as massive and hard as if it were hewn of stone. She looked up at him and smiled.

‘Isn’t it cold?’ she said.

It is terrible to be desirous of saying all sorts of passionate things while convention prevents you from any but the most commonplace.

‘You haven’t been walking at the rate of five miles an hour,’ he said cheerily. ‘I’ve been into Blackstable to see about buying a nag.’

He was the very picture of health. The winds of November were like summer breezes to him, and his face glowed with the pleasant cold. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes glistened; his vitality was intense, shining out upon others with almost a material warmth.

‘Were you going out?’ he asked. ‘Oh, no,’ Bertha replied without strict regard to truth. ‘I just walked down to the gate and I happened to catch sight of you.’

‘I’m very glad. I see you so seldom now, Miss Bertha.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call me Miss Bertha,’ she cried. ‘It sounds horrid.’

It was worse than that, it sounded almost menial. ‘When we were boy and girl we used to call each other by our Christian names.’

He blushed a little, and his modesty filled Bertha with pleasure.

‘Yes, but when you came back six months ago you had changed so much – I didn’t dare; and besides, you called me Mr Craddock.’

‘Well, I won’t any more,’ she said, smiling. ‘I’d much sooner call you Edward.’

She did not add that the word seemed to her the most beautiful in the whole list of Christian names, nor that in the past few weeks she had already repeated it to herself a thousand times.

‘It’ll be like the old days,’ he said. ‘D’you remember what fun we used to have when you were a little girl, before you went abroad with Mr Ley?’

‘I remember that you used to look upon me with great contempt because I was a little girl,’ she replied, laughing.

‘Well, I was awfully frightened the first time I saw you again, with your hair up and long dresses.’

‘I’m not really very terrible,’ she answered.

For five minutes they had been looking into one another’s eyes, and suddenly, without obvious reason, Edward Craddock blushed. Bertha noticed it, and a strange little thrill went through her. She blushed too, and her dark eyes flashed even more brightly than before.

‘I wish I didn’t see you so seldom, Miss Bertha,’ he said.

‘You have only yourself to blame, fair sir,’ she replied. ‘You perceive the road that leads to my palace, and at the end of it you will certainly find a door.’

‘I’m rather afraid of your aunt,’ he said.

It was on the tip of Bertha’s tongue to say that faint heart never won fair lady, but, for modesty’s sake, she refrained. Her spirits had suddenly gone up and she felt extraordinarily happy.

‘Do you want to see me very badly?’ she asked, her heart beating at quite an absurd rate.

Craddock blushed again and seemed to have some difficulty in finding a reply; his confusion and his ingenuous air were new delights to Bertha.

‘If he only knew how I adore him!’ she thought; but naturally could not tell him in so many words.

‘You’ve changed so much in these years,’ he said. ‘I don’t understand you.’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘Of course I want to see you, Bertha,’ he said quickly, seeming to take his courage in both hands. ‘I want to see you always.’

‘Well,’ she said, with a charming smile, ‘I sometimes take a walk after dinner to the gate and observe the shadows of night.’

‘By Jove, I wish I’d known that before.’

‘Foolish creature!’ said Bertha to herself with amusement. ‘He doesn’t gather that this is the first night upon which I shall have done anything of the kind.’

Then aloud, she bade him a laughing good-bye and they separated.

2

With swinging step Bertha returned to the house, and, like a swarm of birds, a hundred amorets flew about her head; Cupid leapt from tree to tree and shot his arrows into her willing heart; her imagination clothed the naked branches with tender green and in her happiness the grey sky turned to azure. It was the first time that Edward Craddock had shown his love in a manner that was unmistakable; if, before, much had suggested that he was not indifferent, nothing had been absolutely convincing, and the doubt had caused her every imaginable woe. As for her, she made no effort to conceal it from herself; she was not ashamed, she loved him passionately, she worshipped the ground he trod on; she confessed boldly that he of all men was the one to make her happy, her life she would give into his strong and manly hands; she had made up her mind firmly that Craddock should lead her to the altar.

‘I want to be his wife,’ she gasped, in the extremity of her passion.

Times without number already had she thought of herself resting in his arms – in his strong arms, the very thought of which was a protection against all the ills of the world. Oh, yes, she wanted him to take her in his arms and kiss her; in imagination she felt his lips upon hers, and the warmth of his breath made her faint with the anguish of love.

She asked herself how she could wait till the evening, how on earth she was to endure the slow passing of the hours. And she must sit opposite her aunt and pretend to read, or talk on this subject or that. It was insufferable.

Then inconsequently she asked herself if Edward knew that she loved him; he could not dream how intense was her desire.

‘I’m sorry I’m late for tea,’ she said, on entering the drawing-room.

‘My dear,’ said Miss Ley, ‘the buttered toast is probably horrid, but I don’t see why you should not eat cake.’

‘I don’t want anything to eat,’ cried Bertha, flinging herself on a chair.

‘But you’re dying with thirst,’ added Miss Ley, looking at her niece with sharp eye. ‘Wouldn’t you like your tea out of a breakfast cup?’

Miss Ley had come to the conclusion that the restlessness and the long absence could only be due to some masculine cause. Mentally she shrugged her shoulders, hardly wondering who the creature was.

