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SIX
MRS GREENES

By
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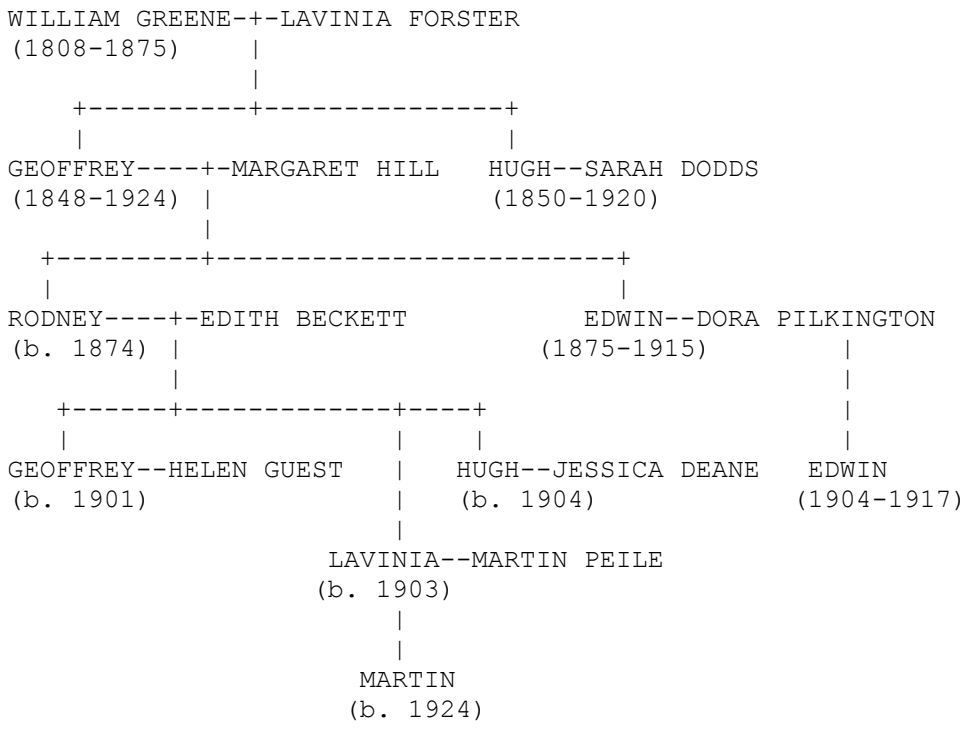
TO PHILIP RUSSELL REA

FOREWORD

The fact that I belong to a family genealogically resembling the Greene family suggested to me the scheme of this book.

Apart from this similarity all the characters in "Six Mrs. Greenes" are entirely fictional.

L. R.



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MRS GREENE

SIX MRS GREENES

MRS. GREENE

I

Old Mrs. Greene was very tired.

When she was tired she talked to herself, and her talk was a jumble of names. Her sons, her grandsons, her granddaughter, her granddaughter's husband, jigged about in her brain. They formed groups, advanced towards her in a solid phalanx, broke up and receded again. The pattern of their comings and goings was shot with pleasure at some remembered incident, or again with intense irritation that found vent in mumbled phrases. "She's always been a stupid woman."

"What did you say, Mrs. Greene?" asked Miss Dorset, a quiet, pleasant young woman who acted as her housekeeper and companion.

"I didn't," said Mrs. Greene, annoyed at being interrupted in that restless uncontrollable reverie which was all that remained to her of thought, but the innumerable little lines on her old cheeks smoothed into tranquillity as a sudden recollection of her granddaughter's last visit established itself momentarily in her mind. Lavinia had been very sweet and so pretty. That scarlet frock had seemed to darken her eyes and whiten her skin; even her hair shone as she sat on a footstool after dinner in front of the fire, her hands clasped round her knees, and talked about Martin endlessly, glowingly; about the two Martins, her husband and her son. A happy child Lavinia; Martin, a satisfactory grandson-in-law, and Martin, the little great-grandson, a pleasant thing to think about. Why was it that Lavinia's husband had not been able to come for the week-end with Lavinia? Mrs. Greene groped in her mind for the reason and then stumbled on it suddenly as one of the things Lavinia had spoken about with pride. Martin had been asked to go North to represent the firm on business. He had to interview two clients and persuade them to carry through an important deal, and it was a matter for congratulation that the negotiations had been entrusted to him.

Old Mrs. Greene pondered. The beginnings of life, how terrible they were; each action, even the most impulsive and ill-considered, marching steadily on towards its inevitable result, and eliminating logically the possibility of any other result.

