

# The New Rector

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Extract

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# 1

Muriel Hipkin turned over in bed to look at her floral china bedside clock. It said a quarter to eight – another fifteen minutes before she needed to rise. It was Easter Sunday today, such a special day in the Christian calendar, and this particular Easter Sunday was extra special, for the new Rector would be taking his first service. The Reverend Peter Alexander Harris MA (Oxon) was young and full of vigour, so different from dear Mr Furbank. She'd always had hopes of dear Mr Furbank, but now he'd died and so suddenly, too, and it was too late. Too late for lots of things.

Her tiny bedroom caught the first shafts of sun each morning and she lay revelling in its warmth. The neat floral curtains with their tiny pattern matched the neat floral bedspread. The carpet was cream with a tiny pattern on it, too. This was the first house she'd ever lived in where the choice of colours and furniture had been her own, her very own. Before, it had always been Mother's choice – nice, sensible dark reds and browns, lifeless and 'practical'. That particular bondage had been laid to rest four years ago. Muriel had been a willing slave but it wasn't until her mother passed over Jordan that she realised how she had been bound hand and foot. Her money kept the house and fed them, her money paid the bills for the special foods and the extra warmth, but she'd made none of the decisions.

Released from her chains, she'd returned to the village of Turnham Malpas where she had been born, and bought this 'starter home' – except that for her, it would be the starter *and* the finisher. No moving up to better things. This was it – till she needed constant care in a home, heaven forbid. The house was tiny. It had one living room out of which a square was taken to provide a minute kitchen. In the back corner of the living room was a spiral staircase which led to the small landing, hardly bigger than a doormat. Upstairs was one bedroom, and one miniscule bathroom. Not even a space for the vacuum cleaner, which had to live under the

spiral stairs. Its compensation was that it was built alongside the churchyard. Glebe Cottages, the little row was called. No one else wanted Muriel's house, with its view of the ancient graves and the lych gate and the church, but it had a large garden which curved comfortably around the churchyard wall. Muriel loved gardening, and hers was the pride of the village. She'd won so many prizes at the annual Village Show the two years she'd been entering, it was becoming embarrassing. Maybe this year she wouldn't enter anything at all and give everyone else a chance.

Eight o'clock. As the church clock chimed the last stroke, Pericles came tip-tapping up the stairs. His bright brown eyes sparkled with delight as he flung himself on Muriel's bed. His snow-white fur contrasted sharply with his bright black nose.

'Off the bed, Perry, you naughty dog! Get off.' He leapt down and sprang about the bedroom, looking for slippers or shoes to race off downstairs with. Muriel got up and chased him out. Looking through her bedroom window, she could just see the back garden of the village store. Eight o'clock on Sundays, James Charter-Plackett – new owner of what was the village shop, but which now gave the appearance of being a miniature Harrods Food Hall – stood naked on the side of his brand-new pool and dived in, shallowly, for the pool was not really deep enough but it was the only way he could force himself to take his morning exercise.

Harriet Charter-Plackett, also naked, followed him in. Muriel could just glimpse them as they stood side by side on the pool edge. She'd once seen her father undressed when she was nursing him through his last illness and had been somewhat surprised, but James, or 'Jimbo' as he preferred to be called, was the first man she'd actually had a chance to take a good look at. This cavorting naked in the garden had caused a minor scandal when the couple first started doing it, but the locals now accepted it as one of the idiosyncrasies of a townie. Besides, they liked the revival of their village shop. Mrs Thornton's fly-blown cakes and tired lettuces and the cigarette ash dusting everything was no longer acceptable in 1990. After all, you had to move with the times, hadn't you? It was time for a change.

Muriel glanced at her slim figure shrouded in its long cotton nightgown – white, of course. In school photographs Mother had only to look for the palest blob of a face to find it was Muriel. She was still a pale blob. Pale skin, pale blue eyes, pale fair hair, and that was going paler still now it had white streaks in it. In strong sun she was almost obliterated. At boarding school (only a minor one – her parents couldn't afford one of the better ones) she had been taught to undress without the necessity of revealing any part of her anatomy. It was unseemly to expose oneself, the Anglican

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nuns had declared. Muriel often wondered how much their teaching had influenced her relationships in later years. They'd taught her embarrassment and shyness and modesty to such an extent that she had never been able to communicate properly with the opposite sex – except for dear Mr Furbank, of course. Some people might have sniggered that maybe he wasn't of the opposite sex, anyway, and that was why she got on with him so well. She straightened her shoulders; she must correct her habit of stooping.

