

MARY MUSGRAVE

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ANONYMOUS

"Nine carets ef it's a blessed one."

"Scale 'im, an' ye'll find he's a half better. Clear es a bottle o' gin, an' flawless es the pope! Tommy Dartmoor, ye're in luck, s' welp me never ef ye ain't, an' that's a brilliant yer can show the polis an' not get time fer."

Tommy Dartmoor, who owed his surname to a crown establishment within the restraining walls of which he had once enjoyed a temporary residence, growled out a recommendation to "stow that," and then added, "Boys, we'll wet this. Trek to Werstein's."

Forthwith a crowd of dirty, tanned diggers turned their heads in the direction of Gustav Werstein's American Bar, and

walked toward it as briskly as the heat and their weariness would admit of. The Israelite saw them coming, straightened himself out of the half-doze in which he had passed the baking afternoon, stopped down the tobacco in the porcelain bowl of his long-stemmed pipe with stumpy forefinger, and, twisting a cork off his corkscrew, stood in readiness.

"Name yer pizons, boys, an' get outside 'em, wishin' all good luck to R'yal Straight; R'yal Straight bein' the name o' this yer stone given by Thomas D. Hesquire, original diskiverer an' present perprieter."

The orders were given,--bass at five shillings a bottle, champagne (nee gooseberry) at five pounds, Cape smoke at two shillings per two fingers,--and, at

a given signal, there was an inarticulate roar from dusty throats, an inversion of tumblers over thirsty mouths, and a second inversion over the ground to show that all the contents had disappeared.

Satan, the one cat and only domestic pet of the camp, saw that there was a general treat going on, and bustling up for his drink took a can of condensed milk at six shillings. Other diggers came trooping in as the news spread, and Tommy Dartmoor, who was rapidly becoming mellow, for he drank half a tumbler of raw whisky with every one who nodded to him, stood them refreshments galore, while the greasy Jew began to see visions of his adopted fatherland in the near distance.

So the Kaffirs, except those who had supplies of their own, kept sober and peaceful, while the higher order of the human race at Big Stone Hole, after the manner of their kind, began to squabble. It was natural for them to do so, perhaps, for the weather was so hot, and the liquors, for the most part, more so; and under these circumstances men do not always cast about them long for a casus belli. One or two minor brawls opened the ball, and Herr Gustav, scenting battle in the air, drew from a locker a card, which he balanced against the bottles on a shelf above his head. It read thus:

GENTS IS REKESTED TO SHOOT CLEAR
OF THE BARR-KEP. BROKIN GLAS MAY BE
PADE FOR AT COST PRISE.

and had been written for the German by a gentleman who had had some experience in Forty Rod Gulch, Nevada. The action elicited a contemptuous laugh from one or two of the new hands, but the oldsters began shifting sundry articles which depended from their belts into positions from which they might be handled at the shortest notice; and the black cat, more wise than any of them, having drunk his fill, stalked solemnly out into the security of the darkness.

The sun went down,--went out with a click, some one declared,--and, as no twilight interposed between daylight and darkness in the country which Big Stone Hole ornamented, Herr Gustav lit his two paraffin- lamps. Neither boasted more than a one-inch wick, and, as their glasses were extremely smoky, the

illumination was not brilliant; but it sufficed to show the flushed, angry faces of a couple of men standing in the centre of the room, with all the others clustered round, watching eagerly. One was the Scholar. The other was a burly giant, whose missing left little finger caused him to be nicknamed the Cripple. About what they had originally fallen out was not clear to any one, to themselves least of all. As the case stood when the second lamp was lit, Scholar had called Cripple a something-or-other liar, and Cripple, who was not inventive, had retorted by stigmatising Scholar as another. Further recriminations followed, and their pistols were drawn; but as the audience had a strong objection to indiscriminate shooting, by which it was not likely to benefit, the belligerents were seized. No one was unsportsmanlike enough to wish

to stop the fight, and Jockey Bill, giving voice to the general wish of the meeting, proposed that the gents be fixed up agin' a couple o' posts outside, where they might let daylight into each other without lead-poisoning casual spectators.