For a moment, looking back, she saw her life move down its long determined track, marked erratically here and there by emotions, incidents and circumstances: her passionate love for Geoffrey, her husband; her passionate maternal love for Rodney and Edwin; the death of her father; her sons' marriages; her husband's sudden and widespread literary recognition; Edwin's death, and then her husband's death followed immediately by the birth of Lavinia's son, her only great-grandchild. She looked down at her thin old hands with the loose rings slipping up the fingers, and thought with clear lucidity: what changes are wrought by the alchemy of years in this poor human stuff.

Immediately her age, her weariness, her thousand bodily discomforts, crowded into the present and engulfed the past.

"Miss Dorset," she said querulously, "help me to bed, Miss Dorset, I'm tired."

II

When a hen's life is ended by the chopper the severed head falls to the ground, but the body with spattered wings awkwardly outstretched steps erratically this way and that, watched from the ground by its own surprised eyes until its ultimate surrender to the laws of death and gravity.

Miss Dorset fifteen years ago had suffered and lived through a kindred mutilation, being forced to watch from the edge of a cliff her twin sister and only relative drowning a hundred yards from the shore. Mary Dorset had gone bathing, Clara Dorset had gone walking. Mary took cramp, struggled a little, and sank, while Clara on the top of the cliff darted a few steps to the right, a few to the left, screaming, and finally fell to the ground, overborne by the shocking realisation of her loss and of her utter impotence to have prevented it.

Since then Miss Dorset, always competent, always adequate, had been curiously incomplete. Anæsthetized by this early tragedy she was invulnerable to further suffering, impervious to the pinpricks of poverty and dependence, and utterly unmoved in the face of any difficulty or crisis. Sometimes at night between waking and sleeping, or in the early morning between sleeping and waking, she was stabbed by a poignant vision of that scene of fifteen years ago, but no trace of emotion showed, as a rule, in her quiet manner of life.

She had lived with Mrs. Greene for seven years, at first as housekeeper and secretary. Since Mr. Greene's death, however, which had occurred suddenly three years ago, her role had been much more comprehensive. She managed the household, prepared for visitors, welcoming them unobtrusively on their arrival, and discreetly beckoning one guest out as she shepherded another in, lest the fatigue of prolonged conversation should lead to a restless night for the old lady. But she was also Mrs. Greene's constant companion, on her walks, in the house and at meals; there were indeed few moments in the day when she could contrive to be alone.

The measured routine of life was rarely broken in its succession of small daily services and arrangements, but when any of the grandchildren came for a visit Miss Dorset showed a natural grace not only in her methods of self-effacement but in leaving undone those trivial duties which, carried out by Geoffrey, Lavinia or Hugh, became a source of pleasure to Mrs. Greene. "Give me a cushion, Geoffrey, and arrange my shawl," she would say; and when Geoffrey had fumbled the cushion into place Miss Dorset, fully conscious of the fact that he had not added to Mrs. Greene's comfort, nevertheless appreciated the pleasure that it had given her to be waited on by her grandson.

There was a genuinely comfortable relationship between Mrs. Greene and Miss Dorset: Mrs. Greene seldom resented the fact of her physical dependence on Miss Dorset, and Miss Dorset understood, too well to be wounded by any sharpness of tongue, the old woman's kindliness, sagacity and clear sightedness.

At 9.15 every morning Miss Dorset brought up the letters, and waited quietly by the bedside, watching the unsteady fingers tearing open the envelopes and slowly withdrawing the rustling sheets. It would have been easy to offer help, but Miss Dorset was infinitely patient. "Mrs. Greene likes to do little things for herself," she would explain. "It takes a few moments longer, but she has a great deal of leisure, you know."

And Helen—it was generally Helen who expostulated at delay, and was ready with her facile, "Let me do it, Granny,"—must needs restrain herself and watch the number of laborious trembling movements that were necessary to perform any simple action.

This morning Miss Dorset remembering Mrs. Greene's extreme fatigue on the previous night, looked anxiously at her face as she took the letters, but made no comment. Mrs. Greene, however, answered the unspoken question, "I had a good night, thank you, and I'm not tired to-day."

She laid a hand on Miss Dorset's arm and added: "You're a nice restful creature to have about."

A deep, unbecoming flush spread over Miss Dorset's sallowness at the unusual tribute, but she only said quietly: "Thank you, I'm very happy here with you," and then waited with folded hands for any news or instructions to be imparted to her.