Her bathroom was dedicated to cleanliness. Crisp clean towels, snow-white, lay in regimented rows interspersed with fresh face cloths. They were all crisp to the touch for they'd been blowing on the line for the best part of a day getting dried and 'freshened up'. She actually had seven face cloths, one for each day of the week. All white. That way you knew when they were clean. The walls were white, the bath, basin and lavatory were white; the floor had white tiles, the curtains were white, the ceiling, the taps, the towel rail . . . all virginal, like Muriel. She had an all-over wash first thing in the morning, after having been in bed all night.

Baths she kept for evenings. She would lie in the scented water with the bathroom light turned off, and just the moonlight creeping into the corners of the room. She would dwell on life and its meaning, though she never had many answers. Sometimes she pondered what her life would have been like if she had married. Children, perhaps four. All nice clean little girls with pretty faces and nice blonde curly hair. Clever at school and well-mannered, not like that young Sharon McDonald from The Royal Oak, all boldness and flashing hips and eyes. Her girls would be sweet and well-behaved. She would prepare lovely meals for her husband each evening when he came home from the office. He would have a military moustache and fair hair, he'd be tall and fresh-complexioned, and he would be gentle and amusing to be with. Occasionally, though, when soaking in the bath she would see her life endlessly unfolding before her and would weep at its barrenness and isolation. Then, like the good Christian that she was, she would count her blessings and begin to scrub herself vigorously so she would go to bed immaculately clean.

Everything clean, as on every day in the week, Muriel descended the spiral stairs with care. Another ten years and she could have problems with those stairs. Perry dashed to the door to be let into the garden. She'd taught him to relieve himself in one particular spot so that she could disinfect the area each day. He was usually very good. She warmed her blue and white teapot, which matched her breakfast set, with boiling water, preparing it lovingly for brewing her tea. Muriel loved the delicate blue flowers which danced up the spout and around the lid. The handle of

her cup had flowers climbing up it, too. She'd chosen the set with a picture in her mind's eye of her little dining table, hardly bigger than a card table, in the window of her living room. The small silver toast-rack awaited its load, the honey pot, matching, gleamed alongside the silver sugar bowl with its air of Georgian gentility, also matching. A bowl of All Bran followed by toast and honey – her breakfast unchanged since her chains fell off – was augmented by a banana this Sunday morning. A little treat to mark the special day.

When the kitchen was tidy again Muriel glanced at the clock. Time for Pericles' walk. The back door locked, she took his lead from the hook behind it – a hook shared with her neat white and blue flowered apron which matched the tea cosy and the oven gloves. Hearing the rattle of the lead, Pericles began chasing round in circles, yapping. Poodles did yap a lot, but she didn't mind. The gardens at the front of Glebe Cottages were open plan so she had to watch that Pericles didn't forget his manners.

Straight ahead was Jacks Lane, which ran between the school and the back garden of the village store. On school days she chatted to the children on their way to school and they loved to pat Pericles and ask her why he had such a funny name. Today being Sunday, the school was silent, resting from its labours. Over the wall she could see poor Mr Palmer sitting reading his newspaper on the garden bench. His school-house came with the job. Muriel always pitied him – a widower in such tragic circumstances. Of course the village had stood by him, but there were murmurs which wouldn't be stilled. He'd stayed on with the stuffing knocked out of him, but for all that the children loved him and he was an excellent head teacher.

There must be nearly forty children in the school now. It had dwindled to five at one time and the County said they would close it. Then in moved these townies with their families, fancying a country life, and then the Big House had been turned into a home for children at risk, so they, too, had helped to fill up the school. What they were at risk from, Muriel wasn't quite sure. That tale Willie Biggs the verger had told her simply didn't make sense. She read things in the papers which she couldn't make head nor tail of, but there you were, they still needed loving like all children.

'Morning, Miss Hipkin. I got four eggs this morning.' Finlay Charter-Plackett was sitting astride the stone wall surrounding his parents' garden.