The motion was acted on, and after rectifying a slight omission on the Cripple's part--he had forgotten to put caps on the nipples of his revolver--the pair of them were seated upon upturned barrels some ten yards apart, each with a lamp at his feet, and told to begin when they saw fit to do so. The swarthy, bearded diggers grouped themselves on either side, and the cat, emerging from his retreat, scrambled on to the shoulder of one of them, fully as curious as the rest to "see the shootin'." It was a weird sight,--dust, scorched grass, empty tins,

rude hovels, piles of debris, African moonlight,--yet, except, perhaps, in the eyes of the newest comers, there was nothing strange in it. The others were too wrapped up in what was going to take place to see anything quaint in their every-day surroundings. There was no theatre in the camp. The little impromptu drama riveted all attention.

But before the duel commenced, a galloping horse, which had approached over the grassy veldt unnoticed during the excitement, drew up with a crash between the two combatants, and its rider, raising his hand to command attention, cried:

"Boys, there's a white woman comin'!"

"A white woman!" was chorused in various tones of disbelief. "What, here? White woman comin' here, Dan?"

And then some one inquired if she was a Boer.

"Boer--no," replied Dan; "English--English as I am; leastways Englisher, bein' Amurrican-born myself. Overtook her et Hottentot Drift. Thort I'd spur on an' tell yer. We'd do wi' a clean-up, some on us."

Dan spoke indistinctly, as a bullet had lately disarranged some of his teeth; but his words had a wonderful effect.

Each man began instinctively to tidy himself. The would-be duellists, forgetting their quarrel, stuck the revolvers in their belts and followed the general example.

The Cripple hied him to the store, and after breaking down the door abstracted the only blacking-brush in the camp,-- putting down a sovereign on the counter in exchange for it,-- and set to polishing his high boots as if a fortune depended on their brightness. The Scholar bought Herr Gustav's white shirt for a fiver, threatening to murder its owner if he did not render it up. And Partridge, a good man from Norfolk, with a regrettable weakness for shooting other people's game, induced a friend to denude him of his flowing locks by means of a clasp-knife and a hunk of wood, as no scissors were procurable.

The wardrobes of Big Stone Hole were stocked more with a view to strict utility than variety or ornamentation, and the slender resources of the store utterly

gave out under the sudden strain that was put upon them. In every direction grimy, unkempt men might be seen attempting to beautify themselves. Here was one enduring agonies from a razor that would scarcely whittle a stick; here another recalling the feel of a cake of soap; there a great fellow pulling faces as he struggled to get the teeth of a comb into his shock of hair; there another brushing the clay from his moleskin trousers with a tuft of stiff grass.

It seemed to these men ages since they had last seen a woman in the flesh,-- Kaffir women don't count; they are not women, merely Kaffirs, --and, with the natural instinct of males of every species, they set about pluming their feathers.

These operations, though speedy as might be, were necessarily prolonged, for most of the men required several buckets of water over the head before they felt fit for such unaccustomed exercises, and they were scarcely finished before the creaking of wheels and the cries of the voorlooper as he urged his oxen announced that the wagon was within earshot. Up it came, the great tilt gleaming white in the moonlight, and every eye was fixed expectantly on the dark chasm within. The driver, puffed up with his own importance, cracked his long whip and deigned not to notice the men whom he usually greeted with a friendly hail, and the Hottentot boy ahead, imitating his master, vouchsafed no explanation. With more deathly slowness than usual did the lumbering vehicle crawl along until the tired cattle pulled up

before the door of the American Bar. Then there was a rush and a bit of a scuffle for the honour of handing the woman out. The Cripple was the fortunate man, and, after assisting her to the ground, waved his tattered hat toward the gleaming open doorway. But he did not speak. Words were beyond him. Indeed, the diggers, who were none of them particularly remarkable for taciturnity as a general thing, seemed, with one exception, to be stricken dumb. But the Scholar proved himself equal to the occasion, and with courtly phrase bade the new-comer welcome to the camp. He had always been a popular man among women in his palmier days, though openly holding rather a poor opinion of them; and as the one before him now was neat of speech and comely

of form, he was not at all averse to enjoying her society and conversation.