It was a long time before Mrs. Greene leaned back on her pillow and allowed a neat and closely written letter to slip from her fingers on to the bed. She was worrying. A thousand tiny lines creased her forehead, and she pushed back her scanty white hair with a gesture reminiscent of the days when heavy dark wings smooth and shining like Lavinia's, had swept down from her middle parting to cover the ears that now jutted out like excrescences on her shrunken skull.

"It's not a good idea," she said with an unusual tremor in her voice. "It's a sentimental idea and the children don't hold with sentiment and anniversaries and such like, and it will be very difficult for me. In fact if Edith weren't so set on it, I wouldn't think of going, but you know how my daughter-in-law must always have her way."

"Is it a letter from Mrs. Rodney that is worrying you?" asked Miss Dorset.

"I told you it was," answered Mrs. Greene. "Here, you'd better read it."

She picked up the letter and handed it to Miss Dorset.

207, Sussex Square.
Nov. 9th.

My dear Mrs. Greene,

Rodney and I were delighted to hear from Lavinia that you were so well and in such good spirits when she saw you at the weekend. We have been hoping to come and see you for the last few weeks, but Rodney has been very busy, and I have had a great deal on my hands since the wedding. I've been supervising Hugh's and Jessica's house being got ready for them among other things. They come home on Tuesday evidently very happy, and quite sure that no couple ever had a honeymoon like theirs. I have a little plan for them which I do hope you will try and fall in with, as it will be no good at all without you. Aunt Sarah is to be in town next week I hear, staying with her own relations, and I think it would be such a good idea if you would come up for one night for a little dinner party. Just the family of course.

Do you realise that there are now six Mrs. Greenes? You and Aunt Sarah, Dora and myself, and the two children, Helen and Jessica. I think Friday week would be best. Rodney will come himself to fetch you in the car, and you can have a long rest before dinner, and motor home on Saturday. Now don't say no, I have really set my heart on having a reunion of the three generations.

Rodney sends his love and is hoping to see you.

Much love from
EDITH.

Miss Dorset read this through carefully, reflected for a moment and then said decisively: "I don't think it would be wise for you to go, Mrs. Greene; you've been very easily tired the last few weeks, and this time of year is trying. Will you not dictate a letter for Mrs. Rodney saying you don't feel able to accept her invitation?"

"I don't call that an invitation," said Mrs. Greene forcibly. "More like a command. My daughter-in-law arranges everything for everybody and sends them their instructions."

Her voice lost its vibration and dropped on a flat note as she added: "It's easier to fall in with her plans, than to hold out against them; I'm getting old. And perhaps it will please Rodney to have me in his house again, though it's more hers than his."

A long silence fell. Miss Dorset had no comment to offer and Mrs. Greene was obviously immersed in painful thoughts. Suddenly she roused herself and leaned forward, speaking with such calmness and certainty that her words borrowed the force of oratory.

"When a woman has lived with her husband and loved her husband for over fifty years, she shouldn't live on after him. She's only a cripple. There's no place left for her, and no power. I saw one of my sons marry a girl I didn't like, and the other a girl I despised. I lost Edwin in the War, and Edwin's son soon after. Geoffrey and I were old; we were on the shelf, but we still had our place in life. Now Geoffrey's dead and I'm lost. I'm Granny and Greatgranny; I'm an old woman to be humoured and treated kindly and encouraged and taken here and there for her own good, but I'm not Mrs. Geoffrey Greene. She's dead."

Mrs. Greene had spoken with long pauses between the sentences. When she had finished she closed her eyes and sat upright and motionless, drained of colour, teeth and hair assailed by the greedy years, but with the lovely structure of jaw and cheekbone more visible under the sagging skin than it had ever been under firm flesh.

"I don't think you should let Mrs. Rodney's letter depress you," hazarded Miss Dorset at last. "If you decide to go I know both she and Mr. Rodney will make all arrangements for your comfort."

"Everybody makes arrangements for my comfort," said Mrs. Greene harshly. "And nobody can achieve it for me."

She spoke with her eyes still shut, and there was bitter resignation in the line of her mouth.

"We do try," ventured Miss Dorset gently. At the sound of her troubled voice Mrs. Greene lifted her lids and smiled.

"I know you do," she said, and her voice had regained its ring. "I'm an ungrateful, cantankerous old woman, and I may last like this for years."

The crudity of the last sentence was the signal for Miss Dorset to change the subject.