'Oh, good morning and a Happy Easter to you, Finlay!'

'Did you get an egg, Miss Hipkin?'

'No, dear, I've no one to give me one.'

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‘Here – have this Cadbury’s creme egg. Mummy’s got plenty in the shop.’

‘I couldn’t, dear, really I couldn’t. Your mother wouldn’t like it.’

Harriet Charter-Plackett, now fully clothed, emerged from between the conifers and looked over the wall into the lane. ‘That’s all right, Miss Hipkin, of course you must have it. I like my children to be generous. Happy Easter to you.’

‘Oh, thank you very much. I shall eat it this afternoon with my cup of tea. Bye bye.’

Pericles was in a hurry to be let off the lead. She crossed Shepherd’s Hill and went into the opening onto the spare land behind the tiny Methodist Chapel. There she undid the little dog’s lead and he raced off to his favourite spots. It seemed ridiculous that he could find such enjoyment every day from sniffing the same clumps of grass. The new coat of paint on the chapel walls had helped to improve it but, oh dear, it *was* so bleak and austere. Muriel much preferred the gentle beauty of her St Thomas à Becket, with its stained-glass windows, the banners, the altar and the flowers. There would be Easter lilies from the glasshouses at the Big House this week. A bit severe, but a delightful change from the usual fussy arrangements done by Lady Bissett. How could anyone be knighted for being a trades union official and be called Sir Ron? Sir Ronald and Lady Bissett. Before the knighthood he’d always been known as Ron Bissett. Now it was Sir Ronald. How could he justify accepting a knighthood? It went against everything he had ever stood for, surely? Lady Sheila Bissett believed she had assumed the mantle of the squire’s wife, but only in her own mind; everyone else knew she’d been serving behind the bar in *The Case Is Altered* in Culworth before she married, and unfortunately had never left it behind. She carried the aura of it with her wherever she went.

‘Good morning, Miss Hipkin. Happy Easter to you.’

Muriel blushed bright red. Lady Bissett’s Pomeranian sniffed at Pericles.

‘Good morning, Lady Bissett, and a Happy Easter to you, too.’

‘See you in church later on. Bye bye.’

It was so embarrassing. Of course Lady Bissett couldn’t read her mind but she felt as if she could.

Muriel glanced at her watch and decided to take the short cut across the green as time was running short. No ducklings yet on the pond. The oak, well the Royal Oak, was coming into bud again. Two years ago, it had looked as if it were dying but it had perked up again. When the Royal Oak died, the village would die, too – that was what everyone believed. But the village was beginning to throb with life again, with new people, new ideas.

As she waited to cross Church Lane, the new rector – Peter, he asked everyone to call him – crossed from the Rectory into the churchyard. He waved to her and called a cheery ‘Happy Easter!’ She waved back and for a moment wished it was dear Mr Furbank; she could have made him very happy. The two of them there in the Rectory tending the Lord’s garden and watching His little flowers grow. In our dear Lord’s garden. Ah well, you couldn’t put back the clock.

The morning service began at ten o’clock. The children were already in their places when Muriel entered. Willie Biggs gave her a wink. That man would never improve. Dear Mr Furbank should never have given him the job; he was misguided there. Muriel wore her navy suit with the Sunray pleated skirt and a buttercup-yellow blouse. Her navy straw had buttercup-yellow flowers decorating the brim; she only ever wore it on Easter Sundays. One of her navy gloves had developed a hole but they would have to do. No one would notice if she carried it and wore the other. Organ music flooded the church. Just as Mrs Peel the organist arrived at a particularly triumphant bit, Sir Ron and Lady Bissett came down the aisle to take their places. In less polite circles his stomach would have been described as a beer belly. He had grown his white hair quite long and wore it brushed back without a parting, while his florid face and heavy jowls implied good living, which earlier stalwarts of the trade union movement would have scorned. Muriel found his hale and hearty personality overwhelming.

The church was filled this morning, partly because it was Easter and partly because the whole village wanted to hear the new rector.