"I should be much obliged if you would direct me to a hotel," she said, after taking a look around the cheap gaudiness of the saloon.

"I'm sorry to say that we have no hotel here as yet, Miss--er--?"

"Musgrave. Miss Mary Musgrave"--with a little bow. "But I heard that a German had started a hotel here."

"No; there is nothing but this. That"--pointing to Herr Gustave, who was regarding the newcomer with an evil eye--"that is the German."

Miss Musgrave appeared distressed.

"Then where can I go?" she asked. "Are there any lodgings to be had?"

"The lady may have my place," chorused three eager voices, and every man in the room repeated the offer.

She thanked them with a pretty smile and one comprehensive bow, and looked up at the Scholar for help.

"I would offer you my hut if it were not such a wretched one. But, as it is, I should advise you to take this man's"-- and he pointed to Tommy Dartmoor.

"Why, mine's twenty carats better than hisn!" exclaimed the Cripple.

"And mine better 'n either," growled Dan.

"Mine's the best of the lot."

"No, it isn't; mine is," yelled others, till there was a general roar, which caused Miss Musgrave to look frightened and shrink nearer to the Scholar, and that gentleman to raise his hand for silence.

"Look here," said he, "we'll pick out the twelve best, and their owners can cut with one another from a pack of cards."

After some discussion twelve were settled upon, but the number was immediately raised to thirteen to prevent Jockey Bill disgracing the camp by shooting before a lady. A pack of cards was placed on the bar, and each man chose one, holding his selection face downward till all were ready. Then the Scholar said, "Turn," and

there were exhibited five aces, two kings, a queen, three knaves, and two smaller cards. This was awkward, to say the least of it, and, while sarcastic laughter rippled among the spectators, there was an instinctive movement of right hands toward the back of the belt on the part of each of the thirteen.

But the Scholar's voice, full of remonstrance, said, "Boys, you're being looked at," and there was a regretful sigh or two, but no bloodshed.

Miss Musgrave gazed inquiringly from one to another, and the Scholar, laying his hand on her arm, whispered something in her ear. She smiled, whispered back, and was answered, and then, stripping off a pair of well-fitting fawn gloves, she took the cards in a pretty little white hand,

and dealt out one to each of the competitors with charming clumsiness.

"Ain't touched a keard afore, bless her," whispered Euchre Buck, giving his neighbor Dan a nudge in the ribs to call attention to this wonderful piece of girlish innocence. "Square a deal es George Washington mought ha' made." Then, as the greasy pasteboards were turned up, and his neighbour was handed the ace of clubs, he raised his voice and yelled out, "Bully for you, Dan! Cut away an' clar yer cabin out."

Away scampered Dan out into the darkness, with the rest of the crew at his heels. Their home comforts were very small, poor fellows; but each gave of his best, though the gifts were often incongruous enough. In half an hour the

cabin was fitted out with a small cracked looking- glass, two combs, an old hair-brush,--still wet from the wash,--a pail, a frying-pan, three kettles, two three-legged stools, and so many blankets that some were requisitioned to carpet the floor. The whole crowd accompanied Miss Musgrave to her door and gave her a cheer by way of good-night. She bowed to them, smiling her thanks, and looking, as they thought, entrancingly lovely as she stood there, with the pale moonbeams falling full on her.

Then she turned to go in, but as Euchre Buck stepped forward with an admonishing cough, she waited and looked round at him.

"Miss," said he, holding out a big revolver in his hard fist, "you take this yer gun,

an' ef any one whistles, or otherwise disturbs you, let a hole into him straight away, an' we'll see him buried decent."