"Would you like to get up now?" she asked. "You have a nice full day before you: it's so sunny this morning that I think a little walk will do you good, and then you remember Mrs. Hugh is coming for to-night on her way up to town. She arrives at 4.15, and I've ordered the car to meet her."

"I'd forgotten Sarah was coming to-day," said Mrs. Greene. "I'll be glad to see her. I wonder if she has heard from Edith; she'll be no more pleased than I am about this ridiculous party."

All her good humour came back at the malicious and delightful thought of imparting the unwelcome news to her sister-in-law and discussing with her the unreasonableness of such a plan.

"Sarah will see that it's a bad idea," she repeated confidently. "There'll we be, three widows and three wives, each of us supposed to stand for something, and the whole idea quite false. I'm not an old Greene grandmother any more than Edith is a Greene mother and Jessica a young Greene wife; I'm Margaret Hill, and Jessica is Jessica Deane, and we married men of the same name and the same blood, but nobody but Edith would ever expect that to link us up in a chain."

"I know you will enjoy a talk with Mrs. Hugh," said Miss Dorset. "Shall I put her in the usual room, or do you think she likes the view from the front better? It isn't such a good room, of course."

"Put her in the front room. Sarah is like me; she likes to look out on a good view and a wide space, and so long as the bed is comfortable she won't notice anything else. And now help me up, please."

The business of getting Mrs. Greene dressed for the day was exhausting both for her and for Miss Dorset, but there were few days in the year when her indomitable courage and vitality allowed her to lie abed and forgo the effort for twenty-four hours. The irritation involved in thrusting out each leg to have its stocking drawn on was so intense as to amount to pain; her back ached and her skin tingled. It was infinite weariness to get her arms into her sleeves and keep her head steady to have her hair done, but Mrs. Greene faced these ordeals with fortitude and equanimity.

Every morning the indignity of physical helplessness struck her afresh, but every morning she banished the thought with resolution and ignored in conversation the difficulties of her toilet. Her good humour never failed her here, and Miss Dorset was too well versed in the intricacies of her employer's code of reticence ever to provoke her by an allusion to the matter in hand.

Usually during that painful three quarters of an hour they discussed the news of the day which both had absorbed during breakfast, Mrs. Greene with genuine interest in current activities, Miss Dorset uninterested, except in so far as they provided a topic of discussion attractive to Mrs. Greene. Mrs. Rodney's letter, however, altered the trend of Mrs. Greene's conversation for this one morning.

"What dress have I got to wear at my daughter-in-law's dinner?" she asked crisply. "I won't wear black and I think my grey satin is getting shabby."

"I think perhaps it is a little," agreed Miss Dorset. "But it always looks very nice."

"Shabby and nice don't go together," was the uncompromising reply. "We'll write to Madame Fenella to-day and ask her to send down a fitter with some patterns of grey satin and brocade. I'll wear my diamond necklace, and grey is a good background. You know, Miss Dorset, I've always liked nice dresses."

"I know you have, Mrs. Greene; all your things have been beautiful as long as I've known you."

"But it was before you knew me that I had my best things," said Mrs. Greene staring into the mirror, but not seeing the face ragged with age reflected in it. Seeing herself instead forty, fifty and sixty years ago when she was ardent and lovely.

"There was a sea-green poplin," she said dreamily. "A silk poplin that Geoffrey liked very much. That was the summer when Edwin was ten; I remember going up in it to kiss him good-night. And before that there was a blue velvet, peacock blue we called it, with a tight bodice and a flounced skirt all drawn to the back. But when I was a girl, before I married, it was always white. I remember asking my mother for a red evening dress but she wouldn't hear of it, so I didn't get one till long after I married—and then it didn't suit me."

Mrs. Greene smiled, thinking of the red dress that had been a failure, and then went on musingly:

"I don't know why it didn't suit me; Lavinia is very like what I was at her age, and she looks so pretty in red; but Godfrey liked me best in green and blue, and I used to dress to please him."

"I think you always look very nice in grey, and of course, as you say, it's a lovely background for your jewels," said Miss Dorset, whose sole conversational aim was to direct Mrs. Greene down pleasant paths and by-ways and prevent if possible any comparison between the empty present and the rich past.

On this occasion she was fortunate. An expression of real pleasure lit up Mrs. Greene's faded eyes. She spoke with assurance.

"You know, Miss Dorset, it's a long time since I wore my diamond necklace; in fact it's a long time since I went over my jewels at all. I think with the party coming off I'd really better look through them."

"I'm sure it would be a good plan," agreed Miss Dorset.