The processional hymn began and they all stood. Peter wore a beautiful surplice decorated with heavy antique lace. He made an impressive figure with his thick hair forming a bronze halo around his head. His broad shoulders seemed designed to carry any burden asked of them, and at six feet five he towered above the vergers and the choirmen as well as the boys. He ought to be a bishop, Muriel thought. Suzy Meadows, mother of three and new to the village, thought he was sizzingly attractive. Daisy, Pansy and Rosie sat beside her in front of Muriel wriggling and giggling. Muriel wished they hadn’t decided to sit near her, they were so distracting in their loveliness. So sweet and so alike, except for their size. Daisy was five and round, Pansy four and very thin and Rosie three and just right. All pretty and blonde like their mother. Patrick Meadows never came to church. He worked somewhere in one of those secret nuclear places and never joined in family life at all.

After the hymn had been sung and the congregation was settling down, in came the rector’s wife, looking harassed and breathless. She was so

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feminine and pretty. Her dark curly hair was cut short in a no-nonsense style, but the curls still made themselves evident. She had a clear ivory skin and bright blue eyes. She rushed down the aisle, sat in the rectory pew and hastily knelt on the specially embroidered kneeler with symbols appropriate to a rector's wife. It hadn't had any use while dear Mr Furbank had been there, for he'd lacked a wife all the thirty years he'd been the incumbent. Muriel had been delighted that at last there was to be a rector's wife, but her hopes had been dashed when she'd learned that Caroline Harris was a hospital doctor in Culworth. Full time, too. No babies or Mothers' Union for her – she belonged to the new breed.

An inspirational sermon followed by uplifting singing and a new modern anthem from the choir made a beautiful Easter morning service. Muriel realised that dear Mr Furbank's sermons had become very dull. She had only enjoyed them because she loved his beautiful enunciation and the gentle aspect of his face.

Peter shook hands enthusiastically with the entire congregation as they left, saying that next Sunday he hoped they would all stay for coffee afterwards in the church hall and he would do his best to get round to see every member during the next few weeks. Willie Biggs winked at Muriel and said out of the corner of his mouth, 'Not quite like the old rector, is he? Got a bit more go, like. You won't be coming with your jars of lemon cheese for this one. He plays squash and runs, he does. Smarten us all up, he will. Bashing tambourines and kissing and hugging we shall be before long, mark my words.'

Lady Bissett came pouring out of the church, hand outstretched.

'My dear Peter, welcome to Turnham Malpas! We're so glad to see you – you're like a blast of fresh air. You've met my husband, of course, but I haven't yet met your dear wife. Ah, here she is. My dear Mrs Harris . . .'

'*Dr* Harris, actually.'

'I'm sorry, *Dr* Harris. I'm Lady Bissett and this is my husband Sir Ronald.'

Caroline Harris turned to look at Sir Ronald, and Muriel saw a mischievous light come into her eyes.

'I seem to recognise you from the television. Aren't you a TUC person?'

'Oh, he's often on the telly, er – television, aren't you, Ron . . . ald?'

'Frequently. When you've held public office it's hard to keep your face off it.'

'Surely you must be the one who orchestrated that massive strike at the engineering works in Bradley?'

'In all truth I actually tried to stop it, Mrs . . . *Dr* Harris.'

'Oh, it didn't come across like that on our television,' Caroline said,



then she turned to Muriel, still smiling and said: 'You must be Miss Hipkin. Willie Biggs tells me that your family has been in this village since the Conquest.'

'Well, I wouldn't say quite as far back as that, but my ancestors worked in the gardens and the park for generations at the Big House, then when Lady Templeton had to sell up after the war my family moved away and now I've come back to live here again.'

'You must come and have tea with me one day and tell me all about the village. I'll call in and let you know which day I shall be at home and we'll get together.'

Before Muriel could thank her for her kindness, Lady Bissett had edged her way between them and thanked the rector's wife for the invitation. Short of being extremely rude, Dr Harris had to concede the point and include Lady Bissett in her invitation. It quite took the pleasure out of it for Muriel, but then she remembered her Christian duty and smiled her delight.