But Miss Musgrave courteously, and with profuse thanks, refused the offer, and, saying that she had perfect confidence in all who were around her, gave Euchre Buck a bewitching smile, went inside, and closed the door after he.

Then the diggers returned to Gustav Werstein's American Bar and discussed the new arrival.

"I know Noomarket an' Hascot an' Hepson, an' all the places where swells goes in England," said Jockey Bill, enthusiastically; "but never one come there as pretty as she, stop my license if ther' did."

"Grand eyes, hain't she?" said Tommy Dartmoor. "Regular fust-water 'uns. Here's to 'em!"

"And-a-hoof! See it peep below her gownd. S' welp me ef it wer' es big as my 'bacca-box!"

"An' 'er close, gentlemen! Made to measure, every thread on 'em, I allow."

"She's a lady, boys," exclaimed he who had offered to see after a funeral, "a reg'lar slap-up, high-toned, blow-yer-eyes-don't-touch-me lady; an' as she sees fit to do the civil to this fellar"--striking himself on the chest--"he's just going to drop his professional name, an' arsk yer to call him Mister Samuel K. Gregson, Esquire. Play on that."

Next morning the inhabitants of Big Stone Hole were startled by reading this announcement outside the cabin which Dan had resigned to Miss Musgrave:

SINGING AND MUSIC TAUGHT. LITERARY WORK DONE.

It was printed on a card, which was affixed to the door by means of a drawing-pin, and from within came the sound of a contralto voice singing to a guitar accompaniment. One by one the male residents of Big Stone Hole drew near to that iron-roofed hut and stopped to listen; but after commenting on the innovation in gleeful whispers-- for guitar had never twanged in that part of Africa before--they moved on to their work. No consideration could cause them to neglect

that. They might fritter away the dull, rough gems when they had found them, but the lust of handling diamonds once was the strongest passion they knew. And so the day's toil was not curtailed; but at the conclusion Miss Musgrave had an application for instruction in music from every man in the camp, with one exception. This one defaulter was Euchre Buck. He owned to having no ear for music--thereby exhibiting more honesty than many of the others--and confessed to knowing only two tunes, one of which was "Hail Columbia," and the other--wasn't; and so he said he wanted some "literary work done." He proposed to Miss Musgrave that she should write a history of his life at half a guinea a page, thereby--cute Yankee that he was--thinking to appropriate the whole of her time.

But embarrassed by all these calls upon her, and obviously unable to satisfy each of them, Miss Musgrave turned for help to the Scholar, whom she appeared to regard as her special adviser; and he, promising a solution of the difficulty in half an hour, drew off the whole crowd to the American Bar, where the question was thrashed out in all its points.

It was clearly evident that Miss Musgrave could not surrender to each individual the whole of her evening, even if any one had been willing to let his neighbor monopolise it, which no one was; and therefore it was necessary to formulate some scheme by which her talents might be distributed over a larger area. But what the scheme should be was not settled all in a minute. One man wanted

to hear her sing, another to hear her talk, another was willing to give five pounds an hour for the privilege of talking to her. After a lengthened discussion, which was excited throughout, and at times verged on the warlike, it was decided to effect a compromise--subject, of course, to Miss Musgrave's inclinations; and a deputation was sent to learn her views on the subject.

There was no assembly-room in the place, excepting Werstein's saloon, -- which, of course, was not available for such a purpose,--and so it was proposed to her, with much humility, that she should take up her position in the evenings on a chair outside her hut, and there discourse such vocal and instrumental music as she saw fit, interlarding the same with friendly

conversation. What was she to talk about? Anything--absolutely anything. They didn't mind what it was, so long as they heard her voice. Five shillings, the committee had decided, was to be paid by every man who came within earshot. And any one who wanted a free list was requested to argue the matter out with Euchre Buck.

This call upon her powers seemed to take Miss Musgrave aback.