"Very well then, we'll go out now; I'm ready am I not? And this afternoon you'll open the safe and I'll go over all my things. Geoffrey did love to give me jewels. You know I used to be very dark, and he always thought them very becoming to me."

"You'll be quite busy then," said Miss Dorset, relieved to think that the day promised to be a full and interesting one for Mrs. Greene; for once in a way there was a definite little plan for each of the yawning intervals between meals.

To Miss Dorset each day presented itself as a problem in four sections: in each section some trivial interest or occupation had to be provided for old Mrs. Greene, whose mental outlook, through still vivid, could not avoid being impinged upon by her physical limitations. There was the long interval between getting dressed and lunch time which could only be comfortably filled by a walk. Miss Dorset registered an aggrieved resentment against Providence for any lapse from fine weather conditions between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Subconsciously she felt that it was Mrs. Greene's prerogative to enjoy the sun for these two hours.

The shorter interval between lunch and tea was partially filled by a rest, and often by preparations for some visitor who was coming to tea, and whose visit involved for her punctilious hostess a change of dress and shawl.

The hour after tea was often a difficult and irritable time, particularly in winter when the heavy curtains had to be drawn early and Mrs. Greene could not sit at her drawing-room window, gazing over the fields to the little larch wood that darkened and thickened as light faded out of the sky, and then magically thinned again till each twig was separate and visible in the clear darkness.

Sometimes there was a library list to be made, or a parcel of library books to be opened, and to Miss Dorset at least, it was a matter of signal importance that the second post arrived at 5 o'clock. It might contain letters that would keep Mrs. Greene occupied for half an hour.

There was always Patience, of course, but there were few days when this proved to be anything but a dreary makeshift. Mrs. Greene would lay out the cards, idly pick up the kings and queens, turn them about as if the designs were new to her and forget what Patience she had embarked on. Even Miss Dorset's nervous system was not proof against the strain of watching her try to play "Monte Carlo" with cards arranged for "Demon."

After dinner was a blessedly short period, and generally a happy one.

Summer and winter alike Mrs. Greene would come through from the dining-room in a mood of tranquil acquiescence; content either to dream by the open window with the scent of stocks from the flower beds and hay from the meadows beyond, blowing in on the cool night breeze, or else to sit in front of the fire gazing at the glowing logs which helped her to focus her mind and recapture elusive memories.

On this November day each section had provided its own solution.

"I think perhaps you should put on something warm," said Miss Dorset, avoiding instinctively any suggestion that she was dictator rather than adviser in the matter of wraps. "It's a lovely sunny day but there's a cold wind blowing round the corner of the house."

She arranged Mrs. Greene's heavy cape as she spoke, and then gently took her arm as they began the laborious descent of the stairs.

This safely accomplished and the old lady deposited for a moment on a chair in the hall, Miss Dorset hurried off to fetch her own coat.

"There now, we're all ready," she stated cheerfully on her return. "Will you have your walking-stick?"

She handed it to Mrs. Greene and they set off, walking slowly towards the walled garden, where clumps of tattered Michaelmas daisies, some limp and shabby chrysanthemums, and a few stalwart dahlias still

defied the coming winter.

A sudden jocose gust of wind swept the leaves along the untidy earthen borders, whirled under Mrs. Greene's cape, and set all the branches rustling and all the tree tops tossing madly.

"You're sure this isn't too much for you?" asked Miss Dorset anxiously.

Everything was in motion; trees, bushes, and tatterdemalion flower heads. Even the earth seemed to move under the restless scattering leaves.

"I like it," she announced stoutly, and breathed deep of the rich odour of decay that rose like a miasma from the ground. "I like autumn; it's the time for adventures and fine deeds; it's the bravest season of all."

"That's quite true; I should like to die in the autumn."

Miss Dorset's answer was as totally unexpected as was the intensity with which she spoke. Mrs. Greene looked at her for a moment.

"You're still young," she said. "Death isn't the only adventure left for you as it is for me. You ought to like spring best, when the celandines come out."

Miss Dorset relapsed into her usual quiet apologetic manner, so strangely at variance with the uncompromising ferocity of her sentiments.

"Spring always seems to me a little silly," she asserted. "It's all so hopeful and promising, and hope and promise are such callow things and fall so soon in ruins."

Suddenly realising that she had broken one of her inviolable rules in betraying so intimate a glimpse of her personality, Miss Dorset hastily turned into a less personal channel.

"I think the word 'jejune' expresses what I feel about spring, but, as you say, the autumn is a fine season, and to-day is really beautiful."