‘Of course,’ she thought, ‘it’s certain to be someone quite ineligible. I hope they won’t have a long engagement.’

Miss Ley could not have supported for several months the presence of a bashful and love-sick swain. She found lovers invariably ridiculous and felt that they should be hidden – just as the sons of Noah covered their father’s nakedness. She watched Bertha gulp down six cups of tea. Of course those shining eyes, the flushed cheeks and the breathlessness indicated some amorous excitement; it amused her, but she thought it charitable and wise to pretend that she noticed nothing.

‘After all, it’s no business of mine,’ she thought, ‘and if Bertha is going to get married at all, it would be much more convenient for her to do it before next quarter day, when the Brownes give up my flat.’

Miss Ley sat on the sofa by the fireside. She was a woman neither short nor tall, very slight, with a thin and much-wrinkled face. Of her features the mouth was the

most noticeable, not large, with lips that were a trifle too thin; it was always so tightly compressed as to give her an air of great determination, but there was about the corners an expressive mobility, contradicting in rather an unusual manner the inferences that might be drawn from the rest of her person. She had a habit of fixing her cold eyes on people with a steadiness that was not a little embarrassing. They said Miss Ley looked as if she thought them great fools, and as a matter of fact that usually was precisely what she did think. Her thin grey hair was very plainly done, and the extreme simplicity of her costume gave her a certain primness, so that her favourite method of saying rather absurd things in the gravest and most decorous manner often disconcerted the casual stranger. She was a woman who, one felt, had never been handsome, but now, in middle age, was of distinctly prepossessing appearance. Young men thought her somewhat terrifying till they discovered that they were to her a constant source of amusement, while elderly ladies asserted that, though of course a perfect gentlewoman, she was a little queer.

‘You know, Aunt Polly,’ said Bertha, finishing her tea and getting up, ‘I think you ought to have been called Martha or Matilda. I don’t think Polly suits you.’

‘My dear, you need not remind me so pointedly that I’m forty-five – and you need not smile in that fashion because you know that I’m really forty-seven. I say forty-five merely as a round number; in another year I shall call myself fifty. A woman never acknowledges such a nondescript age as forty-eight unless she is going to marry a widower with seventeen children.’

‘I wonder why you never married, Aunt Polly?’ said Bertha, looking away.

Miss Ley smiled almost imperceptibly; she found Bertha’s remark highly significant.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘why should I? I had five hundred a year of my own. Ah, yes, I know it’s not what might have been expected; I’m sorry for your sake that I had no hopeless amour. The only excuse for an old maid is that she has pined thirty years for a lover who is buried under the snowdrops or has married another.’

Bertha made no answer; she was feeling that the world had turned good, and wanted to hear nothing that could suggest imperfections in human nature. Going upstairs she sat at the window, gazing towards the farm where lived her heart’s desire. She wondered what Edward was doing. Was he awaiting the night as anxiously as she? It gave her quite a pang that a sizable hill should intervene between herself and him. During dinner she hardly spoke, and Miss Ley was mercifully silent. Bertha could not eat. She crumpled her bread and toyed with the various meats put before her. She looked at the clock a dozen times and started absurdly when it struck the hour.

She did not trouble to make any excuse to Miss Ley, whom she left to think as she chose. The night was dark and cold. Bertha slipped out of the side-door with a delightful feeling of doing something venturesome. But her legs would scarcely carry her, she had a sensation that was entirely novel: never before had she experienced that utter weakness of the knees so that she feared to fall; her breathing was strangely oppressive, her heart beat painfully. She walked down the carriage-drive hardly knowing what she did. And supposing he was not there, supposing he never came? She had forced herself to wait in-doors till the desire to go out became uncontrollable, she dared not imagine her dismay if there was no one to meet her when she reached the gate. It would mean he did not love her. She stopped with a sob. Ought she not to wait longer? It was still early. But her impatience forced her on.

She gave a little cry. Craddock had suddenly stepped out of the darkness.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I frightened you. I thought you wouldn’t mind my coming this evening. You’re not angry?’

She could not answer, it was an immense load off her heart. She was extremely happy. Then he did love her; and he feared she was angry with him.

‘I expected you,’ she whispered.

What was the good of pretending to be modest and bashful? She loved him and he loved her. Why should she not tell him all she felt?

‘It’s so dark,’ he said. ‘I can’t see you.’

She was too deliriously happy to speak, and the only words she could have said were, *‘I love you, I love you!’* She moved a step nearer so as to touch him. Why did he not open his arms and take her in them and kiss her as she had dreamt that he would kiss her?

But he took her hand, and the contact thrilled her; her senses were giving way, and she almost tottered.

‘What’s the matter?’ he said. ‘Are you trembling?’

‘I’m only a little cold.’

She was trying with all her might to speak naturally. Nothing came into her head to say.

‘You’ve got nothing on,’ he said. ‘You must wear my coat.’ He began to take it off. ‘No,’ she said, ‘then you’ll be cold.’

‘Oh, no, I shan’t.’

What he was doing seemed to her a marvel of unselfish kindness. She was beside herself with gratitude.

‘It’s awfully good of you, Edward,’ she whispered, almost tearfully.