"I have never sung in public," she pleaded, rather nervously. "Indeed, my voice is not good enough for it; really it isn't. Only I thought I could teach a little perhaps, and that is why I came here. You see, mother, is an invalid, and we were so very poor that--"

"Miss," broke in Jockey Bill, "call it ten bob a 'ead, an' just 'um to us."

"Oh no, Mr. William, it was not the money that I thought about; indeed, five shillings would be far too much. But if you think that I should be able to amuse you at all, I would do my very best--believe me, I would."

"Miss," growled Dan, with a clumsy endeavour to chase away her diffidence, "all we asks is fer you to sit near us fer a spell. Ef you sings or plays, we'd be proud; ef you just looks an' talks, we'd be pleased."

So in the end Miss Musgrave yielded to the wishes of the community, and the nightly conclave in the American Bar became so much a thing of the past that

Gustav Werstein was heard to threaten another emigration. The songs were to the diggers new, and yet not new. There was nothing of the music-hall type about them; they were nearly all old-fashioned ditties. She sang to them of "Barbara Allen" and "Sally in our Alley"; she gave them "Cheer, Boys, Cheer," and called for a chorus; she sang "The Message," "The Arrow and the Song"; and she brought back memories of other days when Africa was to them a mere geographical expression--of days when that something had not happened which had sent them away from home.

Sunday came, the fifth day after her arrival, and it differed from the usual Sabbath of Big Stone Hole. Sunday had been observed before by the biggest drinking bout of the week, and a

summary settlement of the previous six days' disputes. Now, to the huge surprise of the Kaffirs, and to the still greater surprise of themselves, these diamond-diggers sang hymns at intervals during the day, and refrained from indulging in the orthodox carouse till after Miss Musgrave had retired for the night. It was a wonderful change.

During the next week a fall of earth took place in Tommy Dartmoor's claim. Two Kaffirs were killed; and when the proprietor himself was extricated from the debris of blue clay which held him down, he was found to have a broken arm, besides other serious injuries.

"Don't let on to her," he managed to gasp out to his rescuers, wishing to spare Miss Musgrave's nerves a shock.

But she saw the men bearing him to his hut, joined them, and insisted on being installed as sole nurse forthwith.

Twenty other men would willingly have broken an arm for such a reward; and the recklessness displayed during the next few days was something awful. But she saw that too,--little escaped those big blue eyes,-- and, ascribing it to drink, gave a pretty strong lecture on the bibulous habits of Big Stone Hole, at her next concert.

There was an earnest meeting in the American Bar that night, at which the following motion was put and carried unanimously: "On and after this date, any drunken man is liable to be shot at sight, unless his friends can prove that he

has dug over three carats of diamonds during the day." And then, like other reformers, they went on to more sweeping measures: "Only knife-fighting to take place in the camp. All disputes with pistols, unless of a very pressing nature, to be settled out of earshot of Dan's house." There were even some hints of appointing a closing-time for the saloon--"it would make the place so much more like home." But the promoter eventually withdrew his suggestion, as it was justly felt that such a motion would interfere with the liberty of the subject too much. But a storm of cheers burst forth when it was proposed to transfer the diamond-safe from Werstein's keeping to a corner of the new goddess's shrine.

Even Satan, the cat, joined in the general adoration, and, more favoured than the rest, enjoyed at times a chaste salute from Miss Musgrave's ripe-red lips.

Never, in so short a space of time, had a community been more changed for the better than was that of Big Stone Hole. Never had woman's humanising influence made itself more clearly felt. The azure cloud of blasphemy that hung over the workings and the rest of the camp was replaced again by the normal dust. Each man tried to beautify the inside of his shanty to the best of his means and ideas, for there was no knowing when the only "she" would take it into her pretty, capricious head to pay a call. In this latter line the Scholar had a decided pull. Education had taught him taste; necessity, handiness; and by aid of the

two he transformed his rude dwelling into something approaching the rooms in which he used to dawdle away the happy hours, time ago. It was partly drawing-room, partly curiosity-shop. Cups, saucers, and spoons appeared as if by magicians' call, and one blazing afternoon the news flashed round the diamond-pits that Miss Musgrave was "taking afternoon tea with the Scholar." But when the Scholar saw the dismay his simple act had spread around him, he dissipated it with a kindly laugh and a few reassuring words.