Pericles was standing behind the door when she got back from morning service. He'd been terribly sick on the mat. She rushed him out into the back garden, where he was incredibly sick again. Considering what a small dog he was, it was amazing how much he'd had in his stomach. Cleaning the mat put her off her dinner so she put her thick cardigan on and sat in the back garden with him instead. He lay all afternoon looking extremely sorry for himself. About three o'clock, she made herself a cup of tea, put her Cadbury's creme egg on a plate and carried the tray into the garden. She had a small table out there which she used for potting up but with a scrub it served as a tea table in the warmer weather. The creme egg did taste lovely – very rich and rather sickly and very indulgent. But she didn't have many pleasures. From her chair, Muriel could just see over the wall into the churchyard. Sunday afternoon was the time when most people who cared took fresh flowers to the graves. The churchyard tap was alongside the gardener's shed near the wall. It was far enough away not to block Muriel's view but near enough for her to see what was going on.

Michael Palmer the headmaster was putting fresh water in the vase from his wife's grave. He came every Sunday, winter and summer. You'd never think he was only forty-five – he looked a good ten years older. Up the path came Sharon McDonald from The Royal Oak. A right little madam, thought Muriel. That skirt couldn't be any shorter nor tighter, and that T-shirt was surely meant to sit equally on her shoulders, not be dragged over to one side so that her whole shoulder was exposed. A man would have to be blind not to notice the flagrant exhibition of her

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feminine charms. Sharon stood provocatively in front of Mr Palmer, her shrill voice carrying on the wind.

‘Hello, Mr Palmer. Remember me?’

‘Why, of course, Sharon.’ He straightened up, holding the vase full of water in one hand and the flowers in the other. ‘It’s some time since you were in school but I remember you quite clearly. I don’t see you around nowadays.’

‘No, I work in Culworth, in Tesco’s. Boring, but there’s not much else. How are you? Still teaching in this godforsaken little dump?’

‘Still teaching, Sharon, yes I am. I like it here.’ He set off to walk to the grave. Sharon followed, teetering along the rough path in her stilettos. As he crouched down to arrange the flowers, Sharon bent over and rested her hand on his back. Muriel couldn’t hear what she said but she saw Michael stand up quickly and move out of her reach. He was shaking his head and protesting. Their conversation lasted a few more moments, with Michael Palmer still backing away and shaking his head. Sharon seemed to find their conversation a huge joke, and her laughter carried across the churchyard towards Muriel. It sounded cruel. Mr Palmer turned on his heel and marched away with the wrapping paper from the flowers still in his hand. Muriel knew he always put it screwed up into a ball in the bin provided by Willie Biggs. He must be upset. A man of meticulously regular habits, was Mr Palmer. She knew because she played the piano for the singing in the school on Monday and Thursday mornings.

Sharon wandered aimlessly across the churchyard. She saw Muriel watching so she put her thumb to her nose and waggled her outstretched fingers in Muriel’s direction. Muriel turned away. How rude that girl was. Her parents ought to teach her better manners. Still, what could you expect? Running The Royal Oak left Mr and Mrs McDonald little time to spare for Sharon and her brother Scott. He was a rude, arrogant young boy. Mr Palmer said he was very clever but Scott didn’t care enough to bother.

Pericles took a turn for the better so Muriel walked him out and then went inside to make a substantial tea for herself. She didn’t usually go to church in the evening unless it was something special; instead, she watched the religious programmes on TV, and then perhaps a good play afterwards. TV was her life-saver. Mother wouldn’t have it, even though Muriel had offered to pay. Old people can be very tyrannical.

Easter Monday dawned clear and bright but there was nothing of interest planned by Muriel for this day of leisure. Just after she got back from walking Pericles there was a knock at the door. Muriel tucked Pericles under her arm and opened it. Caroline Harris stood there smiling.

‘I know you probably have a very busy day booked, with it being a Bank Holiday, but could you possibly fit in afternoon tea with me?’

‘Why, good morning, Dr Harris. How nice of you, I’d love to do that! Thank you.’

‘Good – come about three. If it’s warm we’ll sit in the garden. Peter is away today so I shall be glad of your company. See you later, then. Your daffodils do look lovely. I shall be glad of your advice regarding our garden: I’m afraid it’s very overgrown.’