Mrs. Greene held her peace. She had always possessed too much sensibility to frustrate anyone's means of escape from a conversational predicament. She had never pressed for a confidence. But as they walked down the path and out at the further gate from garden to wood it struck her as strange that there should be this kinship of thought between Miss Dorset and her.

The inequalities of life are very marked, she thought. Most of us arrive at the same conclusion, but the ways in which we reach it are as many as the leaves scuttling at my feet. I lived for seventy-five good years, then Geoffrey died and the lean years came. All that was left was to do the best I could from day to day, trying to be a little stoical, and not getting too whining and senile. But here's this poor dried-up creature. She never had a spring time and yet she lives like me from day to day getting a little pleasure here and a little comfort there, but really only living towards the grave.

Her heart stirred with pity as she thought of the glowing human relationships that had been her happiness and delight for seventy-five years, contrasted with the absolute emptiness of Miss Dorset's thirty-eight years.

"The trouble is I've lived too long; three years too long; but she's never lived at all."

Inadvertently she spoke aloud, but Miss Dorset was quite unaware of the trend of thought that had led to the remark.

"I beg your pardon," she said mechanically, more as a warning to her employer that she was thinking aloud, than in expectation of a reply.

Mrs. Greene, however, answered abruptly:

"There's a ruby and diamond brooch in the safe that I'm going to give you when we go through my things this afternoon. I meant to leave it to you anyhow, but you might as well have it now. I'd like to see you

wearing it."

She hardly heard Miss Dorset's surprised and nervous thanks. She was again lost in thought, appreciating with painful clearness her motive in making this impulsive gesture. Life had given nothing to Clara Dorset, so she, Margaret Greene, was giving her a diamond and ruby brooch. It seemed somehow inadequate; Mrs. Greene smiled at the thought of how inadequate it was, but she sighed sharply at the tragic futility of all human endeavours to compensate, to strike a balance between loss and gain.

The day had changed for her. The fitful kindly wind was no longer kindly. It tugged at her hat and made her bones ache cruelly. The white clouds blowing across the sky seemed harbingers of rain, threatening to overcast the sun. She felt frail and impotent, and when she said, "I should like to turn back now," there was a quaver in her voice that she tried in vain to conceal.

As they retraced their slow steps Miss Dorset recited in detail her preparations for Mrs. Hugh's arrival.

"I've put two big vases of leaves in her bedroom," she said. "There really aren't any flowers left worth picking and the leaves are a beautiful colour."

"Sarah's garden at Lynton will be full of flowers. They bloom for her all the year round, but I'm no gardener."

Mrs. Greene was regaining her serenity.

"What are we giving her for dinner?" she asked. "Sarah pays no attention to what she eats, but I'd like to give her such a good dinner that she'll be bound to notice it."

"Well, I had thought of a good clear soup, some stuffed fillets of sole, a pheasant, and a nice apricot cream," said Miss Dorset tentatively, "but that can easily be changed if you would like something more elaborate."

"I don't like elaborate things," answered Mrs. Greene, "but Sarah never thinks of anything so mundane as food and it's good for her to meet a materialist like me."

She reflected for a moment and then pronounced decisively.

"Yes, that's a good dinner. But not apricot cream. Tell cook to make a peach tart with our own bottled peaches, and to give us a good hot savoury after it, and tell her to put enough sherry in the soup. I don't know why, but when there's no man to cook for, they won't put sherry in the soup or rum in the trifles."

Mrs. Greene spoke energetically. Careless herself as to what she ate, she had always held it important not only that her glass and silver should be beyond reproach, but that the food served to guests should be delicately chosen and delicately cooked.

"There's a lot to be learnt from food," she continued in a ruminating vein. "Take Sarah, for instance. After a dinner at Lynton you can't help knowing she's a good gardener because of her fruit and vegetables, but you can't help seeing she isn't discriminating; she gives you nourishment without quality. And think of Edith. Every meal I've eaten in that house has stamped her afresh as a practical, unimaginative, uninteresting woman."

"I hadn't really thought of it, but I'm sure there's a lot in what you say," agreed Miss Dorset. "Here we are back again. Shall we go in now or would you like another little turn?"

"I would not," Mrs. Greene replied crisply. "I'll go in and warm myself till lunch time; this wind chills my bones."

The warm atmosphere of the house after the tang of the fresh November air brought a gentle consciousness of fatigue that did not dissipate during lunch time, and Mrs. Greene was not reluctant to go upstairs for her afternoon rest.