"Don't mind me, boys. I was only doing the civil in a purely platonic manner. Miss Musgrave is nothing to me, nor am I anything to her. Heaven forbid! I'm too hard a bargain for any girl. If any one of you marries her I'll act as his best man if

he asks me to, and wish him every felicity without a thought of regret."

"Bully for the Scholar!" yelled the delighted crowd; and Miss Musgrave's smiles were more sought after than ever.

So things went on day after day, week after week, till Miss Musgrave became little short of an autocratic empress. But still she showed no signs of taking unto herself a consort; she kept all men at a cousinly distance, and those who felt intimate enough to address her as "Miss Mary" accounted themselves uncommonly fortunate. Thus the little machine of state worked perfectly harmoniously, and Big Stone Hole was as steady and prosperous a settlement as need be.

Had these diggers refreshed their minds by looking back for historical parallels, they might have been prepared in some degree for Miss Musgrave's exit from among them, but as none of them indulged in such retrospections the manner of it took the camp somewhat by surprise.

It was first discovered in this wise. Work was over for the day. The Kaffirs had been searched and had returned to their kraal. Pipes were being lit after the evening meal, and a picturesque assembly was grouping itself in an expectant semicircle on the sun-baked turf in front of Miss Musgrave's dwelling. She was usually outside to welcome the first comers, and her absence naturally formed the staple topic of conversation. Digger after digger arrived, threw himself

down, and joined in the general wonderment as to why Miss Mary wasn't there, and at last some one hazarded a suggestion that she "must be asleep." There was a general epidemic of noisy coughing for a full minute, and then silence for another, but no sound from within the hut.

"Perhaps she's ill," was the next surmise.

After the etiquette to be followed had been strictly discussed, and a rigid course of procedure set down, the Scholar got up and knocked at the door. He received no answer, and so knocked again--knocked several times, in fact, and then rattled the handle vigorously, but without result.

"Better open it," said a voice.

And he did so; and after looking inside, announced:

"She's not there."

At this moment Dan came up.

"My ole mar' 's gone," he said; "an' she ain't stampeded, neither, but was stole. Tote-rope's been untied, an' saddle an' bridle took as well."

There was uncomfortable silence, which the Scholar broke by a low, long-drawn whistle.

"Boys," said he, "let's look inside the safe."

The three men who held the keys brought them up, the bolts were shot, and the massive door swung back. There was every man's little sack with his name on it; but somehow or other the sacks looked limper than of yore. Each one was eagerly clutched and examined, and many a groan and not a few curses went up on the still night air as it was found that every sack save Dan's had been relieved of the more valuable part of its contents.

So much heart-breaking labour under the burning sun thrown away for nothing; the dreary work to commence afresh, almost from the beginning! Had the thief been any ordinary one, the denunciation would have been unbounded; but no one lifted his tongue very loudly against Mary Musgrave. Yet mounted men were

despatched on the three trails to bring back the booty if possible, and the rest moved dejectedly toward their old club. The greasy Jew did not attempt to conceal his exultation. He served his customers with his wicked old face glowing with smiles, and when a moment's breathing-time came he observed:

"We all 'az hour lettles surprizes in dis wairld, an' I most confaiss I am asdonished myself to lairn that Mess Mosgrave is a thief--" But here a crashing among the glassware announced that Tommy Dartmoor had begun shooting with his left hand, and Herr Gustave sputtered out from behind the fingers he held before his face, "Ach Gott! I say nozzing more!"

— — — — The End — — — —

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