For her outing, Muriel chose her pale cream blouse with a brown tweed skirt and a toning brown cardigan – well, rust really. She brushed her hair and tortured it into a French pleat – the style she’d adopted when it was the height of fashion and had never troubled to change since. In honour of the invitation she put on a tiny amount of orangey-brown lipstick. She stepped gently along Church Lane, past the lych gate and Willie Biggs’, where she noticed the curtain twitching as she went by, and rang the Rectory bell.

The door was opened by Caroline Harris, her three Siamese cats standing by her feet, their long tails winding around her legs.

‘Come in do,’ she said warmly. ‘I’ve got some scones in the oven and they’re nearly ready. Let’s go in the kitchen while they finish cooking.’

Dear Mr Furbank had not been good at housekeeping and Muriel was dreading the embarrassment of his unkempt kitchen; however, Caroline Harris had worked wonders in the few days since they had moved in. The walls had already been painted – a bright melon colour – copper pans gleamed in racks, the old cooker had been burnished to within an inch of its life and a large pine table had replaced the nasty gateleg thing that dear Mr Furbank had used for dining. A huge fridge freezer stood where there had once been a grubby mesh food cupboard. The floor had been sanded and stained, and Indian rugs covered it in a deliberately haphazard manner.

‘Why this is beautiful!’ Muriel said, looking around with pleasure. ‘You’ve worked miracles in here, and in such a short space of time, too. I love the curtains. Are they Indian?’

‘Yes, they are. I went there for six months, working with the down and outs in Calcutta, and brought loads of things back. It’s what Peter refers to as my Indian period. Milk and sugar?’

‘Just milk, thank you.’

Caroline carried the tray into the garden. It was laid for two.

‘Lady Bissett isn’t coming, then?’ Muriel asked tentatively.

She answered, ‘No,’ in a manner which rejected any further queries, and then added: ‘Will you call me Caroline? I much prefer it. Now, tell me all about your family and what you do in the village, Miss Hipkin.’

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Muriel launched herself on a potted family history and then on a brief history of the village. She'd only been back three years but she'd caught up on forty years of happenings in a very short time. Finally, she remembered herself and exclaimed, blushing: 'Oh dear, I've gone rambling on and you've told me nothing about yourself.'

'Miss Hipkin, there isn't much to tell,' Caroline laughed. 'Peter and I have been married five years. I've thrown myself into my work to compensate for the fact that I can't have children. We're both very disappointed but there you are. It's my fault and nothing can alter it.'

A door slammed in the Rectory and Peter himself came into the garden, bearing a mug. He leant over Caroline and kissed her, cupping her chin with his spare hand. 'Mind if I join you?' he said, addressing them both.

'You're back early,' his wife remarked.

'Yes, I am. How are you, Miss Hipkin?'

'Very well, thank you. I should like it very much if you would both call me Muriel. It seems more friendly.'

'Certainly we shall.' Peter took a huge bite out of a scone as he said this, then, with his mouth full: 'I thought Lady Bissett was coming today as well?'

'No.' Caroline offered no further enlightenment regarding Lady Bissett so Peter turned to Muriel.

'I shall tread very carefully about making changes here,' he told her, 'but changes there will have to be. We need to do more to encourage the local children. Do you have any ideas?'

'I have often thought that there are a lot of little ones on the farms and in the more isolated houses who could well do with one of those nursery schools. That way they get used to mixing with other children before they actually start school. I play the piano for the singing on Mondays and Thursdays for Mr Palmer and I do notice that the new ones have great difficulty learning to join in.'

'What a perfectly splendid idea. We could use the church hall, couldn't we?'

Muriel considered this and then said, 'It would take some manoeuvring, because there is a yoga class and a ladies' quilting group which meet regularly in the mornings – and Lady Bissett has a flower-arranging group there, too. But I'm sure the timetable could be adjusted.'

'I shall see to that immediately. All we need is someone willing to organise it. I'll talk to some of the mothers with small children, as they might do it as a group rather than having just one person in charge. What do you think, Caroline?'

'The Council will have something to say about facilities. Perhaps it

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could start as a mother and toddler group until proper permission has been obtained.'

Peter stood up and went to kiss his wife on the top of her head. 'What would we do without your common sense?'

Shortly after this, Muriel left. Pericles would be getting restless, she said, and thanked them for a lovely afternoon. Peter accompanied her to the door.

What a charming young man he was. Just what the village needed.